Manifesto of a Tenured Radical

Nelson, Cary

Published by NYU Press

Nelson, Cary.  
Manifesto of a Tenured Radical.  
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76358.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76358
The rapidly increasing visibility of cultural studies in the United States over the past few years gives us an opportunity to see how an emerging body of theory is realized politically and professionally, to reflect on its articulation to existing institutions *in medias res*, before those articulations are fixed for any period of time. One of those institutions is the large academic conference, two of which took place within a few months of each other, “Cultural Studies Now and in the Future” at the University of Illinois in April of 1990, a conference I helped to organize, and “Crossing the Disciplines: Cultural Studies in the 1990s” at the University of Oklahoma in October of 1990, a conference organized by Robert Con Davis and Ron Schlieffer where I presented an earlier
version of this chapter. Cultural studies has also recently been the subject of special sessions at regional and national meetings of the Modern Language Association, all of which events together give a fairly good indication of what the future of cultural studies—especially in English—is likely to be. Though cultural studies has a much longer and very different, if still contested, history in U.S. Communications departments, it is on its very recent commodification in English that I want to focus here.

I might begin by posing a single strategic question: what does it mean that Robert Con Davis and Ron Schlieffer, in the papers they gave at the Oklahoma conference quite properly felt it appropriate and necessary to refer to the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in Britain and Hillis Miller, presenting the keynote talk at the opening of the same conference, gave no evidence of knowing anything about it and yet felt fully empowered to define both the history and future of cultural studies? I suppose in the broadest sense it means that the spread of American power and American culture across the globe has led some Americans to believe Disneyland is the origin of the world. I have the uneasy feeling that if one told Miller he ought to find out about the Birmingham tradition he’d reply that he didn’t know such interesting work had gone on in Alabama.

At a regional MLA conference in 1988 I argued that people who claim to be commenting on or “doing” cultural studies ought at least to familiarize themselves with the British cultural studies tradition, beginning with Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart and moving through Birmingham and beyond. I must emphasize, however, that almost nothing in this tradition is simply transferable to the United States. Williams was partly concerned with defining a distinctly British heritage. The interdisciplinary work at Birmingham was often deep, collaborative, a style that has little chance of succeeding in American departments and little chance of surviving the American academic system of rewards. But the struggle to shape the field in Britain has lessons we can learn much from, and British cultural studies achieved theoretical advances that are immensely useful in an American context. So that would be part of my answer to the question Jonathan Culler posed, with an air of whimsical hopelessness, in Oklahoma: “What is a professor of cultural studies supposed to know?” A professor of cultural studies might, in other words, be expected to know the history of the field. Professors of cultural studies need not agree with or emulate all the imperatives of British cultural studies, but they do have a responsibility to take a position on a tradition whose name they are borrowing. Moreover, people with strong disciplinary training who are now feeling their way toward cultural studies have something to gain from encounters with others who have already made such journeys. Leaving open what it will mean to establish cultural
studies in America, British cultural studies nonetheless illustrates some of what is at stake in theorizing culture in any historical moment.

Immediately after my 1988 talk, my friend Vincent Leitch, who ought to know better, stood up in the audience, waving his arms as he scaled some Bunker Hill of the imagination, and declared that he “thought we had thrown off the yoke of the British two hundred years ago.” At an Indiana University of Pennsylvania conference on theory and pedagogy in September of 1990, I heard James Berlin prophesy, with a solemnity nowhere cognizant that he was predicting coals would be brought to Newcastle, that he was simply giving critical theory a new name, that cultural studies would miraculously turn our attention toward “textuality in all its forms.” The claim of course was hardly new; indeed, this heralded revolution had already taken place under another name. In November of 1990, a panel on cultural studies at the Pacific Coast Philological Association unself-consciously offered two models of cultural studies: as an opportunistic umbrella for English professors who want to study film or the graphic arts, and as a terrain of vague, metonymic sliding between all the competing theories on the contemporary scene. Cultural studies in that context was considered interchangeable with semiotics, the New Historicism, and other recent bodies of theory. And at an October 1990 University of Illinois panel on “The Frontiers of Eighteenth-Century Studies” John Richetti, preening himself in the manner of a disciplinary cockatoo, announced with satisfaction that “eighteenth-century people had been doing cultural studies all along.”

I could add other anecdotes. But these are enough to introduce the first points I want to make: of all the intellectual movements that have swept the humanities in America over the last twenty years, none will be taken up so shallowly, so opportunistically, so unreflectively, and so ahistorically as cultural studies. It is becoming the perfect paradigm for a people with no sense of history—born yesterday and born on the make. A concept with a long history of struggle over its definition, a concept born in class consciousness and in critique of the academy, a concept with a skeptical relationship with its own theoretical advances, is often for English in America little more than a way of repackaging what we were already doing. Of course nothing can prevent the term “cultural studies” from coming to mean something very different in another time and place. But the casual dismissal of its history needs to be seen for what it is—an interested effort to depoliticize a concept whose whole prior history has been preeminently political and oppositional. The depoliticizing of cultural studies will no doubt pay off, making it more palatable at once to granting agencies and to conservative colleagues, administrators, and politicians, but only at the cost of blocking cultural studies from having any critical purchase on American social life.
People interested in theory have often been universally accused by the Right of facile opportunism. As I argued in the opening chapter, there is certainly an element of thoughtless opportunism in the way people flock to the most recent turns in theory, but the historical record actually suggests a very different and much more difficult pattern of struggle and mutual transformation for many of those committed to the major bodies of interpretive theory. Consider the deep personal transformation, the institutional changes, the wholesale reorientation of social understanding that accompanied the feminist revolution and its extension into the academy. Compare the various times this century when taking up Marxism has meant a comparable reorientation of one’s whole understanding of society. Even a body of theory like psychoanalysis, which in its academic incarnations has avoided many of its imperatives toward personal and institutional change, has entailed a good deal more than adopting a special vocabulary; even for academics, psychoanalysis has meant accepting a view of human agency that isolates them from their traditionally rationalist colleagues. In Britain and Australia taking up cultural studies has followed the more radical pattern among these alternatives. But not for most disciplines in the United States.

The conference in Oklahoma was part of that repackaging effort. Its joint sponsorship by the Semiotic Society of America suggested as well that semiotics could get new life by being recycled as cultural studies. One also hears graduate students and faculty members talk frankly about repackaging themselves as cultural studies people. The disastrous academic job market, to be sure, along with most of the daily messages consumer capitalism sends us, encourages that sort of anxious cynicism about how one markets oneself. The large number of young people who presented papers at Oklahoma—many of them willing to pay a $95 registration fee and endure the humiliation of potentially tiny audiences at multiple sessions (there were seventeen simultaneous sessions on Sunday morning at 8:30)—testifies to the sense that putting a “Cultural Studies in the 1990s” label on your vita is worth an investment in exploitation and alienation.

I do not mean to belittle the impulse behind the willingness to cooperate with that kind of structure. The unpredictable realities of the job market are terrifying enough to more than explain graduate students and young faculty members signing on for the odd honorific anonymity that being on a large conference program entails. But I also think there’s good reason to bring these realities into the open and subject them to critique.

Indeed, the job market in cultural studies—at least in English—gives a pretty good indication of how the discipline is going to take up this new paradigm. In 1989 a graduate student at Illinois—a specialist in feminist cultural studies with a degree in communications—interviewed for cultural
studies positions at MLA. It was quite clear that many departments hadn’t the
faintest idea what cultural studies was. It was a way to ask the dean for new
money by pointing out an area where they needed to catch up and a way for
interviewers to make a display of ignorance look like canny interrogation: “So
what is all this cultural studies stuff about anyway?” What better way to ask
uninformed questions than in the role of job interviewer? Who cares what
serious cultural studies job candidates might think? The search committee has
the power and the money. If the answers are confusing or slightly threatening,
the candidate will be out of the room in twenty minutes anyway. The commit-
tee, of course, has the only last word that counts—the authority to recommend
who gets offered the job. Some departments in effect conducted fake, explora-
ty cultural studies searches as a lazy way of finding out between cocktails a
little bit about what the young people are up to these days. As the Illinois
student found out, it all comes down to the final question: but can you fill in
when we need someone to do the Milton course?

Although the excruciating ironies of the job market will be the special focus
of the entire third section of Manifesto, it is important here to take note of the
special circumstances of cultural studies candidates. What is now permissible, at
least for many doctoral committees supervising graduate students, is very broad
indeed. But few English departments have faculty positions for people working
outside literature or film. The job market, not the dissertation committee or the
promotion committee, now serves as the discipline’s de facto arbiter of the
possible and the permissible. Indeed, whatever intellectual largesse underwrites
the regulation of dissertation topics is virtually rendered moot by the job market,
since a dissertation committee cannot effectively police entry into a discipline
that has no jobs. Hostility to new developments like cultural studies is thus
more likely to be mobilized at the critical point of entry into the discipline—
the hiring process.

In the publishing world, as it happens, boundaries are more fluid. For many
young cultural studies students, inspired by the more freewheeling world of
publishing, animated by what they read, the links between disciplines and their
traditional objects of study are increasingly irrelevant. The job market, especially
in an extended era of fiscal crisis, is another matter. For in a time of budget cuts
and retrenchment many departments look first to protect their more traditional
investments and object choices. It is hardly news that the leading edges of a
discipline are not necessarily replicated in the recidivist reaches of every reaction-
ary department. But the current situation in cultural studies, in which disciplin-
ary cultural studies degree recipients and departmental hiring committees march
to such different drummers, is distinctive and alarming. It presents young
intellectuals with impossible and equally hopeless alternatives—abandon your
passions in order to become more palatable, or devote yourself to what matters whatever the consequences.

If one rationale for young people paying to give talks at a cultural studies conference is understandable, then, the lineup of senior speakers at plenary sessions (the only times when no concurrent sessions were scheduled) at the Oklahoma conference was less clear: J. Hillis Miller, Jonathan Culler, Robert Scholes, and Gayatri Spivak. Since only Gayatri Spivak has a history of talking about cultural studies, it is safe to conclude that seniority in the broader area of theory in English controlled the choice of speakers. But even in America, Lynne Cheney and company notwithstanding, theory in general and cultural studies are not yet interchangeable.

I had an uneasy sense that the Oklahoma conference might as well have been called “The 1980s: An MLA Reunion.” Perhaps that’s all right. Perhaps not. But there were differences to be marked. They were especially clear in Hillis Miller’s talk, which I will concentrate on for several reasons. Scholes addressed cultural studies not at all, though it is possible he believes his sexist presentation (“In the Brothel of Modernism: Picasso and Joyce”) was an example of cultural analysis. Culler dealt with cultural studies only as part of a general survey of contemporary theory, and Spivak, finally, gave an informal talk, not a coherent paper. It was only Miller among the plenary speakers who made a full effort to define the project of cultural studies.

As someone who respects and admires much of Hillis Miller’s early work, especially his elegant phenomenological readings of literary texts, I must in this context, however, nonetheless say that I just do not see its productive relation to the cultural studies tradition. A concern with ethics on the other hand, central in his recent publications, is not the same as the long cultural studies engagement with Left politics. And the internationalization of technology, which was at the center of his Oklahoma talk “The Work of Cultural Criticism in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” in fact points to the importance of global politics and economics, the global dissemination and subsequent localization of cultural power, issues that Miller thinks will be swept aside in a McLuhanesque spread of technology creating a common global culture. Indeed, it is only blindness to economics and power and cultural differences that made it possible for Miller to present as an argument his fantasy that everyone in the world will have a personal computer within a few years. Had he no sense of what life is like in South Central Los Angeles, let alone in Bangladesh or Somalia? I take this as the limit case of false cultural studies—a warrant for privileged American academics who are used to juggling theories to begin making claims about the material world as well—without ever looking at it. Miller’s expected deadline has now long passed, and his prediction remains unfulfilled.
The effect of Miller's appearance at the first plenary session at Oklahoma was to give the program an opening benediction, a benediction warranting a humanized, "transnational," confidently democratized version of cultural studies as the new American world order. His key role in depoliticizing deconstruction was apparently to be repeated for cultural studies. Indeed, the plenary sessions deferred the centrally political mission of cultural studies until Gayatri Spivak spoke in the final session. Despite their inclusion in many smaller sessions throughout, race, class, and gender were all thus symbolically marginalized or deferred, excluded from the sessions at which everyone was expected to be present, until the end, the last instance that we reach but have no time to discuss.

And in this regard I think it is worth recalling that Hillis Miller once cosigned a letter in the MLA Newsletter warning that an official Modern Language Association position against the undeclared Vietnam War might make all thirty thousand MLA members liable to a charge of treason. I bring this up not to question his position on a war long ended but because the letter insisted on the separation between academic and political life, a separation that cultural studies has sought to overcome. What is at stake here is a definition of the nature and limits of cultural studies. Both in the letter and in his efforts to limit deconstruction to a depoliticized version of textual analysis, he has more than once had something to say about the cultural role of English studies. Those views are very much at odds with the heritage of cultural studies. They may well come to dominate the Americanization of cultural studies, but this is not a process that should proceed unremarked.

Of course the definition and disciplinary mission of cultural studies are precisely what is at stake here. As it happens, I was invited to speak at the Oklahoma conference because I helped organize the Illinois cultural studies conference a few months earlier. That conference gave high visibility to the several strands of the British and Australian cultural studies traditions, along with people whose work we thought could gain from being heard in the context of those traditions. Although a number of people attended both conferences, there was no overlap between the speakers at the two events. That alone is remarkable. I don't think it would be true of the other major bodies of theory on the scene today. A large conference on Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, or poststructuralism—a conference on gender, race, or class in the humanities—a conference on New Historicism: all these would either have overlapping speakers or at least draw from a pool of people with similar commitments or traditions clearly in dialogue with each other.

Perhaps only in cultural studies as English professors conceive it could two massive conferences have almost no points of correspondence. In this context I
do not think an uncritical argument for liberal diversity has much value. Welcoming the opening of the cultural studies field need not necessitate abandoning a debate about what enterprises do and do not deserve to use the cultural studies name, about what commitments cultural studies entails, about what cultural studies projects seem most productive and urgent in the current context. That is not to say I think either the British or the Americans and Australians and Canadians who have learned from them can police the field. In fact I think the more open, generous, democratic—but less critical—shape of the Oklahoma conference will likely win the day. This much more inclusive vision probably is the future of cultural studies in America. I am merely trying to offer a challenge to that enterprise, even if it is a challenge likely to be swept aside by events.

At a paper presented at the annual MLA meeting in December of 1991, Janice Radway argued that attempts to define cultural studies and police its borders risk turning it into a “ghostly discipline.” I would argue that cultural studies has always been exactly that—a ghostly discipline with shifting borders and unstable contents—and that it needs to continue being so. It is an ongoing set of traditions, a body of work whose contributors are in dialogue and debate with one another. Attempts to define its aims and limits, regularly overthrown, have been part of its history from the outset. It is also in significant ways antidisciplinary; that is, it responds critically to the exclusive parceling out of objects of study to individual disciplines, to the way academic disciplines divide up the field of knowledge, and to the social impact of much academic work. To some degree it puts forward its own contradisciplinary forms of knowledge. Yet none of these stances comes into being in a universe free of disciplinary histories and constraints. Cultural studies defines its enterprise in part by positioning itself in relation to more traditional disciplines; in the process it becomes something like a cluster of disciplines under erasure. Its own ghostly disciplinarity unsettles all other humanities and social science disciplines; that ghostly disciplinarity is thus a condition to be welcomed rather than feared.

Notably, most cultural studies work is done by people in traditional disciplines, often with an ambivalent relation to the discipline but not necessarily in full rejection of its historical commitments. Some want cultural studies to transform their discipline. Others, as I argue in the introduction to Disciplinarity and Dissent in Cultural Studies, have largely left disciplinarity behind. Yet most remain housed in traditional departments nonetheless. Cultural studies itself has shown relatively little drive to found its own degree-granting units. Better economic times might have given us actual cultural studies departments by now, but the anti-institutional tenor of cultural studies culture still leaves many wary about departmental authority.
Indeed, the resistance to *any* effort to define cultural studies—a resistance unique to its Americanization—reflects a widespread and quite warranted dissatisfaction with the constraints of disciplinary knowledge. Especially for students and faculty in reactionary departments, cultural studies seems to offer the only realistic solution to a repressive work environment—literally overthrowing disciplinary knowledge. For cultural studies then to occupy itself with defining its boundaries and deciding which activities should and should not be included under its umbrella seems a betrayal of the emotional needs cultural studies was counted on to meet. Some people think of cultural studies as a kind of polymorphously free zone for any and all intellectual investments. That some individual or collaborative cultural studies work comes to be more widely recognized or valued than others seems in that context a violation of the undifferentiated zone of permission cultural studies was imagined to be. Indeed, for some people to defend their particular practices passionately seems equally suspect.

One can begin to see why some students were distressed at the presence of cultural studies “stars” on stage at Illinois. It suggests a field hierarchized by reputation and achievement in much the way traditional disciplines are. But is there any alternative? Actually, there is, but only one: wholesale anti-intellectualism. Some ordinarily canny cultural studies scholars are willing to appeal to just that anti-intellectual strain in American cultural studies. Thus Gayatri Spivak was cheered when she opened her Oklahoma talk by disingenuously declaring how relieved she was to be presenting a lecture that was not destined to be immortalized in a book. Would she be even more relieved to have that state of affairs persist for a few years? Similarly, Radway met with applause when she declared at MLA that the definition of cultural studies should be expanded to include a whole range of political activities. Presumably one could be “in” cultural studies by virtue of joining campus demonstrations. Obviously cultural studies allies itself with and helps to theorize political action. Cultural studies writers both inside and outside the academy are often involved in politics and concerned with the contribution their work makes to political action. But political action and cultural studies are not interchangeable. It should not be necessary to say this, but apparently it is: cultural studies is a set of writing and teaching practices; it is a discursive, analytic, interpretive tradition.

Meanwhile, as an intellectual enterprise cultural studies will inevitably have some people of greater achievement and influence associated with it. Those who would urge us to ignore such a hierarchy—based on accomplishment and impact—are simply being foolish and irrational. Given the chance to hear Stuart Hall or just about anybody else, I’ll opt to hear Hall, as will virtually anyone else in cultural studies. You leave a Hall talk feeling energized for
perhaps the next month; it's not easy to forgo such opportunities. And he is the perfect example, because he has never given any indication that hierarchy or personal achievement has any part in his self-image. They are features rather of other people's evaluation of his work. But some in cultural studies manage at once to admire him and to resent, not him, but their own admiration. Cultural studies for them is to be a place where no one is more equal than anyone else, a leveling utopia of free inquiry, a status it can only maintain if no one attempts to say what it is.

Though none of the above was acknowledged openly at Oklahoma, these values churned under the surface. This helps explain the absence of references to the history of cultural studies from more than a few of the talks, and it may also explain the relative absence of well-known cultural studies scholars from the program. Of course it is possible that those organizing the Oklahoma conference invited scholars long associated with cultural studies—Stuart Hall, Dick Heb-dige, Donna Haraway, or others—and that those people declined the invitation. The Oklahoma conference in fact followed what is now the common practice in academia and offered some of its plenary speakers expenses plus a $1,000 honorarium. But many people won't come for the money. They'll come if the event has an intellectual and political shape and mission that seems important; if it does, they'll come without an honorarium. In fact, only one person refused Illinois' invitation to speak because of the lack of an honorarium.

Actually, the Oklahoma conference did have an implicit but unstated mission. Although some people were invited to participate, most of the papers were given by people who answered an open invitation to submit topics. Essentially everyone who volunteered to give a talk was placed on the program. The result was about 350 papers given in 100 sessions over three days. So the conference, in effect, said here's a self-selected group of North Americans who declare themselves to be doing cultural studies. Let's see where they stand. That's an interesting and potentially important mission, though its value was limited by being undeclared and thus never an explicit subject of discussion during the conference itself.

Incidentally, by current standards Oklahoma's honoraria are quite modest. The annual conference on twentieth-century literature at the University of Louisville gives honoraria of about $1,500 each to its two keynote speakers, and a recent conference on poststructuralism and New Historicism at Texas A&M University had sliding scales of honoraria up to $3,000. So Oklahoma can be credited with resisting inflation. I am not, by the way, faulting people for accepting honoraria. I've never demanded one when asked to speak at a conference, but I've certainly taken them when offered, and I have asked that my expenses be covered. Since that was my status at Oklahoma—expenses paid but
no honorarium—I am implicated in the structure I now want to question. A somewhat rude way of putting the issue would be to say that the contemporary North American conference at which a few stars are paid large sums to create the illusion that something is happening at a given campus risks being rather empty. It has now become one standard model of the high-visibility conference on campuses in the United States, and I think it deserves frank commentary. People's accomplishments inevitably bring them higher salaries and other benefits. But I do not think the economic hierarchies of the profession need to be maintained at conferences. If they are, we should acknowledge them openly, which most conference organizers are reluctant to do. But it may be better to take the time to conceive a meeting that some key people will feel they cannot miss.

No matter how conferences are organized, they are expensive, and registration fees often make some contribution to the cost. Most everyone would agree that registration fees should be kept as low as possible. I would add that it is best not to charge registration fees at all to people who are presenting papers. In collecting nearly $30,000 in fees from people who were presenting papers Oklahoma was, I believe, pushing the economics of large conferences in a regrettable direction. I found myself quite uncomfortable with the idea that other people presenting papers were, in effect, paying honoraria and expenses for a few high-visibility speakers. Since most of the keynote speakers had little or no credibility in cultural studies, I drew attention to this problem by making a rather subversive suggestion: that those who had not yet paid their fee save the university administrative staff a lot of bother by simply passing the money on somewhat more directly. Perhaps, I suggested, they might take a trip to a local shopping mall, purchase $95 worth of videos, CDs, T-shirts, or other examples of popular culture and give them directly to whichever plenary speaker they thought most needed them. He or she would then be better informed about cultural studies next time around.

Unfortunately, the economics of academic conferences are more and more commonly becoming exploitive, with any paper topic submitted being accepted as long as the presenter can pay a registration fee. In the spring of 1996 one of my graduate students received a call about a conference co-sponsored by two Iowa campuses; he had submitted a proposal, which had been accepted, but they had not heard back from him. Was he coming? The caller was fairly aggressive in pushing the conference, and my student suddenly realized he was probably not talking to a graduate student or faculty member but rather to some Iowa conference telemarketer. Look, the caller argued, “if you want to come here just to present your paper and then leave, we'll only charge you a $200 fee.” No doubt some students are desperate enough to go ahead and effectively purchase
a line on their vitas; my student declined. And people wonder why academia is losing some of its luster. Cultural studies might want to turn its attention to practices like these.

From my perspective, a good deal of what was presented at Oklahoma simply did not qualify as cultural studies. But then the Oklahoma and Illinois conferences represented substantially different views of the state of cultural studies in America. The Oklahoma conference was organized to take advantage of an intellectual and economic opportunity. The Illinois conference was organized partly out of our sense that remarkable new cultural studies work was going on both here and abroad. But we were also responding to a sense of the dissolution and depoliticization of cultural studies in the United States.

Many people came to Illinois out of a need to share what might be left of their common ground and debate the nature of the cultural studies enterprise. Yet the level and nature of debate that resulted was quite different from that at the Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture conference that I helped organize at Illinois in 1983. Marxism then was perceived as simultaneously in crisis and in a heyday of expansion, somewhat as cultural studies is now. But the lines for Marxist criticism were more clearly drawn, and people's allegiances were marked in advance. Thus positions about what did and did not qualify as Marxism were argued forcefully. Fred Jameson could thus announce that he felt like a dinosaur, like the last true Marxist on earth, in arguing for a traditional revolutionary teleology. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the other hand could argue that one role for Marxism now was to call on democratic societies to realize the full radical potential of the beliefs they supposedly espoused.

The situation of cultural studies is rather different; it is in a period of testing the viability of potential alliances. People may hold strong beliefs about the limits of cultural studies but are often cautious about expressing them. It is a body of thought that now sometimes destabilizes and de-essentializes categories of race, class, gender, and nationality while simultaneously keeping them at the foreground of debate and definition. Moreover, cultural studies can forge problematic allegiances that transgress and realign the subject positions historically produced in terms of those categories. In practical terms this meant that people at the Illinois conference mapped out their models of cultural studies affirmatively, frequently without overtly marking their differences with others claiming title to its terrain until pressed to do so in the discussion periods.

Despite the uncertainties created by this reticence, the experience of the Illinois conference—together with teaching seminars in cultural studies and writing a book that tried to map out a cultural studies model of a literary genre—leads me to believe some generalizations about the cultural studies
enterprise can and must be put forward. I think it is important to try to say both what cultural studies is and what it is not; keeping in mind the well-known series of definitional articles throughout the history of cultural studies. I would like to do so in the form of a series of numbered points, one version of a cultural studies manifesto:

1. Cultural studies is not simply the close analysis of objects other than literary texts. Some English departments would like to believe that their transportable methods of close reading can make them cultural studies departments as soon as they expand the range of cultural objects they habitually study. Indeed, cultural studies is usually sold to English departments as part of the manifest destiny of the discipline. Our skills at close reading need to be extended to other cultural domains, it is often argued, lest these domains be left to the dubious care of student subcultures or the imprecise attention of lesser disciplines like speech communication. Similarly, some scholars like the sense of theoretical prestige that an unspecified cultural studies umbrella gives their close readings of nontraditional objects. Indeed, cultural studies often arrives in English departments in the form of an easy alliance between debased textuality and recent theory. But the immanent formal, thematic, or semiotic analysis of films, paintings, songs, romance novels, comic books, or clothing styles does not in itself constitute cultural studies.

2. Cultural studies does not, as some people believe, require that every project involve the study of artifacts of popular culture. On the other hand, people with ingrained contempt for popular culture can never fully understand the cultural studies project. In part that is because cultural studies has traditionally been deeply concerned with how all cultural production is sustained and determined by (and in turn influences) the broad terrain of popular common sense. Thus no properly historicized cultural studies can cut itself off from that sense of “the popular.”

3. Cultural studies also does not mean that we have to abandon the study of what have been historically identified as the domains of high culture, though it does challenge us to study them in radically new ways. Since every cultural practice has a degree of relative autonomy, every cultural practice potentially merits focused attention. But we need to recognize that autonomy is not a function of intrinsic merit and it is never fixed and never more than relative. The notion of relative autonomy, of course, makes it properly impossible to repeat traditional claims that some cultural production transcends history.

4. Cultural studies is not simply the neutral study of semiotic systems, no matter how mobile and flexible those systems are made to be. There can be a semiotic component to cultural studies, but cultural studies and semiotics...
are not interchangeable. Cultural studies is not satisfied with mapping sign systems. It is concerned with the struggles over meaning that reshape and define the terrain of culture. It is devoted, among other things, to studying the politics of signification.

5. Cultural studies is committed to studying the production, reception, and varied use of texts, not merely their internal characteristics. This is one of the reasons why cultural studies work is more difficult in periods when the historical record is either fragmentary or highly restrictive in class terms. So long as the difficulties are foregrounded, however, limited but ambitious and important cultural studies projects can be carried out for earlier periods of history.

6. Cultural studies conceives culture relationally. Thus the analysis of an individual text, discourse, behavior, ritual, style, genre, or subculture does not constitute cultural studies unless the thing analyzed is considered in terms of its competitive, reinforcing, and determining relations with other objects and cultural forces. This task is also, it should be noted, an impossible one to complete in any given instance. But unless the constitutive and dissolving cultural relations are taken as a primary concern the work is not properly considered cultural studies.

This relational understanding of culture was one of cultural studies' earliest defining goals. Yet just what is meant by the relational study of culture has changed and evolved and abruptly shifted throughout the history of cultural studies, from Williams's efforts to describe culture as a whole way of life, to the effort by Hall and others to adapt Gramsci's notion of a war of position, to discursive and political analyses of contemporary Britain. One could in fact write the history of cultural studies in terms of how it conceives relationality and puts it into practice.

7. Cultural studies is not a fixed, repeatable methodology that can be learned and thereafter applied to any given cultural domain. It is the social and textual history of varying efforts to take up the problematic of the politics and meaning of culture. Its history mixes founding moments with transformative challenges and disputations. To do cultural studies is to take a place within that history.

8. Taking a place within that history means thinking of one's work in relation to cultural studies work on the politics of race. It means taking seriously the way feminism radically transformed cultural studies in the 1980s. And it also means positioning one's work in relation to the long, complex, and often contentious history of cultural studies' engagements with Marxism, from Raymond Williams to Stuart Hall. To treat that history of engagements with Marxism as irrelevant, as many Americans do, is to abandon
cultural studies for a fake practice that merely borrows its name. None of this is meant to suggest that current cultural studies scholars need to emulate these traditions, any more than they need to emulate British cultural studies. They do, however, need to be familiar with them and mark their relationship to them.

9. Cultural studies is concerned with the social and political meaning and effects of its own analyses. It assumes that scholarly writing can and does do meaningful cultural work. To avoid facing this challenge and retreat into academic modesty (asserting that interpretive writing is impotent or irrelevant) or claims of disinterested scholarship (protesting that political commitments vitiate scholarly objectivity) is to hide from cultural studies' historical mission. A poststructuralist academic liberalism might lead one to argue that, since the political effects of discourse are indeterminate and unpredictable, scholarship and politics are best kept separate. Cultural studies might counter by arguing that such arguments do not free us from responsibility for the political meaning of scholarly work. Cultural studies typically accepts the notion that scholarship entails an engagement with and commitment to your own historical context. The choice of what scholarly writing to do involves a decision about what your most effective intervention can be.

10. In much the same way it must be emphasized that cultural studies does not simply offer students a liberal cornucopia of free choices. Cultural studies seeks to empower students to understand the social and political meaning of what they learn throughout the university. It urges them to reflect on the social meaning of disciplinary work and to decide what kinds of projects the culture needs most. A cultural studies pedagogy thus encourages a more critical relationship to cultural and political life. One small but necessary implication in this is that current debates and social practices need to be a far more pervasive element of many more courses than is now the case. Fields like history and literature that often teach pure period courses need to make detailed and specific analogies to present conditions. It is not enough to establish contexts for and relationships between discourses in earlier periods on the assumption that students will make the contemporary connections and work out the contemporary differences on their own. The Taylorized curriculum needs to be thoroughly undermined with the aim of gaining critical purchase on contemporary life.

11. Cultural studies has a responsibility to continue interrogating and reflecting on its own commitments. In fulfilling this task, however, cultural studies has inevitably had a history that is far from perfect. It needs now to critique its investment in what has been called the Left's "mantra of race, class, and gender," categories that are properly considered both in relation to one
another and to the culture as a whole. It needs as well to question its recent fetishizing of fandom. A ritualized, unreflective confession of fandom has become almost a requirement in some American cultural studies circles. Being a fan is not a prerequisite for doing cultural analysis. Invoking fandom without describing or specifying its conditions and its cultural construction has little intellectual value. Being a fan gives potential access to important insights; the challenge is to reflect on fandom and articulate what you learn from it.

12. Cultural studies is not required to approve a struggle for dominance among the disenfranchised. Multiculturalism in America sometimes degenerates into a competitive form of identity politics in which oppressed and marginalized groups work to sort themselves out into a hierarchy based on their record of historical suffering. Cultural studies is not, however, simply a neutral field in which people can give free reign to their inclinations to play identity politics. Cultural studies is properly an enterprise in which people can explore their race, ethnicity, or gender and articulate its relations with the larger culture. A properly relational and historical analysis suggests that no one group can claim the ultimate site of oppression. The progressive alliances we now need require us to avoid using previously marginalized identities to suppress debate and criticism. At the other end of the spectrum multiculturalism restricts itself to an unrealistic liberal ideal of diversity and difference without conflict. Cultural studies needs to maintain a critical relation to both these tendencies. Cultural studies may thus establish alliances with multiculturalism but should resist being absorbed by it. Similarly, if multicultural work is to claim a place within cultural studies it cannot ignore all the innovative work other cultural studies scholars have done on race, gender, and ethnicity.

Much of this work suggests that race, gender, and ethnicity are always constructed, never given and guaranteed in advance. Furthermore they change and adapt to new circumstances. New “races” or “ethnicities” can emerge and be produced and already existing ones be radically transformed so as to become far more visible and influential. Cultural studies may well want to facilitate such developments in particular cases. Yet cultural studies is pressed by many of its historic theoretical commitments to take up an anti-essentialist position. Thus cultural studies must recognize that such identities are never pure; they are always hybrid, constructed, impure, and their social power should thus never be constituted on grounds of purity.

13. The historicizing impulse in cultural studies is properly in dialogue with an awareness of the contemporary rearticulation of earlier texts, contexts, and social practices. In literary studies, New Historicism may sometimes suc-
cumb to an illusion of being able to address only the earlier historical period being analyzed but cultural studies properly does not. Being historically and politically here and there—then and now—is part of the continuing and thus necessarily newly theorized burden of cultural studies. Nothing we rescue from forgetfulness or distortion stays the same. To study the present or the past is inevitably to rearticulate it to current interests; that is a problem and an opportunity to take up consciously, not to repress or regret. Cultural studies can never be a simple program of recovery; properly speaking, such programs are not cultural studies. Indeed, a conservative tendency to categorize every limited project of cultural recovery as cultural studies usually signals a high cultural contempt for the things being recovered. The tendency, for example, to classify efforts to recover minority literatures as cultural studies sometimes reflects an assumption that these literatures are inherently inferior or that they lack the aesthetic importance of the traditional canon.

14. In its projects of historical and contemporary analysis, cultural studies is often concerned as well with intervening in the present and with encouraging certain possible futures rather than others. Thus as cultural studies people reflect on the simultaneously undermined and reinforced status of the nation-state in different parts of the world they are often also concerned with the future status of nationhood. An interest in how high technology has changed our lives may be combined with an effort to shape its future impact. The opportunities offered by fragmented postmodern identities are not only to be studied but exploited. A study of the multiple meanings of gender in a given moment may lead to reflection on how our lives may be gendered in the future. For many scholars outside cultural studies such double investments are to be avoided. In cultural studies they can be at the center of the enterprise.

15. Cultural studies accepts the notion that the work of theorizing its enterprise is inescapably grounded in contemporary life and current politics. New social and political realities require fresh reflection and debate on the cultural studies enterprise, no matter what historical period one is studying. Although it is possible to overstate the phenomenon of a local theorizing grounded in current social realities, since such a process involves a rearticulation of previously existing theories, it is nonetheless true that major changes in cultural studies have regularly come from an effort to understand and intervene in new historical conditions. From a cultural studies perspective, then, one never imagines that it is possible to theorize for all times and places. Not only our interpretations but also our theories are produced for the world in which we live.
16. Cultural studies within the academy is inescapably concerned with and critical of the politics of disciplinary knowledge. It is not simply interdisciplinary in the model of liberal diversity and idealized communication. This means that the nontrivial institutionalization of cultural studies within traditional academic disciplines is impossible unless those disciplines dismantle themselves. A first step, for a discipline like English, is to make a commitment to hiring faculty members who do not have degrees from English departments. Otherwise there is little chance that English departments will even admit that literature does not acquire its meaning primarily from its own autonomous traditions, let alone take up the general problematics of culture. Yet while English departments have much to gain from expanding their enterprises to include cultural studies, it is less clear what cultural studies has to gain from being institutionalized in English departments. If it is to be institutionalized at all, cultural studies might be better served by a variety of programs outside traditional departments.

Not every individual cultural studies book or essay can fulfill all the conditions in these sixteen points. But a successful cultural studies project should position itself in relation to many of these concerns. When it does not take them on directly, they should be implicit in the project’s interests, terms, and references. These, it seems to me, represent some of the key aims and imperatives growing out of thirty years of cultural work. These points, I would argue, are effectively part of the cultural studies paradigm and part of the cultural studies challenge to the contemporary world. Since they are focused on the ways cultural studies has and is likely to continue to change and develop, they are less rigid than the form of a numbered manifesto may lead some readers to think. Indeed, to take up these points is to write in such a way as to engage in a continual interrogation of what cultural studies is and can be. Thus I have articulated this manifesto at a level of theoretical generality that does not totalize and synthesize all cultural studies projects. These principles do not attempt to anticipate the specific work of local theorizing. To place yourself in relation to the history of cultural studies is precisely to recognize that the practices of cultural studies are not given in advance. They are always to be rethought, rearticulated to contemporary conditions. That imperative to continuing political renewal and struggle is part of what cultural studies has bequeathed to us.

My sixteen points also do not cover all areas of weakness and grounds for improvement in cultural studies. I believe, for example, that cultural studies for much of its history has suffered from the lack of a strong comparativist tradition. It is often difficult to recognize what a cultural practice means if you have no idea what alternatives there might be to it, or what an apparently similar practice means in different times and cultures. Some of the problems inherent in
immanent textual analysis get transferred in this way to the analysis of whole historical conjunctures. It would represent a major change in both cultural studies’ pedagogy and its scholarship for it to become more comparative, but that seems one of the few ways of limiting cultural and disciplinary bias.

It was priorities like these and a sense that, although a great deal of interesting new cultural studies work was being done both here and abroad, the core commitments described above were at risk in the Americanization of cultural studies that led Larry Grossberg, Paula Treichler, and me to organize a large international conference at Illinois in April of 1990. The conference gathered together thirty-three speakers who gave thirty-one long papers offering either their sense of the priorities in cultural studies or a model of cultural studies analysis. There were no concurrent sessions because we wanted the sense of momentum and shared experience that could come from staying together for sixteen sessions spread out over much of five days. Extensive discussions of about forty-five minutes concluded each session. Microphones in the audience relayed all questions, comments, and statements through a public address system, giving them as much presence as comments from the stage. We taped and transcribed the discussions for inclusion in the book based on the conference, as we had with *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. The book, *Cultural Studies*, was published by Routledge in 1992. Although the speakers were all invited, the audience thus had a certain democratic access to the floor and to publication of their comments.

Past experience led us to anticipate that empowering the audience in this way—giving them the basis for shared experience and access to an effective public address system—would also empower discontent. Conferences with large numbers of simultaneous sessions inevitably scatter critique and block people from organizing themselves. Some people felt that the conference model was hierarchical, which indeed it was, though many of the people on stage—two-thirds of whom were women or minorities—were very much on the margins of the academy. Some had lost academic jobs or found them only after years of searching. Most (though not all) were stars in terms of their reputations among cultural studies people but few were stars, say, in terms of their salaries. Another problem came from the sheer size of the audience. As many as six hundred people attended some of the sessions, and this was predictably intimidating to some people, especially those attending their first conference.

It also proved true that our priorities, though shared by many of the speakers and audience members, were not shared by everyone. An audience of over six hundred people in an auditorium was better suited for people committed to a clear intellectual project than for people who were uncertain of their direction
and therefore wanted intimate consultation and support. We were interested in establishing models for the discourses of cultural studies, whereas some of the younger people in the audience wanted sessions devoted to their career problems—finding jobs, teaching cultural studies within traditional disciplines. Those are valid concerns, and in retrospect I wish we had taken them up formally. Some, as I suggested above, arrived so disenchanted with academia that the very format of speakers addressing an audience seemed intolerably oppressive and hierarchical; they felt that the traditional conference structure—with its division between speakers and audience—should be abandoned. For us it seemed ironic that this structure should be slated for demolition at the very moment that disenfranchised populations were finally gaining access to the stage. But many people felt cultural studies should be more reflexive and self-critical about its institutional forms, which is clearly a sound argument. In fact I would agree that intimate conferences with a maximum attendance of fifty are often the most satisfying. But if you are going to advertise a conference with Stuart Hall, Meaghan Morris, Paul Gilroy, Catherine Hall, Simon Frith, Homi Bhabha, Tony Bennett, and other people whom American audiences don’t often hear in person, then a large audience is inevitable.

The crisis came, as we knew it would because it happened in 1983 as well, when someone in the audience proposed that the conference be disbanded and the time and space used for free discussion. Larry and I came on stage to remind people that an attractive and comfortable alternative space was available for those who did not want to hear the talks. Of course it did not represent much fun or much of a victory to attend free discussions elsewhere. The only gratifying symbolism would be to take over the main stage. But the job of the conference organizers in such a situation is to ensure that speakers get the chance to read their papers and that those who have come long distances to hear them be able to do so. In fact, though in the spirit of the moment’s solidarity, many in the audience will cheer the revolutionary fervor of those who call for the conference to be disbanded, the overwhelming majority want the conference to go on largely as planned. So we played our role as sympathetic heavies and got the program going again. We gained several things as a result: an opportunity for people to hear and discuss a wide range of reflective and politically committed papers on cultural studies, material for a large book that has the potential to be a major intervention in the field, and a more self-conscious awareness of cultural studies as a force within the academy.

We had invited as speakers not only those long identified with cultural studies but also people whose work we thought gave them a potential relationship to the cultural studies tradition, a relationship we hoped the conference might draw out and establish. The three of us debated over many names before
agreeing on a few. That debate was often heated, as we discussed similarities and differences and potential alliances with cultural studies. Some people looking at the 1990 conference schedule half a decade later concluded it was all made up of stars. Actually, in 1988 and 1989, when we were inviting participants, many of these people were just beginning their careers; some were still not widely known when the conference took place. Most of them have since become influential. Indeed the book itself, which has now sold nearly twenty-five thousand copies worldwide, has helped give some of its contributors an audience they did not have beforehand.

Since the book adds a number of essays by people who attended the conference but did not present papers there, it is broader and more open still. Not everything that we gained, however, will be viewed positively even now. For the most obvious result of the conference is the oversized eight-hundred-page book it produced. From the perspective of the editors, the book is, if anything, overly generous in its presentation of the field. It includes a number of essays that one or more of us feel represent not yet fully realized cultural studies projects. Thus we see the book as opening up diverse possibilities for cultural studies work. But its sheer size, its title, and its appearance on the hitherto wholly uncodified American cultural studies scene will make some feel it is a hurdle they must pass over before they can present themselves as cultural studies people. Varied as the book is, it still suggests that cultural studies entails written work subject to commentary and evaluation, inclusion and exclusion, high and low visibility, success and failure. The fact that the book is there and has to be contended with undercuts the illusion that cultural studies is a zone of free permission. For some, the challenge to write an essay that might be worth including in such a book is already a challenge that spoils whatever lure the field first had.

The Oklahoma conference went a different route. It was an open admissions cultural studies conference, and even though many of the papers had nothing to do with cultural studies, there was much to be gained from listening to them and trying to decide where they stood. Such a process of negotiation and debate over what is and is not cultural studies has to take place if cultural studies is to have any intellectual power and political effectivity. Wider alliances need to be formed, but not every alliance is worth the potential price in dissolution and compromise.

Perhaps I sound like a Third Period Stalinist who is not ready to accept the Popular Front coalition of the late 1930s. But we need to remember that the broad, inclusive alliance of the Popular Front had a political mission and a political reason for the compromises it made—the struggle against fascism. Those on the Left in America and those committed to progressive projects in humanities departments in universities have a related mission today—the strug-
gle against the global inequities following upon the Reagan–Bush era, the struggle against the Allan Bloom–Lynne Cheney consensus about American education and American culture, the growing articulation of discomfort and anger over racism and sexism as universities’ efforts to become more “culturally diverse” take hold. It is our task to make American institutions nervous about cultural studies. One boundary worth drawing around the cultural studies alliance is between those who will and those who will not join that struggle. The price of depoliticizing cultural studies is not a price we should be willing to pay. There are alliances worth making and alliances too costly to make. If the bargain is that we may have cultural studies so long as we do not criticize the government in our classrooms, we should reject it. Cultural studies does not need to render unto Caesar what Caesar thinks belongs to him.

Caesar, however, is in the midst of having his say in any case. Over the last two years or so the phrase “cultural studies” has been taken up by journalists and politicians of the New Right in America as one of a cluster of scare terms—the others include “multiculturalism” and “deconstruction”—that have been articulated together to signal a crisis in higher education and American intellectual life generally. One fair response for cultural studies people would be to work to disarticulate these terms, already effectively welded together in popular understanding. Cultural studies is not multiculturalism and is not deconstruction, we might argue, though cultural studies welcomes some versions of multiculturalism and shares with deconstruction sympathies for the general project of poststructuralism. Unfortunately, it seems likely that the qualifications in the second half of the sentence pretty much undo any useful work the denials in the first half of the sentence might do in the public arena. These are distinctions we need to draw for our students and colleagues, but we are unlikely to be able to do so successfully for the media or the public. These are different intellectual traditions, but their points of partial correspondence are sufficient to convince people they are part of the same general cultural pattern. Our audiences, in other words, will smell a rat. Since we can do little now to resist that moment of recognition, it might be better to welcome it. Cultural studies, in other words, might well set out to be that rat.

The creature I have in mind is a largely urban animal who is wary, focused on local conditions, and willing to eat almost anything—an animal, in short, very much like cultural studies. He or she is, in other words, a political animal attuned to assuring the survival of his or her interests. Now that recent theory as a whole has been accused of being politicized—something many theorists of the last two decades would themselves be hard put to demonstrate—cultural studies can willingly occupy the site of theory as politics. Now that efforts to open up the canon and efforts to expand the cultural reach of academia’s field of vision
have been scandalized for abandoning the transcendent and eternal standards of Western high culture—something not everyone involved in canon revision or multiculturalism would want to embrace—cultural studies can cheerfully occupy the site of standard-free omnivorosity. Everyone else may choose to respond to the Right's assault by filling and backsliding and denying they are now or ever have been political in their aims or interests. Cultural studies can step in and be the very thing the Right loves to hate. Indeed, those cultural studies professors who are tenured should do their best to attract the bulk of the criticism about politicized pedagogy and scholarship.

Cultural studies has never meant only one thing, and it is unlikely to mean only one thing in the future. It may, then, be necessary for individuals to adopt different cultural studies identities in different contexts. When strategically useful, they can be deconstructionists or multiculturalists. All the while, however, they should be reiterating that the real villain is cultural studies. That should certainly thin the ranks of cultural studies' fair-weather friends. More importantly, it should focus on a body of work (cultural studies) as well as the political responsibilities and effects the field has traditionally worked to understand.

For the time has come when the political meaning of teaching and scholarship can no longer be avoided. Attacks on feminist, minority, multicultural, and theoretical research in the academy are helping to discredit those values and constituencies in the general culture as well. A delegitimated university thus does double duty: it oversees its own increasingly curtailed and embattled mission while serving as an object lesson that undermines progressive thought throughout the culture. Meanwhile, the heyday of free time for research in the humanities and social sciences has past. It was a spin-off of the cold war, and the cold war has ended. If the New Right in America has its way, the only time available for research will be that funded by industry. If universities give up their role of social critique, only conservative think tanks will remain to fund social critique over the long term. At the same time, access to higher education will be steadily restricted to wealthier families. Public elementary and secondary education, increasingly vocational, will be reserved for the poor. A divisive struggle for power among minorities will only facilitate that agenda. We need relational analyses of the political meaning of the work all of us do, we need careful disarticulations of the elements the Right has joined to win popular consent, and we need unsentimental readings of the possibilities for alliances amongst those with the most to lose spiritually and economically. That is a task historically appropriate for a politicized cultural studies that devotes itself to the kinds of cultural analysis the society needs.