

On the political responsibilities of cultural studies¹

Lawrence GROSSBERG

I begin with a single premise: the project of cultural studies is to tell better stories about what's going on, and to begin to enable imagining new possibilities for a future that can be reached from the present – one more humane and just than that promised by the trajectories we find ourselves on. Cultural studies then is a form of conjunctural analysis, which re-describes a context, often viewed with some sense of pessimism and even despair, into one of possibilities, by rejecting all forms of simplification and reduction, and embracing the complexity, contradiction and contingency of the world. This is, I assume, what Williams had in mind when he spoke of 'making hope practical, rather than despair convincing' (Williams 1983: 240). One has to understand what is happening in order to figure out how to go about changing it: 'It seems to me that the dimension of what is to be done can only appear within a field of real forces ... If you want to struggle, here are some key points, here some lines of forces, here are some constrictions and blockages ... Of course [you need] to know on what field of real forces we need to get our bearings in order to make a tactically effective analysis' (Foucault 2007: 3). The question of politics is not where we want to be but how we get from where we are to where we want to be, hopefully in fundamentally democratic ways, which prevent us from imposing our moral certainties on others, and sliding into what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the micro-fascisms inside all of us. If bad stories make bad politics, then better stories, while not guaranteeing better politics, open the imagination – of both possibilities and strategies.

Yet politics is never entirely pragmatic, nor is it ever completely determined by the exigencies of the present since it depends, deeply and constitutively, on political desires and ethical commitments that are, I believe, at least partly outside the realm of rational or perhaps even intellectual adjudication. Strategic questions lean on more basic, normative questions. We live in an age when it is increasingly difficult not only to distinguish the ethical and the political (which is not to say that it was ever particularly easy) but also to escape the dual traps of universalism and relativism.² But still, such normative questions cannot be disconnected from the analysis of the present conjuncture, for they are shaped by what it is possible to imagine in the present, and how imagination itself is articulated to contemporary realities and desires.

At the same time, in much of the academic world of the North Atlantic, it seems to me, cultural studies (along with many other formations of so-called political-intellectual work) has succumbed on the one hand to the deep habits of the university (reifying theory and discipline) and on the other hand, to the strident demand of political urgency. It is the latter I want to talk about here.

What is the place of political values and ethical commitments in scholarly work, especially in the light of the powerful contemporary mandate, even the demand, in contemporary academic and intellectual spaces, to be political (and 'politically correct') at any and every moment? This demand takes its most benign form in the claims of engaged scholarship and activist research, and its most malignant forms in the saturation of all knowledge with

political identifications. It is the product of two independent commitments: first, a necessary rejection, embodied in cultural studies and elsewhere, of the claims of epistemological universalism and objectivity; and second, an unfortunate and rather unreflective polarizing practice of critical analysis, which replaces the complexities of Foucault's theory of the inseparability of knowledge and power with the simple assumption of a guaranteed relation between explicit political agendas and identities on the one hand, and the forms and contents of knowledge claims on the other.

I want to consider carefully what it means to say that cultural studies is inherently political, that it is defined and driven by its politics. It is *inherently* political because its very effort to study conjunctures and the effectivities of discourses means that it cannot avoid coming face to face with questions of power – and hence, that its efforts, whether consciously embraced or not, will always be engaged with relations of power. In a sense then, one cannot choose not to change the world, for that choice is actually a choice to leave unexamined and unchallenged the existing relations of power, certainly a political choice. The only choices are how self-consciously one approaches this work, and to what end. Insofar as cultural studies seeks to tell better stories aimed at enabling people to imagine other – better – possibilities for the future as well as other – better – strategies to advance the struggle for such possibilities, politics is unavoidably present in the project of cultural studies. Yet it requires us to hold onto the distinction between doing political and intellectual work. It is a premise of cultural studies that knowledge – ideas and analyses – matter. Cultural studies is about the vital role of knowledge in undoing any claim of necessity, and about seeing, opening and realizing possibilities:

Cultural studies' message is a message for academics and intellectuals but, fortunately, for many other people as well. In that sense I have tried to hold together in my own intellectual life, on

the one hand the conviction and passion and the devotion to *objective* interpretation, to analysis, to *rigorous* analysis and understanding, to the passion to find out, and to the production of knowledge that we did not know before. But, on the other hand, I am convinced that no intellectual worth his or her salt and no university that wants to hold up its head in the face of the 21st century, can afford to turn dispassionate eyes away from the problem ... understand what keeps making the lives we live and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihumane. (Hall 1992: 18; emphasis in original)

I believe that what Hall means here by 'objectivity' is that we must put our responsibility to the world above our responsibility to our theories or politics, that we must allow the world to answer back to us and even to say no. We must accept that the world is never simply the product of our discursive or political desires. I am suggesting that we hold together the two sides of Stengers' view of knowledge: first, to recognize that 'the singularity of scientific arguments is that they involve third parties. Whether they be human or nonhuman is not essential ... the intervention and production of these reliable witnesses' (Stengers 1977: 85). This enables a kind of rigor that can 'speak of the world without passing through the Kantian tribunal' (Stengers 1977: 54). And at the same time, second, it is not the function of knowledge to 'ratify ... a state of affairs but [to] subject ... it to the corrosive dynamics of what could be' (Stengers 1977: 143).

But this still leaves unanswered the question of the place and content of specific political values and commitments in cultural studies. I want to take an unpopular – but also incomplete – position, that it is not our job as analysts of the contemporary to offer a normative politics or even morally based political judgments, although it is probably inevitable (and perhaps good) that we constantly inscribe our own normative positions into our work, as long as such positions do not drive

the content of the knowledge we produce. Still it is not my job – as a critical scholar – to tell people what they should be or should desire. There has to be a difference between scholarship (telling a better story) – analyzing particular formations and mechanisms of power and subjecting them to the challenges of complexity, contingency and possibility – and the statement of political values and enactment of political action, where the latter refers, rather naively for the moment, to collective action aiming to transform the institutions and operations of power and the political. After all, ideas cannot be directly equated to political action, and academic work operates with a different spatio-temporality than political action. At the very least, if everything is political, they are not political in the same way.

The politics of cultural studies are located in the first and the last instances. In the first instance, it is political in relation to the questions it asks. While conjunctures pose their own questions, what we hear is partly determined by our political position-alities. In the last instance, its politics appear at the end of its story, which fabricates the context anew and, in addressing its problematic, opens new possibilities, both imaginative and strategic, for getting somewhere else. But conjunctural analysis does not have a single, guaranteed ethico-political foundation, nor can the political implications of its analyses be guaranteed in advance. At the very least, one cannot control how the stories one tells will be taken up in the name of political struggles.

In the contemporary conjuncture, we need to rethink the grounds and claims of academic authority, responsibility and credibility. Between the first and last instance, in the analytic work of constructing a better story of what is going on, authority is constructed and increasingly lost, responsibility is taken and increasingly abandoned. Unfortunately, I do not have a simple answer for how this is to be done. I am not suggesting we return to notions of value-free knowledge, or correspondence theories of truth. But the all-too-common

unreflective politicization of knowledge, enacted by empowering moral judgments and political desires as conceptual tools or analytic conclusions, only substitutes moral self-righteousness for the difficult and risky work of allowing oneself to be surprised. Some people argue that knowledge is directly political because discourse itself is constructive or performative. Are we not then obliged to construct reality – and produce knowledge – according to a set of ethico-political commitments? But such a conclusion oversimplifies the complex relations of multiple discourses and non-discursive realities, and ignores the many kinds of performances discourses enact as part of the very realities they help to constitute.

However, I am not claiming that there is a clear or simple distinction between intellectual and political work (as might, for example, Stanley Fish). As I have said, the questions from which we begin respond to political demands, even as we seek answers that may open up new political possibilities. Obviously, the work that takes place between these political demands and desires is shaped by this trajectory, but I believe it is necessary to push against the sometimes-overwhelming force of such political concerns and to remain committed to telling the best story possible, where ‘the best’ is not defined simply by its correspondence to our political judgments and desires. Politics too often seems to pull analyses in directions *it* has determined, creating a neurotic sense of inadequacy in which we assume that if we could just be political enough, in just the right way, we could guarantee the political register and efficacy of our analysis, even that our work would be seen as being as political as any other political action.

Instead, we need to accept there is no right story, no perfect story, and no complete or finished story. We need to be more modest about what we think we know or understand, and about what we are competent to investigate or claim (and political commitment or judgment does not constitute competence). Similarly, practice

(or process) does not guarantee either the 'truth' of a story or the validity of a political position. The conflation of ontology with conjunctural politics is simply the most recent way politics trumps intellectual labor. An ontology of becoming does not guarantee the elimination of politics. By identifying a set of analytical concepts – contingency, multiplicity, fluidity, intensities, etc – with political values, such concepts morph from tools to think with to what look like viable political possibilities. But I doubt that anyone chooses to die for fluidity or multiplicity, although many have been killed for enacting them. The authority of knowledge cannot and should not be presented as directly based on or translatable into moral authority or political privilege. Winning people to specific moral values and political visions is a different task than persuading them about the value of the story I am telling.

If the relationship between knowledge (research) and politics is itself contextual, we need to find or invent modes of knowledge production that will be effective in responding to contemporary problem-spaces and struggles, which I have in other places described as struggles over the 'coming' modernities. Obviously, insofar as the questions we ask are shaped by our political values and desires, insofar as we are continuously using not only such values and desires but also our own analyses to offer criticisms of the existing organizations of power, insofar as politics is interwoven into our stories, and insofar as politics is pushing us forward, politics is at the heart of cultural studies. But its soul must be its faith in 'knowledge,' ideas and better stories.

I am aware that I am still deferring the question of concrete political commitments in cultural studies. Of course, since I do not think that cultural studies has any necessary politics – that there can be and in fact is conservatively inflected cultural studies, I do not think there is any necessary answer to this question. I refuse to believe that it is possible to define one proper relation to power or one set of political commitments.

However, perhaps it will help if I say something about my commitments. I have already suggested that I think the political responsibility of the intellectual is defined, first, by the effort to de-naturalize the present and open up the future. In other words, the political intellectual is above all committed to the reality of change itself. I also believe, however, that one's political desires and sense of obligations cannot be entirely bracketed, even if they have to be held at bay. I do believe that we have an obligation to leave the world a better place, and I believe that requires us to try to enable others – everyone – to be able to fulfill that obligation as well. This second condition provides some content to what constitutes 'better,' since it requires us to seek a world in which all people have the material conditions of survival, the political conditions of freedom and justice, and the intellectual conditions of education and expression, as the basis for such a task.³

But I also believe in what I might call the ethical responsibility of the intellectual, grounded in a commitment to the intellectual conversation as a necessarily never-ending effort to belong with, to accept (and one might go so far as to say, to love) the other. While my intellectual commitment is to the conversation, my ethical commitment is to the other, to the belonging together with the other (as what both Heidegger and Foucault in very different ways call 'care'). That is, my own ethical sense is constituted as an obligation to an other, which cannot be too close (family, nation) or too far (god). Rather, the other is what can only be imagined – as a coming community, as a planetary humanity – in its absence, while its presence can only be embraced in its concrete embodiment in every particular instance (in every individual or community). We engage with power for the sake of the other, an other that is always unknown but knowable, always abstract and yet concretized. This is the obligation to imagine an other world, and to an imagination that can only be produced through the concrete effort to bring it about, to embody it in the concrete practice of relationship as

belonging together. And it is there that ethics and politics, practice and desire, meet. This is, I believe, what Fanon called 'planetary humanism.'

Such an ethico-politics is not separate from the cognitive work of cultural studies. After all, conjunctures are not, in my opinion, defined by spatio-temporal boundaries. They are defined by the articulation of various vectors, contradictions and struggles, an articulation always accomplished to some extent in the work of the analyst him- or her-self. Insofar as those trajectories neither begin nor end in any single national formation, conjunctural analysis is always confronting a changing and open-ended geography, more about the lines of becoming across space than the lines of enclosure within space (although the latter cannot be ignored). But if conjunctures pose their own problems, constituting themselves as 'problem spaces,' then we are faced with a new set of dilemmas, involving the practice of doing conjunctural analyses even as one is inevitably being moved across and between conjunctures. This sharply magnifies the challenges that conjunctural analysis poses to the deep habits of the academy.

How do we create questions, vocabularies and concepts that sufficiently capture the complexity of forces, technologies and struggles operating in the midst of numerous struggles over, and transitions among, different visions and formations of possible futures? How do we imagine questions and languages that sufficiently capture multi-polar, multi-temporal and multi-scalar webs of connectivity, relationality, and difference, which are driving the creation of contemporary geo-economic, political and cultural formations and spaces, and new subjectivities and collectivities within and across them? How do we open '[t]he capacity to hear that which one does not already understand' (Chakrabarty 2002: 37), which depends on the recognition that 'other temporalities, other forms of worlding, coexist and are possible' (Chakrabarty 2000: 95).

I want to take my lead from the pragmatists' idea that the intellectual life

involves participating in a conversation, but with the recognition that we always speak from the particularity of our own context even as we speak with other singularities, and with the recognition that a certain globality is unavoidably a part of the any contemporary problematic. This conversation involves many voices and contexts, many discourses and knowledges. It must be both geographically diverse and interdisciplinary, so we have to think about whom we want to think and speak with, and the forms and practices of heteroglossia and translation that can animate such conversations. We must accept at the outset that they will be ongoing, incomplete, uneven and inconsistent. They have to go beyond the recognition that answers are determined by the 'location' of the researcher, to embrace the more fundamental challenge that questions are similarly determined. Thus, if we want to converse across the particularities of contexts, we have to find new ways of asking questions. And yet we must be careful not to confuse the conversational practice of knowledge production with the assumption that knowledge production must embody its own political commitment to 'radical democracy.'

Conversations are more difficult than we like to admit, and the kinds of conversations I am talking about will challenge many of our practices as academics and intellectuals. We have to give up the model of the singular heroic intellectual, and to stop thinking that our success, our intellectual accomplishments, can only be built on the devastation and ruins of other people's work. Our contributions should be measured by our participation in the collaborative conversation, not by claims of originality and difference, which can only be established by demonstrating the utter failure of everyone else (except of course for a privileged few, usually including one's mentors and friends). We need to respect each other as allies and interlocutors and recognize that different theories, methods and even politics are not necessarily in opposition, that they each make some things visible and others invisible, give

voice to some things and silence others. Therefore, sectarianism – whether political or theoretical – and accusations of ‘complicity with the enemy’ have no place in the conversations, even while argument and even passionate disagreement are necessary modalities of this conversation.

We can learn from and with the many efforts, past and present, to establish intellectual work as conversation, taking the measure of their successes and failures. We can notice how easy it is for habits and institutional norms to undermine the efforts at conversation, which become: too sporadic; too sharply divided between theory and empirics, the general and the specific, the global and the local; too comparative – constrained by assuming the questions and the normativity of the allegedly universal knowledge practices and epistemologies of euro-modernity and its institutions; and too beholden to the disciplines as the sole guardians of knowledge and judgment.

This conversation depends on our willingness and ability to speak and listen across many of the taken for granted boundaries of intellectual work, to work with knowledge producers who are: outside the academy, from think tanks and NGOs to social movements (a trans-institutional conversation);⁴ producing other kinds of knowledges (a trans-epistemic conversation); located elsewhere to us, across sedimented but shifting geo-political boundaries and locations (a trans-national and trans-regional conversation); living in different relations to the world, respecting that the world as such is not simply answerable to our theory and desires (a trans-ontological conversation); and finally, in other disciplines or in the spaces between disciplines (a trans-disciplinary conversation). This conversation will demand new practices of translation and commensuration that will enable its participants to reflect on their own geo-political, epistemological and disciplinary positions, and to question their questions, modes of inquiry, and pedagogies, even as it seeks to fabricate better stories of what’s going on. Making knowledge production into a conversation will require

that ‘long march through the institutions.’ We will have to join those movements around the world that are trying to change the university as centers of research and teaching, and even larger struggles to challenge the trajectories that locate and shape matters of culture, knowledge and education within contested social realities.

I am not proposing that cultural studies offers a new universal model for knowledge production and dissemination: I am not even proposing a new universal model for cultural studies. We need to abandon monological strategies and think about the possibilities of pluralization. We need to imagine multiple configurations, multiple organizations of intellectual work, education, and politics. I have to admit that I do not know what these conversations will look like, but I have, in recent years, pointed to the Inter-Asia network, not simply as a model but as the very possibility of such a conversation. I do not know what the outcome of such conversation will be, anymore than I know what other futures are possible, but I do know that we have to begin imagining them, to begin working toward them, and to begin doing the intellectual work that is a condition of possibility for strategic transformative struggles. We have to imagine a world in which many worlds can exist together. And we have to figure out what is going on, and how it has, for so long, prevented us from moving toward more humane realities. I have always thought of cultural studies as an invitation into such conversations, into the experimentation of collaboration, into a self-reflective practice of translation and transformation, and into an uncertain effort to build new institutional spaces. As such, it is difficult and enlivening, depressing and full of hope, modest and arrogant. It is for me one way of performing the political responsibility of the intellectual!

Notes

1. Much of this paper is taken directly from my forthcoming book, *We All Want to Change the World: The Political Labor of Cultural Studies*.

2. Of course this problem was posed very clearly by Lyotard (1984), whose only solution was entirely within the realm of culture: the only basis for declaring a language game illegitimate is that it negates the existence of other language games. Lyotard seems to miss the crucial appeal in Wittgenstein (1968) to the *lebensform*: language games are only sensible and justifiable in their relationship to a form of life.
3. This still leaves open, intentionally, two questions: first, how does one go about changing the world? Does one first change oneself or the social structure? This is a longstanding argument that divided the counterculture in the 1960s, and continues to trouble various cultural and political movements for change. Second, what is the geography of concern and action? How circumscribed is the relevant sphere of action: answers range from family and community to the nation and the world.
4. There is a lot of interesting and sophisticated analysis taking place outside the academy, around the Social Forum movement, the Global Justice movement, the precariat movement, etc.

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Author's biography

Lawrence Grossberg is Morris Davis Distinguished Professor of Communication Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Contact address: Department of Communication Studies, CB 3285, 115 Bingham Hall University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3285, USA.