

First published by Verso 2004
© Michael J. Denning 2004
All rights reserved

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 6EG
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014-4606
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1-85984-577-0
ISBN 1-85984-449-9 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Denning, Michael, 1954-
Culture in the age of three worlds : reflecting on genocide
1. Culture
I. Title
306

ISBN 1859844499 PB
ISBN 1859845770 HB

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Denning, Michael.
Culture in the age of three worlds / Michael Denning.
p.cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-85984-449-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)—ISBN 1-85984-577-0
(hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Culture. 2. Culture—Study and teaching. 3. Social movements.
4. Social history—20th century. I. Title.
HM621.D46 2004
306'.071—dc 22

2003025291

Typeset in 10.5/13 Bembo by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex
Printed in the USA by R. R. Donnelley

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
---	--------------	---

PART ONE Rethinking the Age of Three Worlds

2	Globalization and Culture: Process and Epoch	17
3	A Global Left? Social Movements in the Age of Three Worlds	35
4	The Novelists' International	51

PART TWO Working on Culture

5	The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn	75
6	The End of Mass Culture	97
7	The Academic Left and the Rise of Cultural Studies	121
8	What's Wrong with Cultural Studies?	147

and often shaped by the symbolic structures of cultural commodities, and because alliances between various underothers are often forged by shared cultural commodities, and, perhaps more frequently, through respect for cultural commodities that are not shared.

This is why I still choose maps over journeys, to cite Janice Radway's illuminating delineation of the possible "governing metaphors" for cultural studies. For me, cultural studies is not a collection of biographies or autobiographies: "the journey itself whereby concrete individuals wend their way from region to region."³³ Rather it is the drawing of maps by distant (unavoidable for those who study the past) and not so distant cartographers, maps which are always provisional, always abstractions. Anyone who uses maps knows they are not the same as the world, that the point of view of the cartographer is crucial, and that no single map tells us all we might want to know. Nonetheless, maps are ways of conceiving totalities, understanding the boundaries which join and separate, and imagining the terrains which are contested. The fact that our boundaries are not exact and our categories are always subject to revision should not lead us to give up the task.

7

THE ACADEMIC LEFT AND THE RISE OF CULTURAL STUDIES

When President George H.W. Bush entered the "political correctness" controversy with his 1991 University of Michigan commencement address, it marked the symbolic climax of the running battle over American universities. Having discovered "free speech under assault . . . on some college campuses," Bush warned that "political extremists roam the land, abusing the privilege of free speech, setting citizens against each other on the basis of their class or race." Throughout the Reagan years, conservative journalists and intellectuals had tried to bring the Reagan revolution to American higher education. Government and university administrators like William Bennett, Lynn Cheney, and John Silber, the neoconservative humanities intellectuals around the *New Criterion*, *Commentary*, and the National Association of Scholars (and their journal *Academic Questions*), and a host of right-wing journalists had regularly claimed that "tenured radicals" had taken over university teaching and scholarship in the humanities, launching an attack on the values of Western civilization. In the fall and winter of 1990-91, these charges became feature stories in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*; and suddenly "political correctness," "multiculturalism," university speech codes, and the canon were hotly debated in newspapers and magazines across the country.¹

Though the media storm subsided, and the ideological attack on the university gave way to a fiscal attack – and university budgets generated

more controversy than university speech codes – the issues raised by the term “politically correct” and the existence of an academic left remain important. Not only does the right-wing offensive in American intellectual life continue, but the controversy over the cultural left in the university has divided liberal and left intellectuals. On the one hand, the cultural left, a broad, if contentious, alliance between left and liberal academics and administrators who have worked to reorganize higher education in the humanities under the banners of diversity, theory, affirmative action, the interdisciplinary, “reconstructing the canon,” and cultural studies, began to respond to the conservative attacks in print, at professional conventions, and through the organization of Teachers for a Democratic Culture and the Union of Democratic Intellectuals. To these intellectuals, among whom I would number myself, there is a sense of embattlement; we feel we have been in an extended period of conservative attacks on any democratic and feminist conception of culture.

However, a number of liberal and left intellectuals have taken aim at this academic left, arguing that radicals in the academy – those whom David Bromwich has called “institutional radicals” – have betrayed the values, language, and calling of the critical intellectual. These writers lament the decline of a public culture in the United States and the complicity of the academic radicals in the professionalization of the humanities. For these writers – and they range from David Bromwich writing in *Dissent* to Barbara Epstein writing in *Socialist Review* – the controversy over political correctness is a symptom of serious political and intellectual shortcomings of the academic left. For them the academic left is made up of an unholy and unlikely marriage between identity politics and post-structuralist theory. Irving Howe called it “a strange mixture of American populist sentiment and French critical theorizing”; Barbara Epstein argued that “identity politics and the postmodern/poststructural sensibility do come together in the field of cultural studies, and, more broadly, in constituting the academic and intellectual arena that defines itself as radical”. The result is a left which is only apparently radical. Howe called them “insurgents,” refusing them the name left, and Epstein warned of “the danger . . . that a rising intellectual movement can appropriate the cachet of radicalism while remaining more interested in intellectual and

cultural criticism than in social change.” “If this is radicalism,” wrote Louis Menand of “most *marxisant* critics,” “it is about the most ineffectual radicalism imaginable.”²

These charges are serious ones, but they are, I believe, mistaken. The moral panic over political correctness was indeed a symptom of the presence of a cultural left in the universities; but to understand the passions aroused on both the left and the right by “the most ineffectual radicalism imaginable,” we need to understand the complexities and contradictions of those “institutional radicals” and the cultural studies they have forged.

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been Politically Correct?

Why politically correct? The decade-long storm over the humanities in the university had initially swirled around the threatened canon and obscurantist theory; meanwhile, in the arts communities, the vocabularies of obscenity, pornography, and even blasphemy structured the moral panics over rap and rock as well as the anxious attacks on the discourses of sexuality in the arts, and particularly on gay and lesbian expression. Political correctness arose (for all sides, I will suggest) as a principle of linkage, to use diplomatic jargon. The wide and often incompatible variety of academic radicalisms seemed to come together not under some party banner, but under a style of speech and behavior. Congressional committees will be hard pressed to ask this generation of academics, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party (or any other party)?” But perhaps “are you now or have you ever been politically correct?” will serve.

This is the heart of the right-wing critique: politically correct is the contemporary equivalent of the Stalinist party line, an emblem of the rigidity, intolerance, and humorlessness that the right has always projected onto leftists and feminists. When speaking to themselves rather than to the mass media, right-wing academics admit that the left does not control the university: “in the last analysis,” Stephen Balch and Herbert London told the readers of *Commentary* in their article on “The Tenured Left,” “it is less the academy’s radical minority and more its liberal majority that is at the heart of the problem. . . . The future of higher education hinges

on how the internal crisis in American liberalism is eventually resolved." In this battle over the "future of higher education," political correctness serves to bring together the threats to the canon and the theory explosion.³

For any who may have forgotten the Reagan years, let me recall that the slogan of the canon encompassed two different issues. On the one hand, within the professional disciplines, debates were joined over the place of teaching and scholarship which rejected the usual standards of appropriate subjects of study. Thus, in literature and the arts, one found a reevaluation of women artists, black and ethnic artists, and the arts and cultures of non-Western societies, as well as of the popular or mass-produced arts. In historical scholarship, this meant a turn toward the various new social histories, studying peoples and aspects of daily life that had traditionally seemed outside history. On the other hand, the debate over the canon was also a debate over the forms of general education, a debate over whether a liberal arts education need have some core, some common ground, and a debate over what that common ground might be: the leading public controversies were over revisions to the various "great books" courses, which symbolized a common heritage.

The slogan of theory was even more diverse, including: a sympathy for the aesthetics and cultural styles associated with postmodernism; the varieties of antifoundational epistemologies associated with French post-structuralism and American neopragmatism; the various strains of symptomatic interpretation, most notably the symptomologies of psychoanalysis, the genealogies of the new historicism, and the ideologies of Marxism; and the somewhat arcane rhetorics and writing styles associated with these discourses.

One of the peculiarities of the controversy was the conflation of the "canonical criticism" (to use Paul Lauter's term) and theory. Far from inhabiting the same precincts, these two groups had eyed each other as much with suspicion and hostility as with respect and solidarity. It was precisely the incongruity of these different projects that made the satiric piece published in *Dissent*, "How Not to Write for *Dissent*," funny, uniting as it did the new studies of popular culture (which do not, for the most part, incorporate the discourses of theory) and the works of theory (which

do not, for the most part, deal with *Gilligan's Island*). There are a few fools who have tried to bridge the two, myself included, but we'll come to them.⁴

The shift to a panic over political correctness was a sign that the right realized that they were losing the battles over the canon and theory: that is to say, that large numbers of non-left teachers and non-left students were persuaded of the intellectual value and pleasure involved both in revising the canons and in conducting vigorous theoretical controversies. As in the attack on New Deal liberals as "fellow travelers," "dupes" of the Communist "conspiracy," much of the right-wing argument suggested that seemingly innocuous tendencies like multiculturalism or the new historicism were part of, to use Kenneth Lynn's phrase, an "anti-American Studies." Much of the vehemence of the attack on political correctness was an unwillingness to concede the persuasiveness of certain leftist teaching and scholarship, and its success in the academic market-place.

Nevertheless, the right did not invent the phrase politically correct, and it bears examination. I have never been enamored of the phrase politically correct nor of the "p.c." and "p.i." shorthand, though I have long been interested in its genealogy.⁵ For me, it always conjured up an image of a yardstick by which one might measure oneself. If anyone really were politically correct, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in. However, the media attention persuaded me that the undoubted currency of the phrase gave it a reality that needed consideration; if it was not part of my slang, that was probably because the fractions of the left through which I was socialized had different verbal tics. What does the phrase mean? How is it used? On the left, it is usually used with an ironic, self-mocking tone, to excuse personal tastes that are not part of the leftist, feminist, or gay subcultures. the inverse of a phrase like, "though I know it is very yuppie, preppie, I really like. . . ."

A more interesting, and more telling, usage does occur in university conversations: "I know this is not politically correct, but . . ." a phrase used by those – neither on the left nor right, perhaps unpolitical people – who worry about whether what they say is politically correct. This is a sign of two developments in the academy. On the one hand, the polarization of the university – whether over campus strikes, battles over curricu-

lum, hiring and promotion, or in cases of disruption of university civility, like the *Dartmouth Review* case – makes a nonpolitical stand more difficult to maintain, and puts pressure on people to take sides. In this situation, the invocation of “I know this is not politically correct, but . . .” indicates not that the left has some grand power to punish the politically incorrect, but that leftist ideas have achieved enough persuasiveness to act as a bizarre kind of superego.

Clearly, the notion of the politically correct derives from the sense that there is a political meaning to personal style and behavior; thus an apparently nonpolitical action – the way a man relates to women in a group, the casual use of a racist or ethnic joke, and so on – can be interpreted politically. This is an idea with disparate roots: one source is surely the feminist notion of the personal being political; another, the Western Maoist notion of criticism-self-criticism which had some currency in the New Left. However, it is also deeply indebted to an intellectual ethic regarding the morality of style and taste that is associated with the New York Intellectuals, particularly Diana and Lionel Trilling. In this sense, political correctness is not at all a question of party line; here I think the right is quite mistaken. Rather it is more an issue of “correct” manners (and let us not forget that many of those who object are themselves usually great advocates of manners and decorum).⁹ One finds a mirror image of this political correctness as critique of manners in the many diatribes against bad writing, which maintain that a certain style and ease of manner is required in order to be taken seriously.

One can see this better by exploring the curious double meaning of the term “self-consciousness”: self-consciousness is a virtue when it means a genuinely reflective sense of one’s own being, one’s own situation in the world, and one’s own impact on others; but this is dialectically related to self-consciousness in the other sense – awkwardness, embarrassment, the all-too-awful consciousness of one’s own body and clothes and style in situations where one is out of place. But it is worth recalling that any genuine self-consciousness, the coming to consciousness, the “consciousness-raising” that marked the emergence of feminism, and indeed marks the emergence of any social movement of subaltern peoples, is in part the product of the realization that the negative form of self-consciousness, the

embarrassment and awkwardness, the sense that one does not belong, has a political meaning.

Now this consciousness of the politics, even morality, of style is easily abused – as much in Leslie Fiedler’s famous literary critique of the Rosenbergs’ letters, or in Diana Trilling’s attack on the bad taste of the Scarsdale diet doctor, as in the “policing” of political correctness in speech and behavior. Moreover, there are times for rudeness and giving offense, even in the university. But I find it difficult to think that civil discourse and respectful conversation are threatened because Robert Caserio finds he has to choose his words carefully in order not to offend his feminist colleagues or David Riesman has to go to great lengths to avoid the tag racist (both of them apparently made these statements to *Newsweek*⁷).

But the notion of the politically correct has a larger significance; it is, in a way, the principle of linkage that those on the right so fear. However, this is not because politically correct means that one holds certain views on capitalism, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, the decline of the West, and so on and so forth. Rather the notion of the politically correct is a consequence of the fact that the left has lost or given up its sense of a party line, a sense that an authoritative party or movement is in the vanguard. With the devolution, for better or worse, of the left into distinct social movements, political correctness becomes one mode of mediation between them.

Take an example from Faith Middleton, the host of public radio’s “Open Air New England,” a contemporary incarnation of the New England feminism of Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her interview with activists for the rights of disabled people began with a discussion of which terms are, as she said somewhat ironically, “politically correct.” While this discussion was only a short part of the interview, it raised the question of naming: the physically challenged, disabled people, people with disabilities, the handicapped, even a brief discussion of the use of the term “cripples” among the disabled. While recognizing that argument over the politically correct term should not replace the discussion of the rights and wrongs suffered by the disabled, she nonetheless sensed that the relations between different groups on the left required a certain decorum in language, that the struggle over names is not meaningless.

If this decorum is at times taken to absurd lengths – as when, for example, it implies that only insiders (of whatever sort) have the right to speak or criticize – it more often serves to enable genuine discussion, dialogue and criticism. Those who rightfully note that solidarity should never preclude criticism might recall the damage that criticism without solidarity can wreak. Anyone who has delved into the journals of the left, whether of Communists, Trotskyists, New Leftists, or feminists, knows that criticism is often a euphemism for name-calling and denunciation in which the notion of political correctness and incorrectness can easily degenerate. This is the “left moralism” that Barbara Epstein and Barbara Ehrenreich have both criticized. The rational kernel of political correctness, however, is what Richard Flacks calls an “ethic of collective responsibility.” Flacks, in his brilliant meditation on the place of the left in the US, entitled *Making History*, suggested that one of the key contributions of the left has been articulating and fostering “an ethic of collective responsibility, a set of principles and rules for individual action that are morally binding on members, and that are capable of becoming obligatory for ever-widening circles of non-members as well.” These range from norms against scabbing or crossing picket lines to rules about daily speech and interpersonal interaction between men and women, whites and blacks. He argues persuasively that this ethic is one of the major contributions of leftist movements to American culture.⁶ If this be a defense of “politically correctness,” so be it; but this is a minor skirmish. I am more interested in the larger question of the left in the academy: what our situation is, what our prospects are, and whether our agenda makes sense.

The Public and the Profession: The Tale of the “Tenured Radicals”

Has the turn to the left in the academy in fact occurred? Is the left now predominantly located in the universities? Should leftist intellectuals be in universities? Or have the successes of the left in the academy been Pyrrhic victories, as leftist ideals of general education and a public culture of dissent

are displaced by a narrow professionalism and a cultivation of radical style? These are the significant questions raised by the political correctness controversy.

Has this turn to the left occurred in the university? I will be brief on this first question, but it seems to me one we need explore further. Much depends on the accuracy of our assessment of the current situation. In his critique of the “hard left” in the academy and its “oppositional style of criticism,” Henry Louis Gates took for granted what he called “the celebrated turn to politics in literary studies in the past decade.”⁷ But has it happened? Has the left taken over?

In most ways, the answer is clearly no. In their *Commentary* essay, Balch and London (two leading figures in the National Association of Scholars) drew on a survey of faculty members conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: given five labels to describe their political stance – left, liberal, middle of the road, moderately conservative, and strongly conservative – only 5.8 percent chose left. Proportions of left faculty were higher in sociology and political science (and in English, where 10.2 percent chose left), but overall the left was a relatively small minority. Even what Balch and London called “the liberal majority” was an illusion; only 33.8 of faculty called themselves liberal, so the combined forces of left and liberal professors were just under 40 percent of the profession. (A more recent Carnegie poll eliminated the categories left and strongly conservative for a more “balanced” if less informative spectrum: liberal, moderately liberal, middle of the road, moderately conservative, and conservative. To some, this poll might indicate a liberal majority – 57 percent are either liberal or moderately liberal; others might read this as a sign of overwhelming moderation – 69 percent are moderately liberal, middle of the road, or moderately conservative.) Moreover, these figures have been relatively constant since the late 1960s.⁸

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that since World War II, which is to say since the creation of the modern university system, faculty members have been somewhat more liberal, more likely to support Democratic candidates, than the general population. This, however, is apparently less a product of the university or of specific disciplines than a product of family

background. Professors are more liberal than the general population not because they are professors but because they are more likely to come from liberal families.¹¹

In another way, however, Gates's notion of a turn to politics in literary studies (and the humanities generally) rings true. Why? What is a turn to politics? What does politics mean in this context? In part, it means a turn to history. Various formalisms in the humanities, including deconstruction, are in disarray, and there are a number of new historicisms. Perhaps Roland Barthes's oft-cited maxim was true: "a little formalism turns one away from History, but . . . a lot brings one back to it."

In part, it means a turn to women. The one significant demographic change in faculty ranks in recent years has been the growing number of women in universities, particularly in the humanities. There is no question that this has changed daily life in the university, and has provided the rank and file for a variety of feminist studies.

And in part, it means a turn away from liberalism. Liberalism had a hard time in the Reagan years: it became the dreaded "L-word" both because of the attacks from the conservative right and because of a genuine loss of self-confidence. If the left has not taken over the university, it has begun to set the agenda for the liberal wing of the university. The call for reconstructing the canon moved from *Radical Teacher* and the Feminist Press to the mainstream of many departments. Theory moved from the Marxist literary groups and Lacanian theory circles that Harold Bloom satirized as "those academic covens akin to what Emerson . . . called 'philanthropic meetings and holy hurrahs'" to shift the intellectual frameworks of the humanities.¹²

For the right, this has corrupted the universities; for some on the left, it has corrupted the left. A number of critics – notably Russell Jacoby in his *The Last Intellectuals* – have argued that left intellectuals have abandoned the public for the profession. David Bromwich's essay, "The Future of Tradition," in *Dissent* epitomizes this critique. Its first half is a lament for the loss of a public culture – "what [professionalization] has most destroyed in America is our common sense of a public life"; the second half is an attack on the "institutional radicals" for their complicity in that destruction. The institutional radicals are, paradoxically, too political and not political

enough. "The activist tone in scholarship," he wrote, "has been found compatible with a restriction of politics to the universities themselves. Indeed the standard defense of institutional radicalism in the humanities . . . is that scholars can have their deepest influence on public discourse simply by doing what they do anyway. . . . The adepts of institutional politics seldom encounter members of the general public which they have written off."¹³

It is not clear exactly what kinds of encounters with members of the general public Bromwich has in mind. I take it that he is not referring simply to circles of acquaintances nor to intimate encounters – like that between the businessman and the English professor in David Lodge's comic novel, *Nice Work*. Let us assume that he means face-to-face encounters with the general public in political activity, and encounters with the general public through the mediation of the written word (those members of the general public encountered during the work day, that is, students, don't seem to qualify for Bromwich, but I will return to them).

First, despite Bromwich's insinuations, there is little evidence to suggest that institutional radicals avoid face-to-face encounters with their fellow citizens; the scanty evidence available suggests that, because of their class and the relative freedom of their working conditions, professors in general are much more likely to be active as political citizens – in political campaigns and parties – than the general public. Moreover, as the most extensive study concludes, "it is the most liberal faculty who are the most active."¹⁴ This picture of faculty citizen activism – so at odds with the image of the ivory tower – makes the opposition between the public and the profession far more complicated than it often appears. Bromwich is entirely mistaken to suggest that for the left in the academy, "what one does at a university will suffice as a complete account of what one does in society."

Let me suggest a picture slightly different from that of public and profession, of unattached intellectual and academic intellectual. In an underrated 1965 study of intellectuals, Lewis Coser noted that "one of the most important observations that can be made about unattached intellectuals in contemporary America is that there are so few of them." He suggests that the reasons for their decline are the rise of the postwar

academy and the demise of avant-garde culture and radical ideology. If one follows his account, however, one finds that the "unattachment" of earlier intellectuals was largely an ideological identity, not a description of their means of livelihood. Like all other intellectuals, unattached ones had to eat, and most earned a living through some kind of intellectual occupation. They were not so much unattached intellectuals as market intellectuals; like Emerson, they abandoned the various forms of ministry and supported themselves by publishing for the market, lecturing to the market, and having a small legacy to smooth over the downturns in the market. By the early twentieth century, such market intellectuals were, by Coser's illuminating summary, doing putting-out work for publishers of books and magazines: writing reviews, assessing and editing manuscripts, serving on selection boards of book clubs. After the decline of the lyceums, the most successful market intellectuals were generally fiction writers, since fiction was the form of writing that sold the best.¹⁵

The decline of the market intellectual, the freelance intellectual entrepreneur, was the result of the vast expansion of the culture industries and the state cultural apparatuses, a complex which includes the postwar university. Thus the public sphere is not really the other side to the professions. Rather, one might more adequately imagine three spheres in elaborate orbits, each with their own professionals, part-timers, clerical proletariat, and public. These spheres include: first, the culture industries of film, broadcasting, recording, publishing, education, and journalism — those industries which serve to regulate and facilitate communication, as the financial industries regulate and facilitate the circulation of capital; second, the state cultural apparatuses, including a wide range of local, regional, and national agencies, libraries, museums, and schools; and third, the voluntary associations including unions, political associations, churches and religious congregations, foundations, high culture proper (privately supported orchestras, opera companies, universities and historical societies), the world of small alternative businesses (such as independent bookstores) and what remains of folk culture, groups of hobbyists and enthusiasts.

It is probably fair to say that most intellectuals work in these worlds; moreover, most people find them the sources of culture, intellectual life, and entertainment. Leftists can be found in almost all of these semi-public

spheres, encountering a variety of "general publics." Though the university is sometimes painted as a left-wing island in a right-wing sea, much of contemporary left culture can be found among the voluntary associations, and many leftists work in the state cultural apparatuses. Indeed, I have always suspected that more than 5.8 percent of librarians would call themselves "left"; perhaps leftists are *under*-represented in the academy!

So, without saying that all politics should be restricted to the university or that the university is a microcosm of society (two beliefs that Bromwich attributes to "institutional radicals"), I will insist that the higher education industry is a crucial public sphere, a key part of American mass culture. Indeed, if, as he himself says, "it is an unhappy fact that most of the conversation about culture in America now is carried on in universities" (though I doubt it), it would be odd if leftists interested in culture avoided the universities.

Bromwich's nostalgia for unattached intellectuals and a lost general public embodies both the metropolitanism and the Leninism inherent in the traditions of the New York Intellectuals. On the one hand, the metropolitanism of the repeated call for a public culture barely conceals the dream that New York might yet be central to US culture. Russell Jacoby is most self-conscious on this issue, and his critique of the culture of provincial university towns is powerful. Nevertheless, the culture industries of image reproduction and distribution have rendered the metropolis culturally obsolete, and the seeds of any new left culture must lie within the forms and institutions of these de-centered and professionalized cultural industries.

On the other hand, a spilt Leninism lurks beneath the critique of the strategy of the institutional radicals. The notion of the intellectual as professional revolutionary, drawn from the vanguardist tradition where intellectuals are involved in real politics as party cadre, remains the main alternative to the New Left and democratic socialist notion of a long march through the institutions. And the memory of such an intellectual, a party intellectual creating a separate oppositional public sphere, haunts much of the critique of contemporary left academics. Even those who have rejected Leninist politics use it as the image of the "real" left intellectual (one sees it powerfully in Irving Howe's invocation of Trotsky and Lukács). For

contemporary left academics, conversely, one of the attractions of Antonio Gramsci's work is precisely its break with and refashioning of the Leninist tradition.

If one wants to develop a body of socialist intellectuals, a culture of dissent, if one rejects a vanguard party of professional cadres as their locus, and if such intellectuals continue to be drawn predominately (though not exclusively) from the classes without capital, then of necessity they will be schizophrenic – half socialist intellectual and half professional intellectual of the legal, governmental, union, journalistic, or university type. No doubt strange mutants will appear, but neither Stanley Fish's celebrations of professionalism nor David Bromwich's laments for an imaginary public sphere offer much of a direction for those of us here.

The contradiction at the heart of this situation is not that of the intellectual – attached or unattached – and the general public, but the relation between this cultural fraction of the so-called "new class," and the other classes in American society. This professional and managerial class has always intrigued the Socialist (as opposed to the Communist) tradition in the United States, from Charles Steinmetz, William English Walling, and Lewis Corey, to Michael Harrington and Barbara Ehrenreich. As Ehrenreich has shown in her *Fear of Falling*, the specter of the new class is also close to the hearts of the neoconservatives. This is why it matters so little to Roger Kimball that his "tenured radicals" are not, for the most part, left-wing radicals; they are figures for the new class which is objectively anticapitalist, antitraditional, pro-left, a group of "elite liberals." This is the mirror image of left critiques of this same class as servants of power, ideological watchdogs, reproducing social relations through the media and the educational system, the infamous "ideological state apparatuses."

Both of these attacks are true, and that is one reason why the ideological debates about and within the professional-managerial class range from the sublime to the ridiculous. On the one hand, the very power of this class to shape the culture, combined with its historical ambivalence toward both capital and labor, makes the stakes very great indeed. It is worth recalling that the recent attack on the left in the universities is not unprecedented: the history of higher learning in the United States includes the 1890s purge of Populist social scientists, the attack on Socialist and antiwar professors

during World War I, and the depression scare over Communists on campus, which grew into the postwar "McCarthyist" purge of the universities.¹⁶ The anticommunist purge of the schools, and the blacklists in the film and broadcasting industries, did much to break a popular front between the intellectuals radicalized by the depression and the newly-organized workers of the CIO; similarly, the concerted effort by New Right corporations and foundations to build and fund a neoconservative culture was an important part of the Reagan revolution.

On the other hand, it is clear that many of the battles over theory, the canon, and the curriculum are merely skirmishes over the forms and ownership of cultural capital, a war of intraclass position. We are condemned to engage in arguments and struggles that combine elements of both – the genuine politics of culture in the United States and the pseudopolitics of distinction and careerism. Since individuals must make lives as well as history, to use Flacks's terms, we cannot avoid these entanglements.

In many ways, the cultural right has a better sense of what is at stake than the liberal and left critics of the "institutional radicals." Underneath the right's uproar over multiculturalism and Western civilization, one finds a persistent and insistent argument against affirmative action, an argument about who should have access to the resources and cultural capital controlled by the university. While Louis Menand laments "the most ineffectual radicalism imaginable," the National Association of Scholars accurately notes that the institutional radicals who have struggled over curriculum and theory are also the institutional radicals that have organized over university divestment from South Africa, over support for unions of university clerical and technical workers, and over affirmative action hirings and admissions.

The Emergence of Cultural Studies

But what of writing and teaching; surely one may accept the lineaments of this argument that higher education is a crucial public sphere, a "contested terrain" in the lingo of we academic radicals, and still insist that the academic left is marching through the institutions in the wrong direction.

In particular, the left academy, in its pursuit of cultural studies, has, according to its critics, given up clear writing, general education, even a commitment to social change. Barbara Epstein, who shares little of the *Dissent* nostalgia for the public intellectual, nevertheless criticized the “contempt for clear writing” she finds on the postmodern left, and sees the “shift from social analysis to cultural studies and the affiliation between radicalism and post-structuralism/postmodernism” as the unfortunate effect of the “defeat of the US left in the midseventies.” “These [intellectual] currents,” she argued, “were increasingly divorced from the aim of building a movement for social change.”¹⁷ Is cultural studies, which has emerged as the slogan of the academic left’s intellectual project, a product of defeat, a fashionable substitute for a genuine left intellectual agenda? I think not, but Epstein’s critique requires some account of what is meant by cultural studies.

There is no doubt that cultural studies has emerged over the last decade as a common slogan in the humanities. For the cynical, a look at a catalog of the University of California Press entitled *Cultural Studies* suggests that it is primarily an intellectual marketing strategy. Among the catalog’s headings one finds not only the targets of the cultural right: new ethnography, gender studies, “the new historicism: studies in cultural poetics,” theory, ethnic studies, urbanism, film, theatre and media, and popular culture, but the old humanities as well: the arts, literature, history, and classical studies. One is tempted to give up any attempt at definition.

But there is more coherence than might at first appear. After all, Roger Kinball claims that cultural studies is “the latest and most important academic effort to resuscitate Marxist analysis and liberate the humanities from an ‘elitist’ concern with high culture.”¹⁸ This is not inaccurate, but it does not capture the complexity of the moment. I will suggest that cultural studies, adopted from the British New Left, encompasses several trends in US culture: the emergence of the postmodern magazine; the reappearance of a left social-democratic conception of culture and cultural democracy; and an insurgent movement within the universities to reconceptualize the professional disciplines and the humanities themselves.

Cultural studies in the United States is an immigrant, a travelling theory, adopting its name from British cultural studies, which was itself something

between an academic discipline and an intellectual movement of the New Left. There are now several accounts of and introductions to this tendency associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the social history pioneered by the historians around the journal *Past and Present* and the Communist Party Historians’ Group, and the writings of Raymond Williams.¹⁹ It was always an intervention in several publics, beginning in adult education, and moving into universities, polytechnics, the Open University, the magazines and journals of the Labour left, and the British Film Institute. For many of the institutional radicals, the figure of Raymond Williams – at once novelist, cultural journalist reviewing television, theatre and film, Marxist theorist, literary historian, political pamphleteer, and teacher in adult education and at Cambridge – is a more persuasive image of the socialist intellectual than the Edmund Wilsons and Lionel Trillings held out by the devotees of public discourse.

At times, the emergence of cultural studies in the United States looks like a second British invasion; just as American vernacular music came back slightly estranged by the musicians of Liverpool, so American mass culture is made strange and wondrous by the critics of Birmingham. This is not to be scoffed at; from Tocqueville’s America to Baudrillard’s, it is arguable that the outsider’s eye is a revealing one. Nevertheless, while acknowledging this heritage, I am reluctant to follow those who already see declension: what was critical and radical in Britain is flaccid and affirmative in America. For better or worse, cultural studies in the United States will be what we make of it.

Perhaps the most important aspect of US cultural studies may be seen in the emergence of a group of postmodern magazines and the imagined community of writers and readers surrounding them: *Social Text*, *October*, *Cultural Correspondence*, *Inscriptions*, *Discourse*, *Gender*, *Differences*, *Representations*, *Telos*, *Semiotexte*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Camera Obscura*, *Cultural Critique*, *Border/Lines*, *Cultural Studies*, *boundary 2*, *Tabloid*, *Polygraph*, *Public Culture*, *Third Text*, *Transition* and a number of others.

It is all too common to damn these magazines as full of jargon and bad writing, high theory and low culture; these are after all the precise examples of how the left in the academy has given in to professional standards and turned its back on the general reader. This is where they publish stuff

written the way you shouldn't write for *Dissent*. This is very misleading. It is true that one does not look to this set of journals for literary and cultural journalism, the busywork of the fabled unattached intellectuals. Now I have nothing against such journalism, and there may well be declining outlets for it (though the success of the *Voice Literary Supplement* and the *Women's Review of Books* paralleled the rise in theory and cultural studies). But the demand that all left intellectuals be literary journalists, writing plain English for plain people, is no less objectionable than the old left demand that playwrights write agitprop and novelists stick to a comprehensible social realism.

At the same time as Bromwich and others lament the loss of the "little magazines," those "serious" journals neither academic nor popular, they miss the fact that these cultural studies or postmodern magazines are remarkably similar to *Partisan Review*, *Modern Quarterly*, *Politics* and the other legendary magazines that supported an oppositional public discourse for an earlier generation. Consider some similarities and differences. Like the earlier little magazines, these are not scholarly, professional journals. One would not mistake *October* for *PMLA* or the *American Historical Review*. They make no pretense to being refereed, objective forums for scholarship; they are magazines of a tendency, building a readership and a stable of writers. Like the little magazines, they tend to have small circulations, but are read seriously and thoroughly. Like the little magazines, they are seen from the outside as esoteric, specialized, and iconoclastic. Like the little magazines, some have institutional affiliations, a small grant, an office and so on. Like the little magazines, some are more concerned with politics and some with the arts; they shade off into overtly political journals like *Socialist Review* at one end and into basically academic journals like *Critical Inquiry* at the other.

There are differences; the one most remarked on is that the proportion of nonacademic contributors has decreased. An early study found that while only 9 percent of the contributors to the little magazines in the 1920s were teachers, 40 percent were teachers by the 1950s; the percentage in 1990s is no doubt much larger.²⁰ But this demonstrable shift from those working for advertisers, magazines, and publishing houses, to those working for universities masks a deeper continuity. Throughout the century,

contributors thought of these magazines as a relatively free space, less subject to the popular market or the scholarly profession than one's occupation, whether that was writing for *Time* magazine or writing letters of recommendation.

Other differences are more striking; they make it possible for many people to overlook the similarities entirely. There is markedly less fiction and poetry in the postmodernist magazines than there was in the modernist little magazine. There is a much clearer separation between the fiction and poetry magazine world and the postmodern magazine which is almost all nonfictional prose. On the other hand, there is far more attention to popular culture, to photography, to the performance arts, and to popular musics than one ever found in the modernist little magazine.

I don't mean to flesh out a complete comparison between the modernist little magazine and the postmodern journal; I simply suggest that the contemporary journals do constitute an oppositional public sphere not unlike those remembered so fondly. If their prose style and layout are not those of *Dissent*, neither are they emblems of academic pedantry and professionalism; rather they embody the radical politics and avant-garde aesthetics one hopes for from any cultural left. One of the paradoxes of Russell Jacoby's own jeremiad – that his public voice should emerge out of one of the most esoteric and forbidding of these journals, *Telos* – is no paradox at all; public intellectuals are nurtured not in the mass media but in the little magazines. Barbara Ehrenreich's widely read *For Her Own Good* had its roots in her Feminist Press pamphlets; her *Fear of Falling* elaborates the essays on the professional-managerial class from *Radical America*.

If cultural studies is in one sense the space created by the postmodern magazine, it also marks the reappearance of the cultural politics of left social democracy, the cultural politics of the Popular Front. It is this legacy that marks the distance between contemporary cultural studies and the cultural politics of both the New York Intellectuals – living on in the work of Howe, Bromwich, Jacoby, and Berman (their ideal of cultural criticism has significantly different connotations than cultural studies) – and the radical counterculture of the 1960s. The roots of US cultural studies lie in the pioneering work in the 1930s and 1940s of such figures as Kenneth Burke, Constance Rourke, F.O. Matthiessen, Oliver Cromwell Cox, and

Carey McWilliams: though never a group of any sort (though they deeply influenced the development of postwar American studies), they shared a socialist or left social-democratic politics, an interest in the popular arts, a desire to rethink notions of race and ethnicity, nation and people, and a concern for cultural theory. The remarkable revival of interest in the work of Kenneth Burke may be taken as an emblem of this rediscovered genealogy.²¹

Two elements of this inheritance are particularly interesting. First, it sheds light on the most common critique of the new cultural studies: its apparently obsessive reduction of the world to race, class, and gender. Paul Berman argued that the "mélange" born of "68 philosophy" (his name for the French post-structuralisms) and American identity politics ought to be called "race/class/gender-ism." In his admitted caricature, "culture and language are themselves only reflections of various social groups, which are defined by race, gender, and sexual orientation. . . . Groups, not individuals, produce culture. Every group has its own culture, or would, if oppressors didn't get in the way." The problem with this critique of cultural studies is that it takes the starting point of cultural studies as its conclusion. Race, class, and gender are not the *answers* in cultural studies, the bottom-line explanation to which all life may be reduced; they are precisely the *problems* posed – their history, their formation, their "articulation" with particular historical events or artistic works. These are the issues to be explained and understood.²²

The centrality of these concepts is not surprising, for the conceptual revolution embodied in cultural studies was precisely the shift from a notion of culture as individual cultivation toward a notion of culture as the set of traits, values, behaviors, and beliefs shared by groups: as Immanuel Wallerstein writes in an insightful critique of culturalist theories, "when we talk of traits which are neither universal nor idiosyncratic we often use the term 'culture'. . . . Culture is a way of summarizing the ways in which groups distinguish themselves from other groups."²³ The undoubted presence of race, class, and gender in cultural studies thus has three purposes: first, it stands as a critique of the dominant way of categorizing cultures, which remains national – American culture, English literature and so on; indeed the debate over the canon is not a debate about literature but one

about national identity and national education. Second, it marks cultural studies' fundamental break with the humanities, with the assumption that the arts and letters are primarily reflections on the human, on those traits which are transhistorical and universal.

Third, the concepts of race, class, and gender are all attempts to solve the theoretical issues posed by the concept of culture itself. Here it is worth noting that part of the reason for the incantation of race-gender-class is that they are, in a deep sense, synonyms; Donna Haraway's wonderful exploration of the meaning of gender notes the etymological interferences between the words for kind, kin, stock, race, gender, and class.²⁴ Cultural studies is thus fundamentally about theorizing peoples. Moreover, since the historical formations of race, class, and gender are in many ways symbolic constructs, imagined communities and imagined boundaries, cultural analysis becomes central to understanding them. This is why we cannot simply return to "social analysis and political economy" as Epstein half-suggested.

Like any new conceptual framework, cultural studies presents its own conundrums and antinomies, perhaps none as crucial as that posed by Edward Said: "can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?"²⁵ Against the idealism of the older humanism, cultural studies will insist on the genuine divisions in human culture; indeed to speak of a "human" culture is to speak of something yet unseen and unimagined.

This understanding of culture does stand at a certain distance from any avant-garde conception with its cult of the individual artist (and here we may note the continuing tension between cultural studies as an intellectual project and those post-structuralisms which are indeed idiosyncratic and individual practices of experimental writing) and from the iconoclasm of the counterculture (an iconoclasm that persists in the arts community proper). Thus it is accurate to see cultural studies as embodying certain of the bureaucratic tendencies of social democracy. It does believe in an institutional radicalism which would transform from within the pedagogies and practices of the mass university.²⁶

For this reason, cultural studies has become a new academic space, the name, as Roger Kimball rightly noted, for the academic left's intellectual

agenda, the slogan of an alliance on the cultural left between the forces of theory and the forces of "radical teaching."²⁷ But this is more than a tactical political alliance; it grows out of the fact that the characteristic form of left academic work has been the critique of the liberal disciplines – one sees this in the emergence in the 1970s of radical caucuses in the disciplines of literature, history, sociology, and political science, among others. This characteristic form of academic radicalism – often piggybacked on the national conventions of the professional associations like the MLA, AHA, and ASA – was a sort of craft unionism. Cultural studies itself emerged out of this critique of the disciplines and, since there is little sign that the disciplinary structure will cease to organize teaching, scholarship, evaluation, and credentialing in the mass university, it remains an important project.²⁸

Nevertheless, this engagement with the disciplines leaves the academic left vulnerable to those who rightly criticize the liberal disciplines, calling for general education. John Scarle noted that "it is characteristic of American education that each stage is primarily designed to prepare the student for the next stage, so the best high schools prepare the student for college, and the best colleges prepare the student for graduate school. Since the professors think they know what they are doing in graduate education, it is not surprising that they also feel confident at designing undergraduate majors. . . . In general education the failure of nerve derives from the fact that we do not know what we are preparing the student for." For the left, we see too clearly what we are preparing students for. It is a truism to note that any radical pedagogy runs up against the visible ties between the university and the labor market and the fact that – as Evan Watkins argued in his excellent *Work Time* – neither teaching nor research, but *evaluation*, is the crucial labor process of the university.²⁹

Nonetheless, recent decades have given new life to "general education" schemes; the liberally disciplined university is under a powerful and often populist attack. We on the academic left are now seen as the fellow travelers of the professional disciplines, the loyal opposition, replicating its professional structures and jargons (and thus provoking the ritual journalistic satire of the professional conventions). Thus it is necessary that we begin to imagine cultural studies not simply as the critique of the disciplines

but as an alternative to the humanities themselves, a reformation of general education, for our encounter with the general public is usually our encounter with our students. They do try to see their education whole, and are often bored or amused by debates over disciplinary turf. We cannot cede the notion of a general education to those for whom it means a common curriculum of classics, an ahistorical conversation among great minds, transcending time and culture, and finally speaking of little of any importance.

We might begin such a new imagination of general education by turning to the history of general education itself; to date, our studies of mass culture have not paid sufficient attention to the history of the university as part of that mass culture. If the great books are a tradition, they are surely an invented one. From the start, general education (the great books in translation) combined middlebrow marketing with a conservative response to an immigrant and ethnic student body. The general education movement has been a key part of middlebrow culture, using the mass media and culture industries to distribute a packaged translation of the classical curriculum. The various core curriculum experiments of modern universities are the flip side of publishing ventures like the Five-Foot Shelf of Harvard Classics, the Chicago Great Books enterprise, and the Penguin Classics of the 1940s. All represented attempts by a genteel culture to maintain itself in the face of an ethnic working class and an exploding commercial culture.

At Columbia University, where I taught the fabled great books course and was driven to explore its history, one could see these pressures starkly. In 1916, Latin was dropped as an entrance requirement; by 1919, a core curriculum of classics in translation was established. Both of these changes were related to the changing student body; as a Columbia dean put it relatively frankly, "One of the commonest references that one hears with regard to Columbia is that its position at the gateway of European immigration makes it socially uninviting to students who come from homes of refinement. The form which the inquiry takes in these days of slowly dying race prejudice is, 'Isn't Columbia overrun with European Jews who are most unpleasant persons socially?'" The dean defended the admission of Jews, noting that "The Jews who have had the advantages of decent

social surroundings for a generation or two are entirely satisfactory companions.”³⁰ The great books course was instituted to bring in those imagined to be outside the common culture. This remains a central purpose of these courses, particularly in the face of the Asian and Latino immigration of the past three decades.

As many of us who have written on mass culture have argued, mass culture may well find critical readers; it is not all manipulation and deception. And there is no question that the piece of mass culture called general education exposed a generation of plebeian and working-class students to intellectual life. The stories of the conversions to the great books at Columbia, the University of Chicago, and elsewhere are no doubt true; and they lead to the passionate defenses of general education schemes and to the horror of the unconverted and the apostates. I myself am an apostate, having grown up with the Adler-Hutchins Great Books (my attempts to read them – with their lousy translations, monumental bulk and eyestraining double-column design – all failed after numerous starts through high school; I recall the silent battle with myself over whether I dared underline or write in such sacred books).

There was, indeed, a persistent debate among the advocates of general education between the Chicago and Columbia models, one which continues today. The Chicago model always imagined a philosophical and historical justification for such a course – the mythology of Western civilization was a crucial element, and this tradition continued in the work of Allan Bloom. The Columbia model chose a rhetorical modesty. One of the founders of Columbia’s great books course, John Erskine, claimed that he had “no philosophy and no method for a total education; I hoped merely to teach how to read.” One hears this echoed in the plain common sense of Irving Howe in *The New Republic* and David Bromwich in *Dissent*.

What is particularly interesting about this history is that general education was already a modernist revision of the canon. One of the fascinating aspects of Irving Howe’s contradictory comments about the canon and general education is that he admits that he and his fellow students greatly resisted – indeed refused to deal with – the heritage of the West as it was then understood. He has written eloquently of his lack of any connection with Emerson and Thoreau – the Anglo-American canon. His connections were

with those parts of the Western canon which had direct connections to his own ethnic culture – Shakespeare, as much a part of Yiddish culture as of Anglo-US culture, and the great novelists of the East – the Russians Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, the Pole Conrad, and the Czech Kafka. What now seems so much a part of the tradition that the advocates of general education wish to pass on was as far from and as close to Western civilization as the Du Bois and Fanon that are now fought over. Howe denied this; he and his friends, he argued, saw Kafka and Joyce as “international” writers, not “ethnic” writers, to be set against American “parochialism.”³¹ But the same dialectic of ethnic culture and internationalist and cosmopolitan vision lies at the heart of contemporary critiques of the canon.

There is no doubt a need for general education, for a training that is not narrowly pre-professional and technical; but the energy for this new general education is not coming from the nostalgia for the past schemes. Rather it is emerging from the cultural left; even John Searle admitted that the course resulting from the Stanford civil war was a more powerful version of a liberal education than what preceded it. I am not suggesting a new core curriculum; I am suggesting that we resist thinking of cultural studies as another field, another program, and consider it as the place to think through an alternative to the humanities. It should be a global mapping of cultures, a way to explore not only the great books but the many arts that make up a culture, the relations between culture and society, the cultures of various classes, genders, and peoples. A sign that this shift is occurring is Roger Kimball’s alarm that interdisciplinary humanities’ centers across the country have found themselves drawn to cultural studies as a way of reconceiving the humanities.

The new intellectual space opened up in US culture by cultural studies is not a magic solution to the problems faced by left intellectuals nor even to leftists in the university. But we should not underestimate the openings and possibilities that are found there. The alternatives posed by the critics are less than persuasive: for Barbara Epstein, “the experience of being incorporated into academia has involved a profound defeat. . . . For those of us who hoped for something better, this situation produces various combinations of guilt and alienation.” For Louis Menand, “talking about reforming the modern university is like talking about reforming a sky-

scraper. There's not much point in tinkering: you can knock the whole thing down, or you can go live somewhere else." "Perhaps if America were experiencing right now a significant movement for radical social reform," Paul Berman lectured us, "the temptation to embark on verbal campaigns and to invest these campaigns with outlandish hopes would be less, and the students and young professors would put their energy into real-life democratic movements instead, which might be a relief to their harassed colleagues."⁵²

For those of us who inherited the "defeat," who inherited the universities and their "verbal campaigns," the "real-life democratic movements" of the 1980s and 1990s – including significant student activism – have not respected this imagined boundary between the university and the world: the struggles over university unionization, canons and curricula, affirmative action, divestment, and Central American intervention crossed this line. If we are incorporated in the university, it is because we are living in a corporation, not because conflicts and struggles have given way to "guilt and alienation." We do need a wider left agenda for higher education: a notion of the university as public resource like the public library; a national system of sabbaticals for working people; a more thorough-going affirmative action to open access to the resources of the university across lines of race and class; and the building of international links between university lefts around the world.

All culture, Kenneth Burke taught us, is symbolic action, and that phrase holds a significant ambiguity. As Fredric Jameson points out, "a symbolic act is on the one hand affirmed as a genuine *act*, albeit on the symbolic level, while on the other hand it is registered as an act that is merely 'symbolic.'" The term "academic left" holds a like ambiguity: leftists who are fighting within the academy, and leftists who are merely "academic." It is from that hesitation and contradiction, a hesitation at the heart of culture itself, that we must address the bad new times, not the good old days.

8

WHAT'S WRONG WITH
CULTURAL STUDIES?

"What's wrong with cultural studies?" It's all in the inflection. The Marxist literary critic Michael Sprinker would have said it as a bill of indictment, without even the question mark: what's wrong with cultural studies. My own tendency is to say it with a shrug: what's wrong with cultural studies? But the suspicion of cultural studies is widely shared on the left these days. "In its original incarnation in the Birmingham School," a group of radical young critics of contemporary cultural studies wrote, "cultural studies was conceived as an interdisciplinary, historical materialist mode of inquiry which combated the Arnoldian notion of 'Culture' by focusing on forms of working-class and popular culture." But

cultural studies' current privileging of discursive analysis tends to delink the ideological from a meaningful analysis of political economy, obscuring, for example, the relationship between cultural and economic globalization. [It] may not only obstruct analysis of agency and power but in fact increasingly reflect the complex ideology of late capitalism. . . . What is the relationship of cultural expression and resistance to organized, systematic revolution? Is cultural resistance sufficient to effect social transformation? In order to avoid idealizing local or popular culture as revolutionary, how can we understand what constitutes and contributes to emancipatory social change?¹

Though these questions were posed in this form by the group of young scholars who organized and set the agenda for the "After Postcolonialism, Beyond Minority Discourse" conference at Cornell University in 1999, they resonate among many radical intellectuals in the wake of the unexpected academic success of cultural studies in the United States and around the world. Can one, should one, defend this cultural studies? What kind of politics is cultural politics? In this chapter, I want to briefly outline my way of understanding cultural studies, and offer a modest defense of it as a slogan, by considering its apparent retreat from class, its relation to the work of Antonio Gramsci, and the vexed question of cultural politics and cultural resistance.

First, a short disclaimer. I feel no need to defend all that is done in the name of cultural studies anymore than I need defend all that is done in the name of socialism, feminism, Marxism, or even democracy. Slogans after all are slogans; their purpose is to rally a formation. Like keywords, they are best seen as the sign of common questions, not common answers, a common *problématique* to invoke the Althusserian tradition with which many of us have affiliated ourselves at one time or another. And slogans are, as Kenneth Burke said, always being stolen back and forth; the stealing of slogans is one of the key means of ideological struggles. It is possible that we will lose the slogan of cultural studies to the right but we needn't cede it yet.

So what is cultural studies anyway? Let me suggest two ways of looking at cultural studies. First, cultural studies has become a new name for the humanities, or more accurately, the key slogan in the left's redefinition of the humanities. The right has not, for the most part, even tried to steal the slogan cultural studies, because they continue to take their stand on the ground of the humanities. Cultural studies stands as a fundamental break with the notion of the humanities, with the assumptions that the study of arts and letters is separate from the study of society, that the humanities are best represented by a canon of classics, and that the arts and letters are primarily reflections on the human. Cultural studies has become a powerful slogan in the places where the humanities reigned – the universities, museums, and other state cultural apparatuses – as an assertion that there is a connection between society and culture, labor and art, manual and

mental labor. Moreover, the much satirized mantra of race, gender, and class remains not an answer but a question, an attempt to solve the theoretical issues raised by the concept of culture, the historical divisions in human culture that are the consequences of the long-term processes of proletarianization, racialization, and, to borrow from Maria Mies, "housewifization."

In this sense, cultural studies is best seen not as a new discipline, but as the critique of the disciplines. Following the example of Marx's critique of political economy, most of the early moves toward cultural studies began as the critique of disciplinary knowledges; if cultural studies continues to be the "critique of English," the "critique of history," the "critique of anthropology," the "critique of musicology," the "critique of art history," the critique of the concept of culture itself, it will remain a useful and important intellectual space.

As a new name for the humanities, and a space for the critique of the disciplines, cultural studies thus became the slogan of a tactical alliance of workers in the cultural industries and the state cultural apparatuses. Therefore, cultural studies always remains somewhat bureaucratic; it is the slogan of people whose work it is to teach classes, develop syllabi and programs, mount museum exhibitions, stage conferences, and compose scholarly books and articles: the cultural bureaucrats. Working artists on the left – characteristically torn between avant-gardism and populism – will remain rightly suspicious of cultural studies. Left journalists – part of a slightly different culture industry where the ideologies of the humanities have rarely had any influence, and where notions of plain prose for plain people led to a skepticism of any experimental form whether in art or scholarship – will also remain suspicious of cultural studies. So be it: I am not suggesting that all of left intellectual work be conducted under the slogan of cultural studies.

But cultural studies stands for more than the development of this quasi-discipline in the universities. The reason that cultural studies has emerged as a new name for the humanities is that it was a slogan for a wide range of New Left reflections on culture, the powerful rewriting of Marxism around the tropes of culture during the age of three worlds. Virtually all of the New Left Marxists – a generation of figures who came of age around

the world in the two decades after World War II – took a cultural turn. Having recognized that one of the great failures of the Communist Marxisms had been their reductive understanding of the superstructures, the New Left intellectuals redefined culture neither as arts and letters nor as manners and customs, but as the new means of communication: the culture industries and the ideological state apparatuses, to use a couple of phrases that became central. Not all used the word “culture” – that was part of the vernacular of the British New Left – but any serious look at the variety of New Left Marxisms will find that each was reconsidering the relation of culture to society. These new analyses of the means of communication, of what came to be called “mass culture,” were not simply added to an already established social or political theory. Rather, as is implied by the echo between means of communication and means of production, the mass media often appeared to be the central terrain, the dominant level, of a “postindustrial,” “consumer” order. The new cultural materialisms were not simply a reassertion of the importance of the superstructure, but a rethinking of economy and politics in cultural terms. Cultural studies as a slogan is best understood as the name for this powerful turn in Marxist thought, a turn which has shaped many of us.

Now it may be that, after four decades, the reconsideration of the relationship between culture and society is *not* the most pressing issue facing Marxism. I agree. But cultural studies in this sense (the critical analysis of the cultural industries and the state ideological apparatuses, and the reflection on the intersection of these industries and apparatuses on the cultural formations of subaltern classes and peoples) is a permanent contribution to any serious twenty-first-century Marxism. The attempt to trivialize cultural studies by citing the worst examples of pop culture analysis is not dissimilar to the attempt to trivialize the liberation movements by citing ridiculous examples of so-called identity politics. Our moment is not the moment where liberation and culture are the key words. But we have much to learn from a left for whom they were the key words, and, as we try to build a newer left, a global left whose symbolic antagonists have been the IMF and the WTO, the new enclosures which are privatizing the commons established by the social movements of 1848 and 1968, we would do well to keep alive the promise and problems

of a half-century of radical cultural analysis, for which our impoverished name remains, for the moment, cultural studies.

Does Cultural Studies Neglect Class?

“Does cultural studies neglect class?” is a question one hears regularly. In one sense, surely not. If cultural studies is best understood not as an intellectual formation or movement nor even as a new discipline or department, but rather as a slogan, a name for that wide expanse of formations and disciplines which used to be called the humanities, then part of its success is that it has brought a variety of group concepts, like class, into the humanities. The humanities took their vocation from a sense of the human, the transcultural and transhistorical, and saw the great accomplishments of Western civilization – Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* – as touchstones of what it meant to be human: the universals of freedom and necessity, birth and death and so on. Culture, on the other hand, is, as Immanuel Wallerstein put it, the word we use when speaking of traits that are neither universal nor idiosyncratic: “culture is a way of summarizing the ways in which groups distinguish themselves from other groups.”²² Thus it is not surprising that a key part of cultural studies, in its broadest sense, has been the discussion of the very terms by which we construct groups, terms like class, gender, race, and nation. American studies – the original identity discipline – was in this sense never really part of the humanities. If the humanities are about humans, the cultural studies are about peoples.

But does cultural studies neglect class, as opposed to other definitions of peoples? If it does, I’m not too worried, even as a Marxist. Class is *not* the defining category of Marxism, and I try not to forget that two of my key teachers neglected class in order to develop a Marxist cultural studies: Fred Jameson reinvented Marxist cultural studies in the United States around the concept of reification, and Stuart Hall’s work was path breaking in its elaboration of the notion of the national-popular. The dual imperatives of Marxist dialectical thought are totality and contradiction – how does one think the totality? how does one think contradiction? – and they still seem

to me more powerful than the other grand antinomies that are out there: identity and difference, self and other. The Marxist term that attempts to synthesize totality and contradiction is “mode of production,” which has, historically, always been a mode of exploitation; and my first insistence will be that classes, like genders and peoples, are effects, not causes. The mode of production and exploitation – a way of making and remaking life, a way of extracting work – classes, races, genders, and nationalizes us. If it is hard to always use the terms as verbs rather than nouns, it helps to think that the issue is the process of racialization, the process of engendering, the process of proletarianization, etc. The result of these processes in a particular situation is a specific class formation, racial formation, gender formation. And the currency of that phrase “formation” is quite useful because it helps to break down the sense that we need decide whether the *real* cause, the most fundamental identity, is class, gender, or race.

Nevertheless, one influential argument sees the rise of cultural studies itself as part of a larger turn away from class in the age of three worlds: “the substitution of race for class as the great unsolved problem in American life,” as Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle put it in their influential collection, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*. In this account, our contemporary cultural studies is a descendent of the liberal cultural pluralism of the 1940s that had pushed aside the “labor question” of the 1930s, and of the New Left radicalism that had contemptuously dismissed the “labor metaphysic.” However, curiously, this account of the decline of class is based on little class analysis. Whereas each of the earlier party systems they invoke were brought to an end by a crisis – the crisis over slavery which led to a civil war, the economic crisis of the 1890s, and the crash of 1929 and its aftermath – the New Deal order seems to evaporate because of a rhetorical shift, a curious forgetting about class. When this new preoccupation with cultural pluralism combined with the New Left’s alleged contempt for white workers and its refusal of the New Deal languages of Americanism and populism, we are told, a classless cultural studies resulted.⁵

This is a misreading of the actual class transformations of the age of three worlds. First, there was a profound social crisis provoked by what Ernest Mandel called the second slump, figured in the oil crisis of 1974, and by the defeat of the United States in Vietnam. In a strange condensa-

tion of events – and crises are never simple – this crisis led to the resignation of both the vice president and the president, Agnew and Nixon. Second, the dramatic migration from the South to the North during and after World War II – the largest internal migration in US history – remade the class and racial formations of the New Deal years. The CIO working class was disorganized and reconstructed. Third, the new forms of class struggle in the 1960s and 1970s can be glimpsed in the remarkable organization of public employees, service employees, and white collar employees – three overlapping but distinct groups. If Franklin D. Roosevelt’s National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 kicked off a wave of industrial unionism in the 1930s, so John F. Kennedy’s executive order allowing public employees to unionize kicked off an equally important wave of organizing over the next two decades, a social movement closely connected to the struggles for black liberation and women’s liberation. Finally, the beginning of a new immigration from Asia and Latin America signaled by the Immigration Act of 1965 has led to the making of an as yet unorganized and largely uncharted post-Fordist working class. So the “turn to race” was not a rhetorical shift, a refusal of the languages of populism, Americanism, and industrial unionism (which is what is meant by class and the labor question in these accounts), but was the mark of a profound remaking of the working classes, in the United States and globally.

Thus it is not enough simply to assert the centrality of class or the labor question. Class analysis in the account of specific historical conjunctures requires not a static sense of the working class or the middle class, but an account of the making and remaking of specific historical blocs, and an attention to class generations and to what Pierre Bourdieu has usefully called “class trajectories.”

If there is a neglect of class in cultural studies that should be noted, it is not the neglect of a certain class identity in favor of racial or gender identities; it is rather a neglect of class struggle. For example, in their otherwise excellent collection, *Rethinking Class*, Wai Chee Dimock and Michael Gilmore open by asking “how can we continue to use the word [class] with any sense of political efficacy, when its instrumental expression – ‘class struggle’ – has ceased to be a vital historical force?” One of their answers – in essays by Dimock and Mary Poovey – is that class needs to be

seen as part of a wider modern tendency to classify, and that classification is a central technology of power – as Foucault put it, disciplines classify subjects. This is an important insight for cultural history, but it gives up too quickly on the continuing importance of class struggle as “a vital historical force.” Even the work of classifying is an act of class struggle, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued. Bourdieu also sees class as the consequence of classifying: but Bourdieu sees all of us continually classifying and distinguishing. Class struggle is carried on in part by classing other people. In this instance, Bourdieu is more trenchant than Foucault, because he sees that what we might call vernacular classifying is a necessary and useful part of popular struggles, whereas Foucault leads one to think that classifying is simply a technique of power and surveillance, something to be avoided or resisted.¹

Furthermore, this taxonomic version of class as an instance of classification misses the fact that class struggle is not a kind of drama with giant theatrical characters. Rather it is the continual battle over the social surplus: how it is produced, how it is appropriated, how it is distributed. Classes, both fundamental classes and subsumed classes, are constituted in part by those relations of exploitation, appropriation, and distribution. A key mechanism for distributing the surplus in contemporary societies is the state, which does indeed, as the right reminds us, tax and spend. Who it taxes and who it pays is a vital part of class struggle.

Finally, what we may neglect in cultural studies is not class, but work, something we are reminded of by C.L.R. James’s *American Civilization*. The heart of James’s account is the understanding of mass production: for James, as for many modern social thinkers, Americanism was Fordism. But for James, in Fordism lies the future in the present, and it is worth following his argument about Fordist mass production. First, Fordism signifies *both* the assembly line and the family car, the creation of a new labor process and a new form of mass-produced culture. And the two central chapters of James’s study are the ones on the labor process and the popular arts. I stress this old story because it is in danger of being lost in much of contemporary cultural studies. Cultural studies as an intellectual and political formation was built in a variety of places around the creative tension between the analysis of the labor process – one needs to recall the

extraordinary power of Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, with its analysis of the separation of conception and execution in mental and manual labor – and the analysis of mass culture. This was the dialectic around which Stanley Aronowitz’s classic *False Promises* (1971) was built – “trivialized work, colonized leisure” was the title of one of his central chapters. In the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, the work of Stuart Hall and others on the media developed in a vital tension with the work of Paul Willis and others on the labor process. And the early works of socialist-feminist cultural critique, like those of Barbara Ehrenreich, tied the labor processes of housework, of feminized occupations, of birth itself to the mass culture addressed to women. The catch phrase of contemporary cultural studies, “contested terrain,” originated in the studies of the labor process.

Too often, contemporary cultural studies reads the cultural commodities of postmodernism without interrogating the labor processes of post-Fordism, and James’s notes on American civilization remind us of the necessity to yoke the two, even though he is writing about the very heartlands of Fordism. For James sought the utopian promise in both sides of mass production. Though he was aware that the logic of mass production was to colonize leisure and trivialize work, he also maintained that “*mass production* has created a vast populace, literate, technically trained, conscious of itself and of its inherent right to enjoy all the possibilities of the society.”⁵

Thus, it is not class that is neglected in cultural studies, as critics of “identity politics” often assert. Cultural studies may rightly neglect class, if by that we mean an identity imagined to be prior to race, gender, ethnicity. But a critical understanding of class formations, class struggles, and the relation between work and culture, between the labor process and the popular arts, still seems to me the heart of an emancipatory cultural studies.

“A Study Might Be Made . . .”: Gramsci and Cultural Studies

For me, cultural studies and the work of Antonio Gramsci have always been connected. When I arrived at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies from Boston in 1978, I was told by one of my

fellow graduate students that I needed to read three books to get into the Centre's intellectual debates – Althusser's *Reading Capital*, Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* and Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* – a kind of catch-up primitive accumulation. A wave of Gramscianism had swept across New Left Marxism, and it became part of my vernacular. I am not a Gramsci scholar, but I have reread and taught the *Prison Notebooks* many times over the last twenty years, retailing what I got wholesale at the Centre, the now “old school” cultural studies interpretation of Gramsci associated with the powerful essays of Stuart Hall, and the Gramsci reader edited by David Forgacs.⁶

At the time Gramsci had little presence in the United States; the Frankfurt School dominated left cultural theory and I came to Birmingham full of Marcuse, Benjamin, and Adorno. Most of the American interpretations of Gramsci then available made him sound like an Italian Marcuse. Twenty years later, things have not shifted that much: the new translation of Benjamin's complete Arcades project has drawn much more attention and interest than Joseph Buttigieg's ongoing translation of the complete *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci has had his American moments – the late 1980s controversy over hegemony among US historians (discussed above in chapter six); the reconsideration of Gramsci by Edward Said and other postcolonial critics; the 1990s interest of *boundary 2* in Gramscian writing; even the discovery of Gramsci by Rush Limbaugh and the right – but in general Gramsci is a minor presence. One might think that Gramsci's ideas have been absorbed but, aside from hegemony (a word that is fully American, emanating from international relations programs: one never needed Gramsci to speak a phrase like American hegemony), few of his keywords – historical bloc, national-popular, war of position, passive revolution – have become part of the intellectual vocabulary. An optimist of the will might say that we are in a trough, having long registered the impact of the classic *Selections*, while new interpretations await the completion of the translation of the critical edition.

I want not to offer a new interpretation of Gramsci nor to revive the debate over the British cultural studies interpretation of Gramsci, but to discuss Gramsci's work and the formation of research agendas in cultural studies. For the *Prison Notebooks* are full of research agendas; Gramsci is

always saying: “A study might be made . . .”; “it must first be shown . . .”; “it is necessary to study . . .”⁷ The notebooks are always beginning projects. I would suggest that the reason there are so many different Gramscis in circulation is not because his ideas are half-formed, elusive, and expressed in contradictory formulations but because he offers so many starting points. Gramsci's influence is often registered less by particular concepts or ideas than by starting points. One of the lasting influences of Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's edition, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, was their accenting of one particular Gramscian starting point: the plan to write a history of Italian intellectuals. Setting the passages on intellectuals and education at the beginning of their selection was not only an opening to the student New Left of 1971; it also contributed to the continuing focus on intellectuals and education in the English-language absorption of Gramsci – “organic intellectual” is probably the best-known Gramscian keyword in English.

A different Gramscian starting point oriented Ranajit Guha's famous preface to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*: citing the passage from Notebook 25 where Gramsci outlines the way “it is necessary to study” the subaltern classes, Guha writes that “it will be idle of us, of course, to hope that the range of contributions to this series may even remotely match the six-point project envisaged by Antonio Gramsci in his ‘Notes on Italian History’.”⁸

For me, the impact of Gramsci has also been largely in starting points; reading Gramsci is often an exercise in clarifying how one should begin a study: what questions need be asked, what concepts reconsidered, what should be the, to use a favorite phrase of Gramsci, “methodological criteria.” Three such Gramscian starting points have influenced me; I cite them not because they are necessarily the correct or best starting points, but because I have found them useful for thinking through the project of cultural studies.

The first was relatively direct: in the famous *für ewig* letter of 1927, where Gramsci outlined four ideas for “intense systematic study,” he proposed “an essay on *feuilletons* [serial novels] and popular taste in literature.” That unfinished project took hold among a group of us at Birmingham – one member even translated some of the key passages on

popular literature that were later to appear in *Selections from Cultural Writings* – as we wrestled with the turn to popular literature studies within Marxist and feminist literary criticism. Gramsci's proposed project – an analysis of the “particular illusion that the serial novel provides, . . . its real way of day-dreaming,” and an investigation of the place of popular fiction in working-class culture (he noted the “social obligation” to know the novel that the *Stampa* was publishing) – was almost unprecedented in the socialist tradition, breaking not only from the social-democratic conceptions of *Bildung* and *Kultur* which would appropriate the heritage of Beethoven, Goethe, and Schiller for workers, but also from the avant-gardism of the proletarian culture movement. One of the key notes was the critique of Paul Nizan's account of revolutionary literature:

Nizan does not know how to deal with so-called “popular literature,” that is with the success of serial literature . . . among the masses. . . . And yet, it is this question that represents the major part of the problem of a new literature as the expression of moral and intellectual renewal, for only from the readers of serial literature can one select a sufficient and necessary public for creating the cultural base of a new literature.

“The most common prejudice,” Gramsci continues, “is this: that the new literature has to identify itself with an artistic school of intellectual origins, as was the case with Futurism.” However, “the premiss of the new literature cannot but be historical, political and popular”; it must “sink its roots into the humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies and with its moral and intellectual world.” This project of Gramsci's reverberated with those of us on the rebound from a variety of New Left avant-gardisms and experimentalisms, and lay behind the work of the CCCS English Studies group and my own study of American dime novels and working-class culture.⁹

An explicit Gramscian starting point also guided my study of the culture of the Popular Front social movement of mid-century United States, *The Cultural Front*, a title I borrowed in part from Gramsci's draft essay on Croce. The US 1930s – the period of the New Deal and the old left – are a kind of American Risorgimento, a passive revolution from above, an incomplete and failed popular struggle that has haunted later generations

just as the Italian Risorgimento of the 1830s and 1860s haunted Gramsci: most of his lists of projects included a study of “the Age of Risorgimento.” In both cases, one begins from a crisis: “a crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades.” In the famous note, “Analysis of Situations. Relations of Force,” from Notebook 13, Gramsci explores several “principles of historical methodology.” “It is the problem of the relations between structure and superstructure which must be accurately posed and resolved,” Gramsci writes, “if the forces which are active in the history of a particular period are to be correctly analysed.” Moreover, “when a historical period comes to be studied, the great importance of [the] distinction” between organic movements and conjunctural ones “becomes clear.” This double articulation – on the one hand, imagining the social whole, on the other, characterizing historical moments or periods – remain at the heart of any serious cultural studies, and Gramsci's great trope of the “historical bloc” is one of the most imaginative attempts to bring them together. “Historical bloc,” like many useful theoretical terms, has two distinct meanings: it connotes both an alliance of social forces and a specific social formation. It serves, in its limited sense, as the name for a conjunctural assembly of forces – like the historical blocs represented by the names of Tony Blair or George W. Bush – and, in its expanded sense, as the name for the entire social formation, the totality made up of base and superstructure. The conceptual slippage or sleight of hand is brought off by the concept of hegemony, for a moment of hegemony is when a historical bloc in the first sense – a particular alliance of class fractions and social forces – is able to lead a society for a period of time, winning consent through a form of representation, and thereby establishing an historical bloc in the second sense – a specific social formation. In such moments, one often finds the historical period taking its name from the social alliance, as in the case of the New Deal, at once Roosevelt's successful political alliance and the common term for the United States in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰

However, if Gramsci's methodological criteria helped formulate a way of thinking about the organic and conjunctural, the structure and superstructure of the New Deal “passive revolution,” the plan of *The Modern Prince* outlined in “Brief Notes on Machiavelli's Politics” is, for me, the heart of Gramsci's cultural studies, and the place I begin when teaching the

Prison Notebooks. "Two basic points," he writes, "should structure the entire work": the formation of a national-popular collective will – "when can the conditions for awakening and developing a national-popular collective will be said to exist?" – and the "question of intellectual and moral reform." The first point opens up Gramsci as a socialist theorist of classes, parties, social movements and subaltern groups: the five-point project for analyzing a social movement at the end of "Some Theoretical and Practical Aspects of 'Economism,'" in Notebook 13, is a brilliant counterpart to the six-point project for analyzing the subaltern classes that Guha noted. The second point opens up Gramsci's understanding of "conceptions of the world" and the "cultural movements" that seek "to replace common sense and old conceptions of the world." It is in the context of these cultural movements that the specific analyses of intellectuals and education make sense. Moreover, Gramsci's conception of Marxism, the philosophy of praxis, as such a movement of intellectual and moral renewal, remains the most vital way of understanding any contemporary Marxism.¹¹

My own attempt to unravel the moment of "a national-popular collective will" that took shape in the Popular Front social movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and to understand the "intellectual and moral renewal" attempted by its cultural front, was profoundly shaped by this Gramscian starting point, this research agenda. But in doing so, I was also struck by the fact that Gramsci was not alone in turning to the cultural front. Gramsci's prison writings of the 1930s were paralleled by the work of a number of socialist intellectuals trying to forge a theory of culture. In fact, it is arguable that before mid-century, there was no specifically Marxist theory of culture, the way there was, from Mehring and Plekhanov to Christopher Caudwell and Ernst Fischer, a Marxist aesthetics. Culture as a term belonged to two great modernist traditions – the literary and humanistic notion of culture as *sweetness and light* and the anthropological notion of culture as *customs and morals*. The postmodern concept of culture – distant from *arts and letters* and *customs and morals* – comes out of reflection on the cultural industries and the state cultural apparatuses, what Gramsci and others called the cultural front. This inaugurates cultural studies, not as an academic discipline, but as the critical reflection on the culture industries

and the cultural apparatuses. This is why the pioneering works of that epoch – Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, James's *American Civilization*, and Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* – remain closer to us than Eliot's *Notes toward a Definition of Culture* or Kroeber and Kluckhohn's *Culture*. As long as we are faced with this culture, Gramsci remains a starting point not only methodologically, but historically, part of the infinity of traces that the historical process has deposited in us.

What Kind of Politics is Cultural Politics?

What kind of politics is cultural politics? No politics, many would say. The idea of a cultural politics is not popular these days. In the United States, we regularly hear fellow activists and militants complaining that the turn to culture and the popularity of cultural studies has distracted people from real political organizing and issues of political economy. "If the 30s left had undersold culture," Terry Eagleton has quipped, "the postmodern left overvalued it." And one can be excused from wondering how culture could be a political practice in a world where the global cultural market is dominated by a handful of world-spanning corporations – Disney, Sony, News Corp, AOL-Time Warner, and the like (Viacom, Vivendi, Bertelsmann); where styles of subcultural resistance seem to be immediately appropriated and marketed by the entertainment industry; and where even a radical cultural politics often takes the form of celebrity endorsement.¹²

Of course, the notion of cultural politics has always had an unavoidable ambiguity: is it a cultural *politics* or a politics that is *merely* cultural? What is the relationship of cultural expression and resistance to organized radical or revolutionary politics? Can cultural resistance effect social transformation? In order to avoid idealizing local or popular culture as revolutionary, how can we understand what constitutes and contributes to emancipatory social change?¹³

Cultural studies, or Marxist cultural critique in the age of three worlds, began from the understanding of cultural politics from above: how cultural industries and state cultural apparatuses fought the class war, so to speak,

through cultural interventions. It focused its attention on policing and disciplining of subjects through the mass media, the educational system, and the prisons. The formative generation of New Left intellectuals whose work lay the ground of cultural studies looked at processes of reproduction (Bourdieu), hegemony (Hall), ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser), discipline (Foucault), subject formation, and cultural imperialism (Dorfman and Mattelart). The major New Left alternative to this version of the politics of culture lay in the pioneering accounts of the role of culture in revolutionary and postrevolutionary struggles for national liberation: one thinks of the influential essays of Fanon and Amílcar Cabral, the work of C.L.R. James (relatively unknown at the time), and the potent metaphor of cultural revolution coming from Maoist China. But the imaginative divide between First and Third World, between the space of incorporation and that of revolution, meant that these tricontinental concepts of cultural politics had little impact on North Atlantic cultural analysis. Indeed, the emblem of the postcolonial turning point in North Atlantic cultural studies, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, was more Foucaultian than Cabralist in its sense of cultural politics, stressing the cultural processes by which political – imperial – power was secured.

In the 1980s, a number of figures tried to theorize cultural resistance, often in Gramscian terms. But the rise of a neoliberal “market populism” or consumer populism and a fairly indiscriminate use of the term “resistance” made these Gramscian invocations of the popular ring hollow. Much of the contemporary skepticism about cultural politics derives from this “crisis of the popular”: if shopping or watching television can be understood as forms of cultural resistance, haven't we lost any sense of an effective politics?

Thus, for the most part our understanding of cultural politics remains crudely dichotomous, stuck in binaries of social control and resistance, incorporation and subversion, and we often get lost in what Priya Gopal called “a general stew of inchoate resistance-talk.”¹⁴ Haunting these binaries were the old and inadequate habits of separating false consciousness from enlightened class consciousness, and reactionary from progressive art. Raymond Williams's fourfold scheme of alternative, oppositional, residual, and emergent cultures was often cited, since it seemed to offer a step beyond

the simple binaries, but it was rarely used systematically because it was too like a simple genre classification. To label a culture or subculture – rave, ethnic studies, or surfing – as alternative, oppositional, residual, or emergent was more subtle than praising or denouncing it as progressive or reactionary, but the logic was not dissimilar.

We need, I think, an account of what we might call, following Ranajit Guha, the elementary forms of cultural politics, the fundamental moves on the cultural front, the equivalent of Foucault's analysis of the simple forms of discipline. As a contribution to such an analysis, I would suggest that there are three moments, or levels, of cultural politics: cultural resistance, the struggle for cultural justice, and cultural revolution. Each has its own forms, importance, and political meaning; however, to confuse or conflate them leads us to mistake the point of cultural politics.

The first moment, or level, of cultural politics is the moment of resistance. If domination is, as James Scott suggests in his study of the arts of domination and the arts of resistance, “the use of power to extract work, production, services, taxes against the will of the dominated” and resistance is thus the effort at “minimizing the exactions, labor and humiliations to which [subordinates] are subject,” perhaps cultural resistance should be kept, as a concept, to precisely those acts of ideological insubordination which, openly or secretly, minimize symbolic humiliations and refuse to pay what Scott calls “symbolic taxes,” the assent and respect claimed by both a high culture consisting largely of the valuable objects the wealthy have collected and display in museums, universities, and concert halls, and a popular culture consisting largely of the latest speculative investments of culture industry producers in digitized sound and picture.¹⁵

Thus cultural resistance ranges from cutting school and defacing billboards with graffiti to violations of public taste by forms of clothing, hair style, manners of speech, and high-volume boomboxes. At times, these forms of cultural resistance may cement small communities of resistance, what cultural studies came to call subcultures, a term which connotes not the culture of a part – a minority, regional, or occupational culture – but a culture underneath the main culture, somewhere between the underground and the mainstream. Widespread forms of cultural resistance may serve to unite countercultures, those moments – historically associated with the

1920s and 1960s – when a wide range of subcultures adopted by young people merge into a generational structure of feeling. Nevertheless, even in these moments, cultural resistance remains akin to classic forms of material resistance – pilfering, sabotage, slowdowns, monkey wrenching – and it has an analogous complex relation to organized political struggles.

For the most part, cultural bureaucrats like ourselves – teachers, artists, activists – do not practice cultural resistance (in fact, we too often practice the arts of cultural domination). But an emancipatory cultural studies should always pay close attention to these practices, not to congratulate ourselves on our taste for resistance, but to understand what is taking place in the culture.

The second moment, or level, of cultural politics – and much of what we think of when we use the term “cultural politics” – is more properly called the struggle for cultural justice, a term I borrow from Andrew Ross. It is a more accurate name for what state bureaucrats call affirmative action; it is closely related to the so-called identity politics of the liberation movements; and it is named by contemporary political philosophy as the politics of recognition. It is here we find the struggles to reassert the dignity of despised cultural identifications: the assertion that black is beautiful, that gay and lesbian romance and sexuality are as central to our collective narratives (novels, movies, pop songs) as are heterosexual marriage and adultery, that art forms practiced by women are not “minor” forms, that speakers of minority languages have rights to cultural autonomy and representation. This battle for cultural justice has a long tradition, and it includes the proletarian cultural movements and folk culture revivals that flourished around the world in the early twentieth century, stressing the dignity of working people and their cultural practices.¹⁶

At this level of cultural politics, we see the characteristic forms of self-organization by artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers: writers’ unions, theater groups, and so forth. Here again there are several distinct aspects that might be identified. First, there are the avant-gardes, those experimental, intentionally nonpopular cultural innovations, many of which prove idiosyncratic, flukes, passing fads, but some of which open the doors of perception. Second, there are movement cultures, when alliances are built between particular social movements and particular cultural formations,

when particular songs become anthems, and when movement cultural institutions – night schools, bookstores, little theaters – are created. Third, there are the struggles within the institutions of mass culture: the culture industries and the state cultural apparatuses. These include not only struggles to reshape the content of popular culture, but the struggles for the rights of cultural workers, for free expression, and for culture industry unions. It also includes the struggles for equal access to the institutions of cultural production and cultural distribution: schools, museums, film and recording studios. The historic breaking of color, gender, and class bars are fundamental parts of this kind of cultural politics, and the battles for affirmative action and diversity in admissions to cultural institutions remain crucial, if only a scratching of the surface of what is needed. Imagine sabbaticals for working people at our universities, so as to support forms of adult and continuing education; indeed, as Raymond Williams often reminded us, cultural studies itself was invented *not* in the university, but in the labor movement’s own institutions of further education.

The struggle for cultural justice is also a struggle to reshape the selective traditions that determine which works of art and culture will be preserved, kept in print, taught to young people, and displayed in museums, and which cans of film will be housed, whose manuscripts and letters will be archived and indexed. These struggles for cultural justice have been the center of the most visible “culture wars” and they are the place where cultural bureaucrats like us – artists, writers, teachers, and activists – are most directly involved. This is the realm of the battle over the relations of representation.

Out of these organized forms of struggle for cultural justice and the sometimes unorganized forms of popular cultural resistance may come a third moment, or level, of cultural politics: the formation of a new culture, a new “conception of the world,” as Gramsci put it, a cultural revolution. This is the least predictable form of cultural politics and a reminder of why cultural activists like ourselves must have a certain humility; the history of the left is littered with examples of left-wing cultural bureaucrats unable to recognize and support new forms of art, new cultures, even in revolutionary moments.

Indeed, the Marxist understanding of revolution has always been marked

by a hesitation, and ambiguity, between two notions of revolution: political revolution and the revolutionizing of modes of production. And cultural revolution also holds these two senses. It is at once the term for those epochal and world historical moments usually associated with political revolutions, when the world is turned upside down, new calendars are invented, old statues torn down and new ones erected. These volcanic cultural revolutions are relatively rare, and are always difficult to assess and understand. But it is also the term for that massive transformation of human lives and activities that accompanies changes in modes of production. This may take generations to come to fruition, as new forms and media are invented, new ways of living and clothing the body develop: this is what Raymond Williams meant by the "long revolution." However, this form of cultural revolution has also been lived and experienced over the last two centuries by migrants whose journeys have taken them from one end of the capitalist world-system to the other.

The point of this brief elaboration of the elementary forms of cultural politics is to get us beyond the simple dichotomies of incorporation and subversion, the ritual invocation of resistance. We should not, in our justifiable anger at the trivialization of cultural studies and cultural politics, give up the sense that there are forms of cultural politics that are irreducible to the politics of the workplace, the state, or the household. Understanding and distinguishing these three moments of cultural politics – cultural resistance, the struggle for cultural justice, and cultural revolution – may help us avoid an unwarranted triumphalism and a paralyzing despair.

PART THREE

THE AMERICAN IDEOLOGY: THE AGE OF THREE WORLDS AS THE AMERICAN CENTURY