

# Social Science Bites

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# Toby Miller on Cultural Studies

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**David Edmonds:** *Literature, Physics, History, now these are proper areas of academic discipline, but Cultural Studies? Even compared to the other Social Sciences Cultural Studies has attracted – from usually ignorant sources – particular derision. Toby Miller is a leading academic in Cultural Studies whose writings cover an astounding range of topics from TV and Hollywood to sport and the media.*

**Nigel Warburton:** *Toby Miller, welcome to Social Science Bites*

**Toby Miller:** Nice to be here Nigel

**Nigel Warburton:** *The topic we're going to focus on is Cultural Studies. Maybe you could begin by saying something about what you do and why that's Cultural Studies.*

**Toby Miller:** Sure, and I think the answer to the question 'What is Cultural Studies?' is one that's ongoing and it depends on the time and place that it's answered, although the same thing could be said about lots of other discipliners as they merge through time and as they change and as they warp and woof and as they interact with other disciplines. In my case I try to look at two particular factors in the everyday life of culture. One is subjectivity, by which I mean not just 'this is simply my opinion', but rather how subjects are made, how persons are constructed, how positions are generated for them and how they occupy those positions - whether that's something the census says about you, or your mother says about you, or your religious affiliation says about you. And secondly, power: how those subjects are constructed in terms of different power dynamics, hierarchies, opportunities for difference, opportunities for contestation.

**Nigel Warburton:** *So, that sounds like Sociology to me, this idea that the association between the self and society.*

**Toby Miller:** Well I am a lapsed sociologist, it's true. But because my career's been split between Australia, the US, the UK and Latin America I'm prone to different kinds of sociology. So I guess one of the ones that appeals more to me is probably the slightly more qualitoid politically inflected form, more culturalist form you get in Latin America, and less the 'rats and stats' quantoid form which you get in the United States.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Could you give an example of something that is Cultural Studies? What makes it 'cultural', I'm not quite sure what it means?*

**Toby Miller:** By 'culture' I think most of us in the field would mean two things. First of all what's often thought of as an aesthetic inheritance or an aesthetic heritage, namely the world of arts, the world of meaning, the world of textuality, the world of content. The way in which artists, authors, writers, radio producers, etcetera generate things of beauty, things of truth, if you like – what we understand by the Arts or the Humanities. Secondly there is the understanding of culture which is more ethnographic, perhaps more anthropological which is about customary ways of life: the understanding that society is authored not only through formal rules and regulations but informal ones - the way in which we organize our daily routines, the way in which you and I are taking turns politely, so far, with each other's sentences and interrupting and so on right. And in cultural studies those things actually merge: in order to understand how art works, you need to understand everyday life and in order to understand everyday life increasingly you have to understand how art works. And that's especially true in many of the de-industrialising, post-industrialised societies like this one the UK where we are, like the US. Where increasingly its services, it's culture, it's ideas, it's meanings, it's insurance, it's law, it's media that is being sold; it's not farming, it's not manufacturing, and it's not mining. To give an example, do you like Hollywood Nigel? What do you think about the Hollywood industry as a consumer, as a viewer as a fan as an enemy as a whatever?

**Nigel Warburton:** *I tend to go a bit more for the independent films... there are some great Hollywood movies, for sure.*

**Toby Miller:** This is the edgy, arty side of Nigel Warburton being exposed to his multi-national public. Well in the books *Global Hollywood* and *Global Hollywood 2* that I did with a number of collaborators with Indian, Chinese, Spanish and US backgrounds what we tried to do was to understand the success of Hollywood as a film industry around the world in many different contexts, but always trying to bear in mind three factors. One factor would be, if you like, the underpinning political economy, in other words who benefits from all of this? How does the money move? Is the success of Hollywood not just about the supposed quality of what it produces but actually its capacity to get hold of things like free money. In other words, not loans and not equity but lunatic governments throwing money at it because they think, that Hollywood will produce glamour or tourism or whatever it is. This country is lunatic about that, Australia is, Romania is – you name it. So that's one aspect of it, another aspect is of course, what on earth is the meaning of these things? How is the success of Hollywood achieved filmically? What are the sights and sounds and narratives, dramatic arcs? What are the special effects that generate the meanings that stand for Hollywood when you and I use the term? And then, thirdly, how are these things actually interpreted: what do we know about how audiences make meanings themselves as recipients of Hollywood? So in other words the way I do Cultural Studies, and plenty of other people too is what's the ownership, control, proprietorship, state regulation and so on, what's the meaning that's generated, and what is the experience of that meaning as it is in turn re-generated by audiences or spectators?

**Nigel Warburton:** *It strikes me there that there are two distinct things going on: you're collecting empirical data about Hollywood, and presumably that's reasonably objective when you get into the economic realm, but you are also spinning a story about Hollywood and that has a subjective element no doubt. How do you know that the story that you are spinning about Hollywood is a plausible story?*

**Toby Miller:** That's a really good question because Hollywood in particular is one of these places where vast amounts of data are as you say available. And one can deem them to be real, to be credible. But frankly they are full of all kinds of words that you don't say on Social Science Bites but are running

through our minds even as we speak. So when you go to sources like the major trade magazines, or you go to the studios themselves, it's likely that the stories that you are told about say the success of 'Skyfall', a big James Bond movie, and we say that it's cost this amount of money and it's taken in this amount of money and it will go through the following 'windows of release' that will generate the following revenue. That's all normally fabricated, and the only way that you'll ever find out the *real* data is when there is a big law case and people actually go to court and the books are open. So yes we try to use in those projects lots of so-called hard data that are about where the money goes, and some of that's, reliable and some of it's not. However to get your point about how I spin the story, how I know that, that's legitimate that's I think a very reasonable point and certainly I'm a polemical writer. And I want to tell stories that appeal variously to other scholars and that will meet the standards of rigour that are expected within the various disciplines that are germane to the topic I'm interested in. Secondly, that stakeholders will actually read and pay some heed to, and third that the general public may actually be interested. Some people, when they read my academic prose, say 'Extraordinary empirical data - it's a pity this person is so biased.'

**Nigel Warburton:** *Well you don't think it's biased do you?*

**Toby Miller:** No, I don't. My personal, political, intellectual commitments are very important to the work I do but, they don't structure it or inform it in any total way. My overall commitment is to try to find out the nature of things and how they function and how they operate. That often means disclosing, unveiling things that are very uncomfortable in terms of my political commitments. More generally, I think it discloses things that are uncomfortable for other people's political commitments. So, for example, in the case of Hollywood most people think of this as a truly laissez-faire private enterprise industry, an example of the grandeur of American capitalism, the capacity to simply let entrepreneurs have their head without state intervention. That's simply not true. I've disproved it, so have many other people, hundreds of times. But there are plenty of people who say 'You're a socialist, that's what you're looking for, you don't understand that that's really

irrelevant'. But my politics do not override the empirical material that I uncover.

**Nigel Warburton:** *How do you know that they don't ever override your interpretation of the data?*

**Toby Miller:** Well, I get my work often read by others who clearly will not always share the same commitments that I do. But I also try to write so often and so much but with so much time to spare that I can go back and cast a really critical gaze over what I've done. I guess in terms of the Hollywood material one of the interesting things to me is that I know people that are producers in Hollywood, are attorneys in Hollywood, that are studio executives in Hollywood who read the book and introduce me to others and say 'This is Toby Miller, he's a professor at the University of California, which I was, he's a socialist, but he actually understands how we go about what we do'. That would be one case where I'd be arguing that I'm making a point about the hidden subsidies that characterize much of US capitalism: it's informed by what I suspect I'll find as a consequence both of my Social Science background and my political commitments. And then when I find it I have a diagnosis that I think is perfectly legitimate. But you don't have to accept in order to recognize that I am correct in the empirical material that I present.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Have you ever had the experience of taking your interpretation of event or of an institution back to people who know it intimately and them saying 'That's not us, it's nothing like us'?*

**Toby Miller:** Yes, I have. And frequently that's been an interesting lesson in and of itself. Whilst it's the case that a number of people working in Hollywood areas have found my analysis of their success and how they go about it very compelling; others have just completely refused to engage and denounced it because the reality in my view of the profundity of state participation and the success of this apparently laissez-faire industry, is tough for them to hear. Now that doesn't mean that their story, their version of these things, is worthless. I want to make sure that the voices that disagree with me are given plenty of space in what I write.

**Nigel Warburton:** *When I interviewed the psychologist Jonathan Haidt for this podcast, he told the story about how he'd moved from Democratic convictions more towards Republicanism through his research. Is that anything that you could ever envisage happening to you?*

**Toby Miller:** My view is constantly changed by what I unearth and what I encounter and what people tell me. So an instance of that would be my work, there's a book called *Sportsex* about sports and sexuality. As part of my commitment to try to reach out to scholars, to stake holders, to the general public in addition to that book I wrote op-eds in newspapers, and I also wrote a couple of pieces in fashion outlets and in some gay websites at their request. One of those pieces was then re-appropriated by another website and illustrated with hardcore porn without my being told, without the earlier gay website being told, and with no name responsible on the website other than apparently mine. What was I to do with this? What was it telling me? Well, there's an ethical issue, there's a legal issue – those things are off to one side, but what I learnt from the episode was that my writing in *Sportsex*, which was an attempt to talk about the beauty of the male body as a grand, new, vibrant commodity in the world of the media and in the world of sport and the world of general circulation and public life of bodies, was amenable to this profoundly erotic/pornographic interpretation. So here I was finding my words illustrated without my say-so by images that many people would find deeply offensive, and yet there are some readers out there for whom this connection was quite significant. So it was a very, very interesting lesson in when you put your foot into the water in a certain domain suddenly information comes back to you that's really at variance with what you were anticipating.

**Nigel Warburton:** *I was intrigued when you said earlier that your role is to disclose the nature of things because the caricature of Cultural Studies is that people in that discipline don't really think there is a nature of things, that everything is constructed, that there always is another perspective that could be taken. But you seem to be embracing something that seems to be an Enlightenment view of our relationship to the external world.*

**Toby Miller:** Caught out. You know I thought that one was going over the boundary that I got caught in the deep. My answer to that would be to turn to Bruno Latour – one of the great French anthropologist-philosophers, sociologist of science. But when Latour is asked to talk about the nature of science and the nature of things and the nature of meaning, he says that you have to have all three in dynamic intercourse (as the actress said to the bishop). So let me give you an example of what I mean and what Latour means and how that informs my understanding. Yes there are all kinds of different natures of things: things evolve and the struggles over what they are and how to deal with them evolve, and the struggle over how to represent them evolves, but all those three things need to be understood if your going to get to the nature of things. So Latour's instance is for example, if you're a scientist and you are writing an article that is about a particular thing that exists in the natural world – lets say wind. On the one hand there is a thing called wind, nobody in Cultural Studies is going to say that the flag is not blowing when the flag is blowing, right. But the decision to write about the flag, the funding that comes to you to do so will involve social forces, power relations, government decisions, financial investments and so on. And thirdly the way in which you write about the wind will be informed by the rules of how to write a journal article: there will be in abstract, there will be keywords, there will be a method, there will be a literature search, there will be a hypothesis. None of these things has anything to do with wind: it's to do with a set of forces to do with texts. So to understand the nature of things you have to have all those things in dynamic play.

**Nigel Warburton:** *But when it comes to the interpretation of the significance of things there's much more scope for debate than there is about the hard empirical data.*

**Toby Miller:** Yes, but.. deciding what to count and how to count it is incredibly important. Justin Lewis a wonderful scholar here in Britain wrote a great book [www.socialsciencebites.com](http://www.socialsciencebites.com) Toby Miller Dec/2012

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about public opinion which came out about ten years ago. Justin's point there is that basically what happens with a lot of numerical Sociology, Communications Studies, and so on, is that there's a problem that exists and the problem that people are trying to understand is one that you can describe with words. Who is going to win (today is the day of the US presidential election), the election between president Obama and Governor Romney? That will be decided empirically by numbers, but it is being constructed as a problem verbally. Once you've got that verbal problem, what it is that you want to know about, you then seek to turn the different categories that you've described into numbers. X number of people are doing this, Y number of people are doing that. Once you've done that then you go through the various numerical manipulations required of say mathematical sociology, your next task is to turn them back into words so that people can interpret them. So in fact the semiotics of data collection, administration, manipulation and so on are riddled with questions of representation.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Cultural Studies has a bad press in Britain and possibly elsewhere in the world. Why do you think that is?*

**Toby Miller:** I think in Britain it's regarded often as a 'Mickey Mouse' subject - that's actually the language used. And you find plenty of people involved in, for example the elite universities: Oxford and Cambridge decrying it, you get plenty of people within media institutions like the BBC or the *Guardian* decrying it, you get plenty of people who are worried about so-called standards of education generally decrying it. It basically is going through the same growing pains and denunciations that Sociology did after the Second World War, that Literature did in the late nineteenth century and that the Natural Sciences did in the early twentieth century. In other words, when you have massive, imperial and economic changes to the way in which a country functions the knowledge which is generated in universities to deal with those transformations has trouble getting a place at the table in terms of the legitimacy of those who have been trained in other domains. If you went back

a century and a bit and you looked at the way that English Literature was denounced as 'Mickey Mouse' – though unfortunately they didn't have Mickey in those days - by contrast with Ancient Greek and Latin you'd find extraordinary similarities, in the US it's associated much more, is cultural studies, with literature. So the idea that it is within English departments that the historic task, the kind of Arnoldian, Reithian task in British terms of high culture to elevate the citizenry, is being in a sense thrown to the wolves by literature professors who instead of understanding that historic mission are instead obsessed with precisely Disney or whatever. There the criticism is that the obsession with political correctness and the popular is diminishing not the quality of, say, the Social Sciences or students' minds but rather diminishing the capacity to undertake the historic mission of literature.

**Nigel Warburton:** *It doesn't follow that because something is despised now that it has value that will emerge as history unfolds.*

**Toby Miller:** You're absolutely right, and of course we're in an era when, in particular, areas like academic publishing are changing very rapidly; the interrelationship of the media and universities is changing very rapidly; the commodification of knowledge is changing very rapidly. And unless Cultural Studies manages, on the one hand, to satisfy some of those requirements and modify itself to the reigning political economy and on the other hand manages to find methods, forms, and norms that are legible to more traditional university areas as Literature managed to do, it will have difficulties. But if we go back, Nigel, just over fifty years to C.P. Snow the great physicist and novelist and the 'Two Cultures' pamphlet: what Snow was doing in the fifties was lamenting the fact that whether he was in Knightsbridge or Cambridge, Massachusetts, when he spoke to Literature professors they didn't understand anything about laws of thermodynamics. Whereas when he spoke to Physics professors they knew something about T.S. Elliot and Modernism, and he felt as though ne'er the twain shall meet. One of the problems that Cultural Studies might offer if it manages to get friendly with the Sciences and the

Social Sciences is that actually it is very interested in how those things can intersect. Now let me give you an example that's organic and already happening and that is in areas like electronic games where you have people in Cultural Studies who can write code and understand how software and hardware interact, and you have the people in Computer Science who are interested in narrative and understand the imagery of different subjects. These people take the same drugs, wear the same clothes, sleep with the same people, go to the same parties and they are no longer either physically or symbolically at opposite ends of campus. So if Cultural Studies can follow that kind of example without losing I hope its commitment to these questions that I've adumbrated with subjectivity and power that it may have a future.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Do you think the point of Cultural Studies is to understand things or to change them?*

**Toby Miller:** Are this is your inner Marxist expressing itself! I think that those things are deeply connected: if you look at what people do who teach Public Policy or teach Tourism or teach Shipbuilding or teach Architecture or teach History, guess what, they are not just finding out truth for its own sake: they're actually deeply complicit with,, implicated in the nature of the economy, how people are trained to participate in it, how state work is achieved, how it is done, and also the knowledge that citizens have that helps to make them the people they are. So there is no pure and unscarred form of knowledge that is not about trying to change things.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Toby Miller, thank you very much.*

**Toby Miller:** It's been a pleasure.

[ends]