

# **A Cultural Studies Reader**

**History, Theory, Practice**

Edited by

**Jessica Munns  
& Gita Rajan**

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With the British section edited and  
introduced by

Roger Bromley



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# *General introduction*

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Cultural studies, as a discipline, occupies a relatively new space in American and British universities. Most scholars in both countries see it emerging as an area of academic research, and consequently, a pedagogical practice from different socio-political and economic changes that followed the second world war. A series of world events validate such a view, and a major factor is the rise in the political status of America above that of Europe (and Britain) during the middle of the twentieth century, which in turn created new power trajectories in the global arena. This power differential created 'first' and 'second' worlds, situating countries in a hierarchy based upon economic and political cartographies rather than categories of geographic location or cultural community. This in turn created a new space called the 'third' world that was soon occupied by the growing number of previously colonized nations breaking free from 'empires'.

Another factor is the rise of a modern society with a large consumer capacity which re-configured trade and labour along lines of technocratic capital. And finally, the rise in democratic values in America and Britain gave the middle class, with its distinct needs and desires, a valid space for creating and enjoying popular culture. All these massive factors (and several smaller, individual ones) contributed in various ways to the intellectual endeavour of cultural critique. Contrary to what some scholars have argued however, cultural critique itself, i.e., critique as mode of challenging and refining the foundational assumptions of any field of enquiry, has always been a clear voice in the liberal humanist tradition. It is, as Con Davis and Schliefer point out in *Criticism and Culture* (1991) not completely an invention of the late twentieth century scholar. One force that shapes this book is this historiography of cultural critique that is vital to cultural studies as a discipline. Another major force is the impact of such a critique on the various cultural forms in contemporary society.

In a lecture, 'The Future of Cultural Studies' given in 1986, Raymond Williams stated, 'you cannot understand an intellectual or artistic project without also understanding its formation; that the relation between a project and a formation is always

decisive; and . . . the emphasis of Cultural Studies is precisely that it engages with both.’ With this double agenda, with regard to cultural studies as both an academic project and a particular social formation, we hope to bring together an energetic mode of enquiry and one of the most dynamic and vital disciplines to be taught in the academy in recent years.

## Historicizing contexts

If the post-war scene created neat divisions of first/second worlds, then the crumbling of the Berlin wall in the 1980s, the fracture of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, and the gradual and unwelcome increase in economic and political strength in the Far and Near East demanded another scale for cultural critique. For example, the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement recently adopted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, the negotiations of the European Economic Community, and the much-debated General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade proposition, on the one hand signal a move towards homogenizing global markets, and on the other wipe out the distinct signatures of each country’s culture that were so eminently marketable. In this frame, questions regarding an inalienable essence of America or an intrinsic nature of (Europe) Britain as they become global phenomena have become urgent and intensified. Commonly challenged and critiqued issues in such a globalization centre around some basic structures. For example, one area of debate is the relationship of cultural productions such as art, literature, music, and theatre, and the social value of these forms in a democratized and computerized *multi-media* society. In today’s hyper-technological world, concepts such as ‘interactive video’ or ‘information super-highways’ are not jargons in the audio-visual industry, but emerging forms of cultural production and daily consumption. Also, questions of cultural identity *vis-à-vis* the roles played by citizens in these societies are raised where *gender*, *class*, and *race* factor into their value as citizens. Similar questions as to the meaning of migrant, diasporic, and transnational identities have been raised by post-colonials, where the politics of *representation and nationhood* come into play. Yet, none of these issues can be singled out, or compartmentalized, or read as discreet units, especially since the intellectuals engaged in such enquiries have been drawn into old and new centres of world power and have fed into American and British universities and their systems of thought. Thus, cultural critique is more than an interdisciplinary solution, it provides a spectrum of approaches to questions that are raised in today’s global, multi-classed, multi-racial, and multi-cultural societies. While most of the major factors initiating cultural critique are shared by America and Britain, the methods, milieux, and trajectories of these movements varied considerably in each country.

The discussions and analyses of culture, the alternations between jeremiad and optimistic belief in progress, however, are not new. Jürgen Habermas, in ‘Modernity: An Incomplete Project’, quotes Octavio Paz who remarked ‘the avant-garde of 1967 repeats the deeds and gestures of 1917’ (6). Frequently, arguments from the post-war period to the present have their roots in earlier discourses, or unknowingly echo

earlier anxieties and critiques. Indeed, most of the arguments demarcating high/low culture inevitably rehearse Matthew Arnold's thesis from *Culture and Anarchy* (1867), making it important to recognize Arnold's double position as both creating and critiquing a concept of culture. In this vein, Gerald Graff in a recent interview pointed out the impossibility of escaping Arnold's over-arching presence in cultural studies, for both Right- and Left-wing intellectuals.

As the intellectual emerged in American and European societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, his (and eventually her) task was not, as was the case for the clerical class of previous ages, to pass on a set body of knowledge but to critique the state of the very bodies of knowledge. Karl Marx declared that the role of philosophy was not to understand society but to change it, and although the revolution he advocated was not endorsed by all social thinkers, the principle of change was. From Marx to Arnold, the great cultural critics of the nineteenth century sought not only to understand their age but to remedy its flaws, and for these purposes roamed freely across those disciplinary boundaries which subsequent educational systems created. Gerald Graff has documented in *Professing Literature* (1987) that American universities started creating departments to teach specific, national literatures only by the end of the nineteenth century. Similarly, in Britain, Chris Baldick in *The Social Mission of English Criticism* (1983) and Peter Widdowson in *Re-Reading English* (1982) have pointed that the academization of 'English' had a certain social and cultural inflection. And, tracing the idea of culture even further back to the late eighteenth century, Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* (1958) also points to the ever-present battle between democracy and industrialization and culture and education. The nineteenth-century view that fruitful change was more likely to be located in a return to an earlier and stronger value system than through a radical re-organization of contemporary culture is a remedy that is suggested even today by Right-wing pundits. In so many of its concerns and approaches, cultural studies is not so much a new and terrifying subject, as it is a re-examination, a re-negotiation, and a re-interpretation of major Enlightenment and humanist ideals, especially with a contemporary temper of sustained critique. This is not to argue that cultural studies is an endless repetition of older ideas and themes, but to suggest that cultural studies has a comprehensible origin and a genealogy of analytical methodologies, which needs to be taken into account. In so far as cultural studies is forging new ground, even sometimes to dissociate itself from the assumptions of the past, it is as vital to scrutinize the materials of our study of culture as it is to study the materials of culture.

Most cultural-studies scholars use the second world war as a historical marker for tracing the growth of the field. The post-war scene created a demand for the provision of higher-level education to suit the needs of increasingly technological societies, and this, in turn, stimulated a recognition by first-wave cultural-studies scholars of the inter-related nature of culture and society. There began a move to 'build' universities in America and Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. This resulted in a massive increase in university populations, and areas such as sociology and cultural anthropology started establishing both empirical and theoretical models for tracing connections between culture and society. More recently, the role of the citizen, specifically, the gender, class, and race of the citizen have come into play in the

methodological analysis of culture. This in turn has resulted in a re-examination of a largely male, Eurocentric world view. This move has been matched by the development of a growing body of texts concerned with previously marginalized areas, such as the works of women and ethnic minorities, 'unacademic' subjects such as TV, pop music, comic books, as well as the once taboo field of diverse sexuality. In such a climate cultural studies has moved from a minority discourse pursued mostly at the graduate level at a few specially focused institutions to an increasingly integral element of the modern university curriculum at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

In Britain certain works and dates can be established as formative in the development of a cultural studies consciousness. Richard Hoggart's influential *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), focused attention on alterations in the traditional class system in Britain as it nostalgically looked back to a community of 'working-class' people. And E. P. Thompson's interpretation of the 'worker' in British society in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968) is another index in the formation of cultural studies. The National Union of Teachers conference in Britain in 1960 took as its subject matter the critical responses of teachers to television and film, which led directly to Paddy Whannel and Stuart Hall's ground-breaking book, *The Popular Arts* (1964). In America, an infinitely larger and less centralized country, the movement towards such a consciousness is more diffused, although the Taniment Institute Conference in 1959 parallels the concerns of the NUT conference and similarly brought together scholars from a range of disciplines. So too, the landmark case in Mississippi for integrating high-school education of black and white students generated a new paradigm for racial equality in America. Meanwhile, at the university level, American studies programmes pioneered interdisciplinary methods to define and often celebrate a unique national culture. While in Britain, new universities broke from traditional syllabi to create Common First Year programmes of study, in America, the move was more gradual. In both countries entirely new areas of study, such as women's studies, black studies, film studies, studies in Commonwealth literature, communications studies, and sociology of literature crossed hitherto separated disciplinary boundaries.

In Britain, the critique of contemporary culture was largely a dialogue of the New Left-wing intellectuals, even if many of its roots lay in the despair of Right-wing intellectuals like T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis at changes in traditional ways and values. British cultural studies formed itself out of many sources but predominantly by braiding together works in different areas with a debate with Marxism. In America, the impetus to study culture has always been as much the province of the Right as of the Left, but with, perhaps, a more nationalistic bias as European theories were often regarded with suspicion. Consequently, in America, cultural anthropology, American studies, and media studies tended to provide a viable methodology for cultural studies. Due to this documentary and explanatory principle, American cultural studies, on the surface at least, can be seen as less overtly engaged in political critique. While a Marxist heritage has made British cultural studies alert to issues of class, popular culture, and subcultures, initially at the expense of issues of race and gender, American forms of cultural studies focused upon ethnographic approaches, making them more open to questions of gender and race but obscuring issues of class. Black studies and women's studies, for instance, both emerged in America first.

Britain had to fight a double-edged battle against traditionalist disapproval and Marxist tendencies to subsume all struggles of power under the category of class struggle.

An interesting fact that is overlooked while creating such epistemological charts is the 'cultural' exchange that took place between the first and second worlds, especially in the light of the present breakdown of the Russian empire. The cold war was often also a culture war as each bloc sent its artists to perform in each other's capital cities, and the cold war, whether producing intellectuals supporting or contesting the superiority-claims of their bloc, made 'culture' by show-casing systems of habits, customs, practices, and beliefs. This need to define a cultural territory spilled, not fortuitously, into the expanding arena of higher education. While the flexing of political and nuclear muscle is well known, what often gets elided in these conflicts is the common ground that a European culture forged between the two blocs as a space for mediations.

## Contemporary contexts

While the topics mentioned above provide a glimpse into the background of cultural studies, there are a number of anthologies in the market today that deal with theories and methodologies already at work. The publications of the Open University in support of its ground-breaking courses in cultural studies and women's studies, for instance, provide basic collections of contemporary materials largely based on the works of British practitioners. The publications of the University of Essex conferences on the sociology of literature similarly collect together innovative materials, mostly by British and European scholars, focused around interdisciplinary issues of culture, gender, class, and race. In America since the 1970s collections of essays devoted to black studies, women's studies, chicana/o and native-American cultures have highlighted the importance of the issues of race and gender to modern culture. While the general emphasis tends to be on literature and media, their significance to all branches of cultural enquiry is clear. An informative over-view of the development of cultural studies as a discipline is provided by Graeme Turner in *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (1990). American publications such as Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1989) gather together a massive collection of essays covering a wide range of cultural issues offering students and scholars important resources. Grossberg and Nelson have re-negotiated the very terrain that cultural critique has occupied in its engagement with traditional Marxism. Their agenda is ambitious, poly-directional, and deliberately heterogenous, making the anthology, in turn, multi-textured, and uneven in presentation. This is partly due to the fact that their work is one of the first 'cultural studies' collections in America (a collection of the first cultural studies conference organized at the University of Illinois), and, unlike British scholars, they are not seeking to create a foundational text for the field. Since then, various other cultural studies anthologies have also been published. An interesting, if polemical, over-view of the rise of cultural studies is provided in Patrick Brantlinger's *In Crusoe's*

*Footprints* (1990). His most recent anthology, *Modernity and Mass Culture* (1992), reflects his major concern with the relations between mass and elite culture and between modernity and postmodernity.

Cultural studies anthologies indicate the political nature of cultural critique which is always embroiled in contradictory and conflicting discourses. One factor that is undebatable about the nature of cultural studies, however, is its immense political potential. Whether cultural critique rests on Marxist or continental theories of subjectivity (both as physical potential and/or psychological interpolations), or on oppositional dialogues with Right-wing reactionaries (Reaganites in America and Thatcherites in Britain), or is faced with constant interruptions by race and gender analysts, the field continues to challenge every shift in global culture. Cultural studies is therefore championed as an energetic, polysemic, multi-disciplinary field by its advocates, or is denounced by its opponents as a parasitic, cacophonous phenomenon capable of wrecking culture as it is known today. This is because all parties involved agree that cultural studies is an inherently powerful tool with a radical potential for intervening in the education and socialization, i.e., acculturation, of future generations of students.

Our *Reader* attempts to provide a brief context of ideas that are crucial to cultural critique and presents a survey of some of the major texts in the field thus far. The introductory essay and the nineteenth-century section are designed to draw attention to the central issues of cultural criticisms in America and Britain, and each of the sections on British and American cultural studies shows the distinct traditions and trends in the two countries. While we hope to draw a comprehensive map, this is not intended as a 'world' reader; work carried out by 'Third World', Australian, Canadian, and Eastern European cultural critics has not been included. We have not, however, enforced an essentialist paradigm, i.e., insisted that all our authors be either American or British by birth or nationality, but rather that their work is conducted in the contexts of American and British cultural and academic life and responsive to the particular strains, movements and tendencies of these cultures. However, even with the latitude that the American-British locus provides, we have not been able to include certain works by major figures in cultural theory or any work by Right-wing intellectuals such as Allan Bloom, due to the sheer economics of production.

## Textual contexts

As an area of academic enquiry, cultural studies, inevitably, is textually based and with this *Reader* we hope to provide a series of texts, some very well known and some less known outside their particular country of origin or discipline, which will contribute to the study of culture/s. We are, however, very aware that cultural studies, more perhaps than many other academic areas, both in its formation and in its objects of study resists, as much as it consists of, textualization. Cultural studies can only partially be undertaken through the study of written texts. Films, videos, music disks, trips to shopping malls, museums and art galleries all have their place in any

study of the materials of culture. Essays by Stuart Hall, James Clifford and Richard Johnson included in the *Reader* specifically address what are in many ways the paradoxes and problematics of an area of study which defies easy and singular definition and which is constantly enmeshed in mediating between experience as a lived process and as a textualized critique. In Williamsesque terms, cultural studies is, perhaps, a 'structure of feeling', as well as, or even more than, a 'discipline'—and hence the ability of cultural studies to colonize and combine varied disciplinary areas.

Our *Reader* offers an historical perspective on the field of enquiry and a selection focused around strong thematic markers which signal the significant fields of cultural enquiry. There are three basic organizational movements: chronological growth, national concerns, and thematic areas. These groupings in themselves indicate the development of cultural studies from nineteenth-century reactions to a mass society, to specific national concerns, and then to the interdisciplinary productions of an increasingly international/cross-national body of scholars. The *Reader* is not, however, a history of ideas but offers an interpretation of how certain ways of thinking about culture have come into being in relation to cultural phenomena, such as urbanization, technology, and the increasing presence of women and peoples of colour in the public sphere.

In the first section we provide basic texts from Arnold to Marx which plot the field for subsequent formations and reactions. Essays in cultural studies frequently refer to the importance of Marx to the study of culture as a social construct, and/or to the elitist critique of Arnold. Similarly, they refer to the central role of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of 'frontierism' in the American imagination, or to Frederick Douglass's questions on race politics. We have thus sought to present selections from nineteenth-century cultural thought which will serve as a useful background.

The following three sections, The impact of European theory, Cultural studies in Britain, and Cultural studies in America, indicate certain moments in cultural theory and critique which could be summarized as: European theories shaping cultural criticism, British formulations of critique and resistance, and American reflections and re-conceptions of culture. The selections here chart the specific national and cultural-historical boundaries which mark the emergence of cultural studies as an academic discipline in America and Britain. The selection of major European texts indicates the significance of a theoretical discourse which created a specific vocabulary for analytical methodologies. One criterion for including a theoretical section was to familiarize students with certain foundational concepts that are used in many of the essays in the *Reader*.

The four following sections are thematically organized and simply titled: Media Studies, Race Studies, Gender Studies, and Voice-Overs. The point in keeping the titles direct is to indicate the concrete nature of these constructs within culture, while the essays themselves bring out the theoretical complexity within these constructs. We hope to create a play in these sections ranging from media as the scene of representation, gender as the deployment of sexuality, and race as presenting the politics of multi-culturalisms and colour. All the sections represent major areas of cultural concern/critique carried out on both sides of the Atlantic by an increasingly international body of scholars. Our final section is deliberately heterogenous, moving from monographs to dialogues and from manifestoes to pedagogic paradigms in an effort



to invite scholars, critics and students to talk to each other. An important contribution that we see our *Reader* making is in presenting a body of knowledge to students as one view of the origin of cultural studies, and the consequent development of cultural critique as an intellectual endeavour and a disciplinary practice. We hope that teachers and students will be able to use this knowledge (in its metalanguage of analysis) as a productive pedagogical practice. In other words, what impact does the field of cultural studies have on the academic growth of students in today's multi-cultural environment? How do students learn the meanings and values of cultures as both lived-in experiences and as intellectual tools of critique? This *Reader* presents students with concrete examples of the various constructions and practices of culture. Quite specifically, this step into the classroom at this precise socio-political and cultural moment, with Right-wing opponents of cultural studies in America blocking its entrance into the academy, is a direct way of empowering students. Given the marbled nature of the demographics of today's student populations on both sides of the Atlantic, Henry Giroux's comment in 'Post-Colonial Ruptures and Democratic Possibilities' is very valid. He writes that cultural studies has given 'a new twist to the political and the personal, [since] the conservative backlash has attempted to reverse many of the gains made by women, gays and lesbians, ethnic and racial minorities, and other subordinated groups who have organized [themselves] around a politics of identity' (6).

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