

# Cultural Studies in an Indicative Mode

Toby Miller

Alec Leamas/Richard Burton: What do you believe in?

Nan Perry/Claire Bloom: Me? History, partly; partly, freedom; partly—

Alec: Nan! Don't tell me you're a bloody communist [laughs, throatily]

Nan: Yes. That's me [points to photograph]. Fighting for peace.—*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*<sup>1</sup>

Larry Grossberg is hortatory and magnetic. He is a Periclean perorator, the man you bring in to get the conference going, resuscitate it, or close it. That position allows him to reflect on the bits and pieces he hears and experiences around the globe, whether in conferences themselves or their interstices. In this mode he tends to quote the aphorisms of essayists and interviewees.

Grossberg can also be exegetical. Part of his ability to speak so effectively to audiences is his ability to listen to them, which carries over into his research. He is an enthusiast who sees value around him and seeks both to endorse and contest it. This relates to his quality as a summarizer of ideas. Grossberg's textual analysis ably engages significant, long-form books that argue from first principles and draw on vast empirical material, alongside the *aperçus* of *belles-lettristes*. In addition, he produces profound insights from original research, such as his work on young people, which blends the qualities adumbrated above with an eye for material grounded beyond seminar rooms and hotel lobbies.

His latest book is a valuable addition to a series of metatextual meditations on our field. *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* looks at politics, economics, and modernity. It provides a well-written, fascinating, and unlikely alchemy of after-dinner speaker and careful exegete, in the service of important work.

The book confronts a problem: to influence public life, cultural studies as we know it only gets you so far. One also needs to intervene with the big kids at the top table.<sup>2</sup> Wafting on airily, seriously, or even truly about movies, games, or music does not "matter." It is pub talk, lunchtime chatter, golf-course relaxation, cubicle gossip, tweet tattle.

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Grossberg is alive to this dilemma. To have an impact, in addition to utilizing the tools of phatic and substantive communication, one must also know the master discourses of decision-makers, master discourses of the age. They may *draw* on culture, and of course they have their *own* culture; but they do not borrow much from the humanities, where the *esquintles* sit at the low table or in the kitchen.

In the master's dining room, the discourse draws on the social sciences, principally rational-actor models and *Realpolitik*, whether the topic is share prices, unemployment, education, research, or planning. And there is real value in understanding such talk. Grossberg recognizes that cultural-studies *dharma* disables us from such topics in all too many instances of narcissistic, aesthetic self-indulgence. For all the reasons I have listed above, and many more, both personal and not, I admire Grossberg.

You are waiting for the "but."

And I think *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* is a tendentious account, for five reasons. I shall focus on these limitations, rather than on the book's many estimable qualities, as a sign of my admiration and desire that people read the book and argue with it.

Firstly, Grossberg seeks to exhort cultural-studies people to change, to be different. As a consequence, he allocates less space to the right and the anti-socialist middle: the line singled out for critique is from the left. Reactionaries and conventional academia largely get a free pass, whereas they should be the ones who are challenged. In terms of the key cultural questions of our day and their political and theoretical corollaries, we are left in the dark. For example, religion is not engaged. This is a post-secular age in the United States, but the link between great awakenings, immigration growth, and income inequality is not considered. Militarism and its appeal via the popular is also not addressed.

The fact is that our principal opponents on the right know we threaten them when we engage such matters. The *Village Voice* dubs cultural studies "the ultimate capitulation to the MTV mind... couchpotatodom writ large... just as Milton doesn't belong in the rave scene, sitcoms don't belong in the canon or the classroom."<sup>3</sup> Steve Forbes in his family zine (you know the one) rages against "the political correctness that stifles the genuine free flow of discussion and debate in so many higher-ed institutions" and predicts a future with "fewer ridiculous basket-weaving-like courses."<sup>4</sup> On the long-in-the-tooth anti-Marxist left, *Dissent* hopes we are dying out:

the lack of seriousness that had been synonymous with the nineties—the intellectual fads, the pop culture studies, the French theories... collapsed under the weight of an economic meltdown. What once appeared to be a liberating application of high theory to essential aspects of political and cultural experience now seems silly.<sup>5</sup>

These are the attacks I would like to see the book engage, because they need countering more than the left requires further critical self-examination.

Secondly, cultural studies needs to make peace with numbers. Justin Lewis has made this point in many places, focusing in part on the paradox of words and

numbers—that quantoids take concepts, turn them into numbers, then transform them back into concepts.<sup>6</sup> But Grossberg's otherwise illuminating discussion of economics and culture largely ignores people who for a quarter of a century have been blending political economy with cultural studies. My quickly constructed list features: David Throsby, George Yúdice, John Quiggin, Paula Sibilia, Ana Maria Ochoa, Paula Chakravartty, Richard Maxwell, Andrew Ross, Dan Schiller, Mike Wayne, Jim McKay, Douglas Kellner, David Theo Goldberg, Lisa Parks, David Rowe, Mark Deuze, Ned Rossiter, Armida de la Garza, Des Freedman, Yuezhi Zhao, Alan Tomlinson, Ellen Seiter, Rune Ottosen, Natalie Fenton, Will Straw, John Nguyet Erni, and Kate Oakley. You might have dozens of different names in yours. Instead, the issue as Grossberg constructs it continues to be with old-school political economy versus cultural studies, understood as per communication-studies debates of the past in which these were disabling antinomies.

In place of addressing the body of work I just listed, time is given to addressing cultural-economy research, which is basically economic sociology applied to culture, and to orthodox economics itself. The former largely sidesteps core questions of systemic inequality associated with capitalism, and remains a minor player academically. The latter is a real target in need of skewering. The main point about neoclassical economics is that it works—not in the sense that it *tells* the truth, but that it *constructs* that truth in real life from its originary fantasies. There is a purposive nature to marginalism, whereby *noumen* and phenomenon become one in the application of an account of the real to the world to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Political economy continues to be its principal alternative, but is caricatured here.

Thirdly, the book fails to engage the challenge to cultural studies from the discourse on creative industries. This discourse buys into individualistic fantasies of reader, audience, consumer, and player autonomy—the neoliberal intellectual's wet dream of music, movies, television, and everything else converging under the sign of empowered and creative fans. The New Right of media and cultural studies invests with unparalleled gusto in Schumpeterian entrepreneurs, evolutionary economics, and creative industries. It has never seen an “app” it did not like, or a socialist idea it did.<sup>7</sup> This tendency should be at the forefront of a debate about cultural studies. It is making the running across the globe.

Fourthly, Grossberg is opposed to coupling cultural with media studies. Here is the news, though—that union is necessary for cultural studies to survive, because media attracts people; literary studies is dying; and communication studies is dominated by third-rate scientific positivism and Americanization forensics. The only way, given the US policy of not funding cultural studies other than via teaching, is for us to offer media courses, which fascinate undergraduates.

Finally, lurking behind these first four issues I have with the book is this: it will not squarely address the fact that cultural studies came into being via a profound and ongoing relationship with Marxism—and not just to mode of production or ideology critique, but to cultural materialism. This is the specter haunting Larry—a specter that has two elements he abjures: economic determinism and ideological absolutism.

But his favored concepts—conjuncture and context—are surely material themselves. Having Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci without class formation is a problem. Conjunctures and contexts require motors: what changes them, and what are the signs that they have changed? I emerged unclear from reading this volume.

So, I think we need to engage Grossberg's critiques, and his modes of writing. Both of them have great value. But we should urge him in turn to turn his ire on the right; to consider the legion of scholars who disavow a division between political economy and cultural studies; to address the creative-industries push; to fuse with media studies; and, above all, to rethink the anti-Marxism. Wrong target.

## Notes

- [1] *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, directed by Martin Ritt (1965).
- [2] Laura Nader, "Up the Anthropologist—Perspectives Gained from Studying Up," in *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell H. Hymes. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 284–311.
- [3] Norah Vincent, "Lear, Seinfeld, and the Dumbing Down of the Academy," *Village Voice* (February 2–8, 2000), <http://www.villagevoice.com/2000-02-01/nyc-life/hop-on-pop> (accessed June 1, 2011).
- [4] Steve Forbes, "Dinosaur U," *Forbes* (February 28, 2011), <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2011/0228/opinions-steve-forbes-fact-comment-dinosaur-u.html> (accessed June 1, 2011).
- [5] Kevin Mattson, "Cult Stud Mugged: Why We Should Stop Worrying and Learn to Love a Hip English Professor," *Dissent* (January 31, 2011), <http://dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=440> (accessed June 1, 2011).
- [6] Justin Lewis, *Constructing Public Opinion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
- [7] Celebrating fifteen years of work on this topic, see Stuart Cunningham, "Creative Industries as a Globally Contestable Policy Field," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 2, no. 1 (2009): 13–24.