

# Remarks on the Successful Institutionalization and the Political Failure of Cultural Studies

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THE ROLES OF THE POLITICAL INTELLECTUAL IN AND OUT OF ACADEMIA

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## Remarks on the Successful Institutionalization and the Political Failure of Cultural Studies

I want to mention two things that I will argue are fundamentally linked: the successful institutionalization of Cultural Studies and the meaning of public intellectual. In mentioning these, I want to argue that the role of public intellectual should be critically examined in light of the successful intervention of Cultural Studies in education.

In some ways, Cultural Studies did not really exist until it was recognized as a field and accepted into the academy. It was the incorporation of Cultural Studies into already established, but often foundering, disciplines and fields such as English or the sociology of culture that had the effect of reinvigorating these areas, though not necessarily in a radical direction. Along with this incorporation of Cultural Studies came also the establishment of formal graduate and undergraduate programs authorized to grant degrees in Cultural Studies (variously named in keeping with the schools where such programs were installed).

Now Cultural Studies has no one genealogy. In fact, one might say that the scope of its genealogy is almost as vast as the breadth of areas where Cultural Studies has been accepted. But there are general tendencies that ---perhaps only in hindsight--- can be seen as coalescing in Cultural Studies in the United States.

The rise of Cultural Studies coincided with a general intensification of a politics of identity, debates surrounding multiculturalism, and the so-called postmodern condition. This coincidence no doubt made many on the left suspicious of Cultural Studies, despite the direct engagement with Marx and marxism that one finds in the works of critical theory and of the Birmingham School. Still, there can be little doubt that the debates over multiculturalism and the shift to identity and “new social movements” provided strong forces for the increasing coalescence of Cultural Studies and its intervention into education. This alliance was always a tenuous one, however, for in many respects it depended upon the public intellectual as an agent for change.

The notion of public engagement, or of being a public intellectual was a part of Cultural Studies from the beginning. We can find it in Birmingham's emphasis on literacy and media representation, and in Adorno's radio lectures of the 1960s. In the United States, the link between the public

intellectual and the political intervention of Cultural Studies was flatly stated by Cornel West when he called for the recognition of a new identity, the “culture worker.” This Culture Worker would serve, he said, as a “critical organic catalyst” and help to usher in “a new cultural politics of difference”. These “intellectual freedom fighters” ---*as he called them*--- would be public in the sense of being “attuned to the best of what the mainstream has to offer... yet maintain a grounding in affirming and enabling subcultures of criticism” (West, “New Cultural Politics of Difference”, in *During*, 266).

Of course, such a cultural worker never emerged, or if it did, it was in a rather enfeebled form.

The study of culture as “life as it is lived” (Horkheimer), the breaking apart of things and identities has been countered by a privileging of particular abstractions, such as the “visual” or “visual culture” or “the body” or the media. The critical work has also been countered by a commitment to identities and movements, and to the politics of representation. This holds especially true when we think of Cultural Studies as an intervention into education and the production of knowledge. In deference to Stuart Hall's remark at being “completely dumbfounded” by recent American Cultural Studies, it is necessary to turn the critical theory that underpins Cultural Studies back upon itself. This is to ask if Cultural Studies can be salvaged from the collision of Critical theory, Birmingham's class (and later gender and race) critiques, and the American context of identity, multiculturalism, and a disorganized Left.

The notion of the public intellectual is always tied to a notion of public education and schooling. Schooling is not just about disliking standards, but about creating publics (or a public). Education is obviously then about the State. Although civics might be out in curriculums, there is no need for civics classes when the entire educational apparatus is about training for work. The intervention against this notion is of lasting and significant importance, but our opposition to education as schooling for work can not lead us to overlook the importance education always plays in the maintenance of the social order.

It is said that Socrates “lived ever in the open,” walking the promenades in the morning, the market at midday, and spending the evenings wherever the most people were to be found. Anyone might listen, his student wrote, and “his conversation always concerned human things” What made Socrates a public intellectual was that the public was the state, the polis, and he was immersed in it. The public intellectual could not help being an educator, and the educator a public intellectual.

Adorno said in his radio lectures that “The society that confronts people is nonetheless these very

people” (Adorno, “Resignation,” *Critical Models*, 291)

This confrontation makes the public intellectual a real problem, for in serving the public, the public intellectual also serves the state.

Obviously, our conception of the public intellectual as educator is not the same as the ancient one. In many ways we can agree with the view “that the public is born in myth and is sustained by superstition” (Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 38). But the image of Socrates going about in the open allows us to consider how the organization of a public is a problem of the state power: “to organize the public, it is necessary to equip the public with official representatives” and the “mark of the organization of the public ... is thus the existence of officials,” John Dewey wrote. The public intellectual, or “Critical Organic Catalyst,” easily becomes, on the one hand, a representative of a public, and on the other, a producer of knowledge that is heard by more than just its *intended* public.

We have to be clear that this knowledge serves not only the needs of the public to which the intellectual is committed, but also serves to produce knowledge that is crucial for the State's understanding of its' own composition and dynamics. So a field like Cultural Studies came in time to not only critique, but also to *explain*. It began to explain why we like TV, or certain fashions, or who we choose to have sex with, and what it all means. It seems almost unavoidable that on some level, critiques produce knowledge that is useful. That is, knowledge that ultimately props up groups and holds together identities instead of breaking things apart and making representations uninhabitable.

Commitment to produce useful knowledge marks the work of the public intellectual. In the light of the lessons learned from the institutionalization of Cultural Studies, it would seem that the public intellectual is a position that is as much compromised as it is committed. Because the intervention of Cultural Studies in the United States depended so much on the figure of the public intellectual, is it still possible to loosen these institution constraints, or should the project of Cultural Studies be abandoned altogether? This second choice would, of course, dissolve the notion of the public intellectual as “Critical Organic Catalyst, too. It may be romantic to believe that either alternative is possible. At least we can be assured that dispersed critiques and resistances are emerging all the time in everyday life, but it is not clear what role the public intellectual can play in the open ended critique of everyday life when the public it seeks to change is also the public it represents.

West's call for committed Culture Workers is a demand for conscious commitment, for criticism to have

a particular intention and alignment with a public. However, when everyday life becomes the affirmation of the existing order, “What does it matter who is speaking?” (Beckett in Foucault, “What is an Author?”) as has been asked, “What is the point of the demand for commitment” in a society where everything is aligned and committed? (Williams, “Alignment and Commitment,” 199). With that. I will end by noting Raymond Williams comment in his essay “Alignment and Commitment,” which those of us who helped institutionalize Cultural Studies in the United States should have paid more attention to: “Social reality can amend, displace, or deform any merely intended practice, and within this (at times tragically, at times in ways which lead to cynicism and disgust) 'commitment' can function as little more than ideology.”

[Of course, I am saying all of this in public and to a public.]

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