



# Locating Cultural Change

Theory, Method, Process

*Edited by*  
**Partha Pratim Basu**  
**Ipshita Chanda**



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Partha Pratim



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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Locating Cultural Change: Process and Method



**T**he aim of the chapters in this volume is the study of located cultural processes: but how, if at all, is this different from the existing formulations of Culture Studies and Cultural Studies? Is it the same as both or one (which one?) of them and why? Or is it completely different from either? It is with these questions in view that we might try to outline the focus of this book, which contains a collection of essays on diverse topics that form part of the lived reality of the present.

#### Can the Real 'Cultural Studies' Please Stand Up ?

Each of the 'objects' of these chapters is constructed and deconstructed by the writers as 'texts' in the sense that Barthes<sup>1</sup> outlines:

Just as the Einsteinian science demands that the relativity of the frames of reference be included in the object studied, so the combined action of Marxism, Freudianism and structuralism demands in literature, the relativisation of the relations of writer, reader and observer (critic). Over against the traditional notion of the work, for long, and still conceived of in a so to speak Newtonian way, there is now the requirement of a new object, obtained by the sliding or over-turning of former categories. That object is the Text.<sup>2</sup>

The text is thus a processual entity in the process of constant formation and reformation through production, reception, use and reproduction. In that sense what we are studying are texts in their dynamism. We



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could conceive of this dynamism in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, as an 'impulse to meaning'.<sup>3</sup> These writers further elucidate their description by saying that meaning is not necessarily confined by prior structures and feelings—hence the Althusserian position of base always influencing superstructure, as well as the Frankfurt School's claim that culture's role is manipulative, are problematized. The impulse to meaning is, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, expressive, incarnated and forceful. But the production of meaning is only one part of the story: the actual production of the text whether it is virtual or material, is the complementary part. The process through which meaning and material are produced and conjoined within specific locations could then be the working definition of cultural process. Texts become a part of the cultural field due to this process, and participate in its semiotic and material economy. It is not the sign alone but the sign within this process, the sign-in-process that one attempts to understand in what follows. This is the reason why 'process' as both practice and concept form the focus of the studies included here.

If we return to the questions with which we started, then we can now ask: is this approach different from what we understand as Cultural/Culture Studies in India and elsewhere? To answer this question we may rehearse the history of Culture Studies/Cultural Studies in these locations. As the discerning reader knows, Barthes has outlined the situation in which the transformation from 'work' to 'text' as object of study has become possible. He says:

What is new and what affects the idea of the work comes not necessarily from the internal recasting of each of these disciplines, but rather from their relation to an object which traditionally is a province of none of them. It is indeed as though the interdisciplinarity which is today held up as a prime value in research cannot be accomplished by the simple confrontation of specialist branches of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

The foundational moment of modern Cultural Studies probably coincides with this thought, if not with the exact date of Barthes' insight. For in the British perspective, Cultural Studies was a challenge from within to academic value judgements, grading and the hierarchy

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within English literature as discipline, fuelled by the work of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart.<sup>5</sup> It was an 'opening up of the disciplinary structure of the Humanities'<sup>6</sup> and 'one of the first...challenges to the conventional map of intellectual life within the academy'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Williams and Hoggart, on the fringes of academia and apparently more closely connected to the class that did not generally populate the university, used it to challenge the 'great tradition' of the Leavises and the 'high culture' of T.S. Eliot. Add to this the inclination for contemporary culture, which different theorists have chosen to see in different forms. Though Matthew Arnold's liberal formulation that 'culture' would save us from 'anarchy', concealed the actual class character of such culture, the Birmingham School for Contemporary Cultural Studies and Williams turned the area of operation of Cultural Studies towards the interrogation of academic institutions and practices identified as 'high' culture in the name of what was 'outside'. In its North American avatar, Culture Studies studies popular mass culture (which the socialist orientation of the British variety of the discipline dubbed 'capitalist') from a pragmatic-liberal and pluralist view. According to Lindloff et al.,<sup>8</sup> the North American version of Cultural Studies concentrated on the 'use' of mass culture. This was taken a step ahead by the Australian theorist John Fiske who argued that cultural objects were interpreted according to the needs and desires of those who received them. This shifted the focus from object/artifact to consumption, from resisting a hierarchy or disrupting a canon or problematizing a point of view to the arena of 'text' as Barthes defines it.

This well-known history may form a background to the inception and institutionalization of the discipline in India. In quite an exhaustive survey of this matter, Radhakrishnan<sup>9</sup> outlines the different views regarding the origins of Cultural Studies in India and then follows this up with a survey of institutions dedicated to activities that are described as 'doing' Cultural Studies, derived from programmatic assumptions about what Cultural Studies actually is. Speaking of the inception of Cultural Studies as a separate identifiable disciplinary entity, he enumerates several categories within which current definitions of Cultural Studies in Indian academic institutions fall. There is the Culture Studies as Media Studies model at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS),

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Mumbai, the Culture Studies as a basket for Humanities and Social Sciences variety at Centre for Social Sciences' Cultural Studies Workshop in Kolkata, Cultural Studies as 'space for doing contemporary theory' at Baroda, etc. Radhakrishnan concludes that Cultural Studies in India bears a 'relationship to local concerns'. But it is clear that here 'local' is an idea rather than a location: it has a vast range and is underpinned by various needs and desires. For example, the birth of Cultural Studies opened a space for studying and 'doing' Continental theory or 'post-colonial'/'third world' literature (in English mainly, and sometimes in translation from Indian languages) in English departments that needed an answer to their own soul searching. Or the fact that the 'subaltern' perspective in the Social Sciences, which had the potential to question established disciplinary practices, was also seen as a cause for the birth of Cultural Studies. These are various narratives describing the foundational impulse for the establishment of Cultural Studies in India, and it appears that there is not much difference between these impulses and those that were seen as primary in 'Western' locations. Rather, the concern and consequent 'opening up' of disciplines in India may be understood as a repertoire of questions and responses from Indian academics exposed to Cultural Studies programmes as oppositional projects interrogating the establishment in 'Western' academia. In that sense, Cultural Studies in India may well be termed as one of the early instances of globalization as a phenomenon. The following of Western models of inquiry is of course not limited to Cultural Studies alone: it is salutary to note that English was the language in which the hierarchy, which some would argue was established by English itself, as discipline and language, was problematized. Alternatives acted upon or articulated tended towards partiality for theoretical inputs and positions derived from Western models. The disciplinary formations to which these were addressed were either English Literature or the Social Sciences, whose chief mode of operation was also that same language. In that sense, a commonality that may be discerned within Cultural Studies, despite its numerous formulations and definitions including the desire to desist from definition itself, may be seen as either of two things. First, an attempt to introduce a variety of Western theory in order to construct an avant-garde or a margin, depending upon the perspective that one takes. Second, to introduce into

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the mainstream of Indian academia, concerns, positions and objects of study that were again seen either as marginal or avant-garde, depending upon one's perspective.

From this vantage point, reading Radhakrishnan's comment on the 'local' concerns of Cultural Studies takes on another dimension. We may turn to specific cases of Cultural Studies Programmes. The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) Programme is described thus:

Depending upon the number of credits, the student goes away with a Master's degree, in English Literature, Cultural Studies, Linguistics or English Language Teaching. The disciplinary presence of social sciences in the programme is scant in the programming though there were attempts at inter-disciplinary dialogue when a social scientist was employed as faculty. A significant absence in a fully formed institutional space like EFLU is that of attempts at syllabi formation. The making of the syllabi is one that is central to the imagining of a discipline. In a programme like the one at EFLU the immediate translation of research that is understood as Cultural Studies seems to be the default mode of forming the syllabi.... The insistence on the part of the faculty of the Cultural Studies programme in EFLU, that it is a set of research agendas or research programmes including Dalit Studies and issues like gender and community that defines the institution's Cultural Studies programme, is telling in this context.<sup>10</sup>

This seems to connect the goal of the programme to what Radhakrishnan has described as the approach taken by the Centre for Social Sciences. This Centre has been running a Cultural Studies Workshop since 1995, and Radhakrishnan explains the history of this endeavour thus:

[T]he name Cultural Studies has come to mean, for the purposes of the Workshop, a convenient basket into which most humanities and social science research can be put. This development points to two key issues that can be picked up for our understanding of Cultural Studies—one, that it is a space for interaction between disciplines, and two, that Cultural Studies derives from developments within the social sciences. If we are to look at the institutional structure within which

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the Workshop is organised today, we will be able to see that the other disciplines and Cultural Studies are on par with each other. Cultural Studies at CSSS-C is one discipline among many—the former being a space for studies in the wake of developments within English Studies or studies of popular culture. The disciplines as understood in the Cultural Studies Workshops appear to be independent entities that can borrow from each other retaining their basic characteristics and methods. Interdisciplinarity becomes a large field here populated by a number of approaches—from ‘inter-’ as literally ‘between’ disciplines and ‘inter’ as a space for give and take.<sup>11</sup>

The EFLU Programme and the CSS Workshop therefore have a common focus in having no specific focus at all, all the more to allow ‘independent entities’ or ‘research agendas’ to define a disciplinary boundary. This is certainly different from the Tezpur (1995) and the North Gujarat University (2002) initiatives which Radhakrishnan describes:

A focus on local culture, on issues related to the forms of expressions in the North Eastern region, is being emphasised upon in this programme. Another initiative of a similar kind at a national level is the Centre for Indian Diaspora and Cultural Studies that was set up in Hemchandracharya North Gujarat University (Patan, Gujarat) in 2002. This centre seeks to study the life of diasporic Indians and thus to redraw geographical boundaries in the understanding of national culture. The initiatives both at Tezpur University and the Centre for Diaspora and Cultural Studies attempt to infuse into a new domain, conveniently called Cultural Studies, concerns of a local nature in dialogue with and contrast to ideas of national culture (as in the case of the former) and of a global nature again in a dialogic and conflictual nature with ideas of national culture.<sup>12</sup>

These two initiatives can certainly be seen as fuelled by ‘local’ concerns, rather than by academic ones, the latter being the concern with theory, discipline and the relations between them. But also, the institutionalization of these local concerns in mainstream academia is done through Cultural Studies since there is no place for them in any of the established disciplines. In that sense just as the English departments and the Social

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Sciences needed Cultural Studies to do theory and post-colonial literature, similarly, different geographical locations in the country demand that local concerns be addressed and find Cultural Studies a convenient envelope into which their concerns fit.

Radhakrishnan attempts to bring some coherence to this field when he says:

Though the different institutions doing Cultural Studies seem to be working within different and at times contradictory paradigms, one can discern important similarities between them, although the tendency so far has been to see them as disparate and unconnected attempts. For example, all these instances of the emergence of Cultural Studies seem to be dealing with an epistemological or political issue that has a very close relationship to their institutional locations.<sup>13</sup>

But as we have seen earlier, these 'local' concerns are of varied nature, though all oriented towards a single goal: the introduction of what was hitherto outside the institution of academia, into the mainstream. Radhakrishnan sees this as a positive outcome because it 'allows for the programme to be more inclusive and to address and challenge earlier disciplinary formations with ease' (ibid., p.12). But he does not ask how this is to be done. And that brings us to the abiding problem of method in Cultural Studies: what White and Schwoch (2006)<sup>14</sup> call the 'structuring absence' in Cultural Studies: the absence of a methodology.

Assuming that Cultural Studies is a discipline defined by diversity, does it have a unified method? In this context, White and Schwoch (2006) present the argument against methodological rigour in Cultural Studies by pointing to the implications of 'method' as such. These are 'often, whether accurately or not, associated with an imaginary scholar devoting an entire career to asking questions and desiring answers with the same methodological approach over and over again regardless of topic, regardless of relevance'.<sup>15</sup> And Cultural Studies with its diversity cannot fall into that trap. So what is the way out? Should Cultural Studies be content with what these two authors call 'method fragmented within the context of specific disciplines', rather than 'articulated through Cultural Studies and across disciplines'?<sup>16</sup>

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In order to answer this question, we must first point to a difficulty in nomenclature: the terms Culture Studies and Cultural Studies are often interchangeably used. In order to bring a semblance of order into the discussion, let us assume that we are talking about Cultural Studies, which refers to a way of studying material at hand: which is to say we are attempting to do a particular kind of study. We are not, therefore, talking of Culture Studies. Our efforts are not defined by the object of study, that is cultural artifacts met with a collection of material and a cache of theories that are all included within the rubric of Cultural Studies, we come to the conclusion that the object (or subject, depending upon your theoretical proclivities) of Cultural Studies is anything and everything. Given the history of the formation of the discipline, that is probably quite fitting. But then, how is this vast amount of diverse material to be handled, whether 'taught' or 'done'? In other words, is there a method that will distinguish Cultural Studies from ways in which other disciplines, like Comparative Literature, for instance, 'read' 'texts' and have been doing so since the time Goethe wrote *West-eastern Divan* in 1815? Having argued that there cannot be a unified method in Cultural Studies, White and Schwoch propose a 'management' or 'negotiation' template, emphasizing possibilities of methodological usage rather than a single model emphasizing boundaries and theories. The final outcome of this is 'a multi-celled cultural studies spread-sheet': 'Visible Cultural Studies spreadsheet cells are those that are germane to the operationalization of that specific project',<sup>17</sup> implying that a smorgasbord of theoretical concepts and tools from a wide variety of disciplines ranging from sociology to film theory is a perfectly acceptable situation. Yet, these same authors pose a counter-argument to the 'no-unified method' position by saying that in the inter- and cross-disciplinary dialogue of the twenty-first century and the advanced communication and information technology systems that we operate and inhabit, a careful rearticulation of method is needed.<sup>18</sup> While we are not unsympathetic to this state-of-the-art argument for method, we are also concerned about the more mundane problems besetting the actual acts of teaching and research without the attendant support of definitive methodological model. Indeed Bourdieu (2001)<sup>19</sup> advises that we must move from a 'mechanics of a model to dialectic of strategies'. We do not claim anything other than a functional necessity, in our desire for 'method'. Hence, it is our attempt in what

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follows to propose, through individual essays in this collection, a possible formulation of a method, keeping in mind the fact that the object of Cultural Studies is varied by definition.

Our focus is on 'how', rather than 'what'. Why the text has been marked out as the object of study in the beginning of this essay may now be clear. Barthes' definition of the text is constructed at the interstice of a number of frames, from the perspective of a number of entities that stand in varied relations to it. The study of such 'texts' should include the frames of location from an interrelation of perspectives. We have argued that 'process' is the key to this method, and we are studying the production and consumption of meaning and material in conjunction. We may be rightly accused of side-stepping the fraught question of 'what is culture'. Pleading guilty to this charge, we proceed by identifying the 'cultural' as a dynamic field, formed of the interstices of many layers of practice, belief and quotidian living. This field provides a context or a location for the existence, change and operation of the 'text'. It is related, with all its specificities, to other immediate or remote fields constructed and imagined in a similar way. And its dynamism is caused by the fact that the production, reception and re-use of the text that is our object of study occurs within this field. Therefore the production, consumption, reception and re-use of the 'text' has the potential to change the shape and nature of the context/location, even as the 'text' itself is changed and shaped by the context/location. It is through the text's being and becoming that culture is produced and participated in. The processes of being and becoming are those which we have indicated as 'cultural process' and undertaken to study.

We have tried to bring together diverse interlinked moments within the chronotope of the present and populated them with texts. These texts are located in time and space and travelling across times and spaces, beginning from an arbitrary point in the period of their genesis to a projection for the kind of future that they might fashion. Looked at separately, these studies will stand as disparate pieces of writing; viewed from the perspective outlined earlier, however, they constitute a loosely patterned 'present'. The dynamics of change in the internal structures of each of the texts is the object of study here. In that sense, the mystery of the process remains—we are hard put to foretell the direction of change, but we argue that the mapping of the moment will allow us to



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understand some part of this mystery. We recognize and try to understand the structure of feeling from which the selected texts generated and the changes they are able to make in those structures. Through this, we address various processual dynamics which yield an understanding of some of the dimensions of the specific chronotope chosen.

The processual method attempts to study interrelated processes of textualization located in time and space across the spectrum from concept to embodiment, through language. By language I refer to a medium: the medium of the study, especially if one is writing an academic volume, may be language, but the object of study can be (and has been) expressed/constructed in any medium including language. Changes in the nature and usage of texts, that is changes in their means of production, consumption/reception and re-use, point to a changed 'understanding' of their place and function. This dialectic produces what we have called 'process'. Process may be understood by identifying and understanding this dialectic. As far as antecedents of this form of procedure is concerned, the method that we are proposing may be seen to be derived from Reception and Influence Studies and theories of Contactual Relations. Reception Studies provides methods for understanding the reception of signs within and across specific locations and through time. The concept of influence has been shortchanged by thinking of it as unidirectional: it has been rendered unidimensional as a result. For our purposes, 'reception' includes the dimensions posited by Tartakov and Dahejia (1984),<sup>20</sup> who conceptualize the act of reception as 'Sharing, Intrusion and Influence'. This triad does not exhaust the field, and individual elements here are even not mutually exclusive; but the formulation points out the possibility of variety in conceptualizing reception, and may be seen to occur in various ways in the individual efforts collected here.

At this juncture, we should point out the implications of this method. First, it gives us the opportunity to consider forms of 'understanding' as part of the process too, a condition that we must accept if we do embark upon this route. This means that our conclusions regarding textualization are provisional and located. All stops are wayside stops: of course the stamina, energy and commitment to movement are factors in our continuing this process of understanding as are the actual conditions of the study itself. Underlying this is nothing more than a philosophy