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On not being at CCSS

Jo Littler

I wasn't a student at Birmingham, and I've never had an official institutional affiliation with a department solely named 'cultural studies'. But ever since I discovered what cultural studies *is*, at its best, rather than its pale populist imitations, it has always been the academic area I have been drawn to, and have identified with, most. I found out that it didn't just *allow* you to think about the relationship between contemporary culture and politics, it positively encouraged it! It said, *that's the point of your work*. That can be its purpose. It allowed you to put that dynamic right on the centre stage, and explore it with an openness to theoretical and methodological experimentation: with an openness to finding interesting new tools that fit the task rather than being servile to disciplinary boundaries. All this was for me made possible by the work people did in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham. This chapter discusses some of those legacies from the particular standpoint of someone who was never at CCCS, but who nonetheless kept finding out, with irritating regularity, that the most interesting academic roads seemed to lead back to it.

There are for me two particularly important features of cultural studies it is worth highlighting: first, its political investment in conjunctural analysis and second, its radical interdisciplinarity.<sup>1</sup> Some prefer the term 'multidisciplinarity' to interdisciplinarity' to indicate the range of disciplines cultural studies has drawn on; others prefer the more combative or disruptive terms trans- or anti-disciplinarity. As John Clarke has said in the excellent issue of *Cultural Studies* on CCCS, 'I think the multi- and interdisciplinary

formulation doesn't touch the *strangeness* of what was being done'. (Or as he put it another way: at CCCS 'they let you mess around'.<sup>ii</sup> In its CCCS formation, cultural studies tended to cross disciplinary boundaries with energetic disregard to take whatever it needed, its anti-disciplinary ethos disrupting the great tradition of elite conservatism. The range of disciplines that were drawn on -- or raided -- to produce work in cultural studies was wide, and often had knock-on effects by enlivening the areas drew it from.

Anti-or transdisciplinary 'messing around' does of course have longer histories. As I have discussed elsewhere, 'no-one could accuse Raymond Williams, for example, of being stuck in one single, unitary disciplinary rut'; but at CCCS

the degree to which people working under the sign of cultural studies felt able to rip up the disciplinary rulebook, and the collective energy with which they pursued these enquiries, was to prove profoundly influential in humanities and social sciences from the last few decades of the twentieth century onwards, where it helped propagate a wider interdisciplinary ethos in research, even if the siloed nature of teaching programmes often remained the same. For instance, cultural studies helped (and was part of the wider currents which helped) history become more open to cultural history, and more open to considerations of the psycho-social (eg Eley 2005); literature become more open to theoretical, sociological and historical contextualisations and interpretation (eg Dollimore and Sinfield 2012); and sociology become more inventive in its qualitative analysis (eg Skeggs 2004).<sup>iii</sup>

Like anyone else affected by it, I experienced the legacies of that interdisciplinary, conjunctural work from a very partial perspective or situated knowledge. My 'English and

Related Literature' undergraduate degree in the early 1990s was predominantly conservative with experimental fringes. This meant that whilst it was often fairly dull, enough cultural studies had percolated through from Birmingham for me to find it. I was able to come across the early edited collections on cultural studies – *Cultural Studies* and *The Cultural Studies Reader* -- in the bookshop<sup>iv</sup>; to hear about the interesting modules friends with better taste than me at that moment had taken (on lesbian and gay literature, for example); to find work by cultural studies' literary cousin, cultural materialism; and to meet postgraduates who talked of how you could do more of 'this cultural studies stuff' at Sussex. So I went there to do an MA and PhD. That was where one of my several long-suffering supervisors, Janice Winship, who had been a student and a producer of work at CCCS, let me 'mess around' and explore a variety of disciplines, much more than a lot of other PhD supervisors and institutions would today.<sup>v</sup> The most significant part of this academic journey wasn't so much my PhD as the process of finding out about cultural studies and figuring out ways, within particular institutional spaces, to be able to do it.

On the way I found out just how many roads led *to* CCCS at Birmingham (such as from the workers' education movement, and the new left) as well as beside it (Handel Wright makes a persuasive case for the Kamiriithu Centre in Kenya) and through, and beyond it (through those who left it to do innovative work in polytechnics, developed it in journalism, or translated it into/alongside national contexts outside the UK).<sup>vi</sup> And I found out more about how the work that had fermented in Birmingham at CCCS had opened up and helped reconfigure disciplines like history, and art and design, as well as helping spawn new ways of understanding the relationship between politics and culture as the terrain of lived experience and the space of possibility.

To mention this latter feature is to refer to that key characteristic of cultural studies, conjunctural analysis. Understanding 'the conjuncture' means understanding the particular power dynamics and character of a particular moment. What is specific about the moment we inhabit? What common-sense understandings, what economic decisions, power dynamics, what vested interests and collaborative terrains work to shape its contours? What does this constellation of forces look like? How are these power configurations different from before?

When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no 'going back'. History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment. You have to attend, 'violently', with all the 'pessimism of the intellect' at your command, to the 'discipline of the conjuncture'<sup>vii</sup>

Continually evoked and often maddeningly methodologically elusive, the analysis of the conjuncture has always been the central contribution of it as an (anti/trans)discipline and for many is its key project.<sup>viii</sup> Borrowed from the then-recently translated texts by Antonio Gramsci, 'the conjuncture' was a means of describing the specificity of economic, political and cultural forces at a given moment, in which both long-term organic and short-term changes in power relations are present, and as the place where political and cultural struggles are fought: a space where both established interests might defend themselves and 'the terrain upon which the forces of opposition organise'.<sup>ix</sup> This 1970s re-use of conjunctural analysis became a fairly open process in which a variety of additional theoretical tools were drawn upon as and when required.

Understanding 'the conjuncture' therefore became a malleable practice which tended to rely on some key cultural studies resources and influences. These have usually included: a strong commitment to the more equitable pooling of power and resources; a Gramscian

understanding of cultural hegemony, of the importance of culture in political persuasion, and of Gramsci's ideas of wars of position; a commitment to anti-essentialism, which refuses the reification of essentialist identity subject-positions (considering, for example, what a man/woman/white/old/ young person 'is' as historically specific and formed through culturally processes); a poststructuralist understanding of discourse which can be 'articulated' or connected in various different directions (so, for example, environmental discourse can be funneled through capitalism or anarchism); and an understanding of tendencies as dominant, residual or emergent.<sup>x</sup> On top of these tools, a wider range of theories are drawn from, created or sought for, depending on the subject and the people doing the work. Therefore, some cultural studies work which seeks to be 'conjunctural' in character might draw from the psycho-social; some on feminist activism; some on literary analysis; others on philosophy. All would try to use this multi-faceted investigation to consider the configurations of power which constitute contemporary life.<sup>xi</sup>

At CCCS and onwards, conjunctural analysis in its cultural studies formation therefore often used particular theoretical resources, insisted on interdisciplinary borrowing and emphasized the importance of thinking through the cultural and the political together (indeed, so much so that in many regards, a better term for 'cultural studies' might well be 'cultural politics'). One of the outcomes of this kaleidoscopic approach to theory and practice, filtered through a focus on the character of the conjuncture, and questioning how the shape of political-cultural terrains could be changed was the development of extracurricular projects outside the university. These spanned a wide range from club nights to art practice and community projects. One of the many vitalising joys of the 2014 *CCCS at 50* conference was how these extracurricular activities were entertainingly revisited through anecdotes about local

community activism, excerpts from Isaac Julien's film *Capital*, and Dick Hebdidge's flamboyant performance art.<sup>xii</sup>

Where might we look right now -- in this quite different climate -- to find other forms of conjunctural analysis, political commitment and theoretical and methodological experimentation that resonate with those which characterised CCCS, in order to find some resources of hope? What is the legacy of these forms of transdisciplinarity and experimental conjunctural analysis today?

I think we all know the contours of neoliberal constraints that work on and through the universities now – institutions pitted against each other through the utter snobbery and savage social distinction of league tables, compulsory careerist individualism atomisation, marketization, an elite cadre of tutors and an army of perma-temps, and increasingly socially polarised and massively indebted students.<sup>xiii</sup> In fact, when I typed 'CCCS' into Google, the first listing that came up was not the Birmingham centre, but a debt management organisation, the 'Consumer Credit Counselling Service'.<sup>xiv</sup>

In Britain departments and degrees in cultural studies are thin on the ground; even more so after the University of Birmingham axed CCCS.<sup>xv</sup> Cultural studies' influence spread through research whilst it contracted as a university discipline (not that it was ever huge in terms of student numbers in the first place). But I think we shouldn't forget how, in different ways, such practices were *always* hard, however easy they may look in retrospect. For instance, I was interested to come across a quote in the centre's 1969 report stating how 'we are poorly staffed and funded for such an ambitious project. Interdisciplinary work in the centre, in particular, is poorly placed and supported'.<sup>xvi</sup> The report also raises the issue that whilst

interdisciplinarity was paid ritual observance, in practice it was also very difficult: because it ran against defensive boundaries, established divisions of labour, deference and status between staff and students, even good manners.<sup>xvii</sup> Reading this, I thought: some things don't change so much. But equally, the stark differences are important. When reading about CCCS, one of the strikingly different characteristics today it is what would now be called the 'horizontalism' of much of its organisation; like, for example, its practice of students sitting on admissions panels.<sup>xviii</sup> Such practices have been made much more difficult through today's deadening hierarchical bureaucratic managerialism.<sup>xix</sup>

But whilst cultural studies as a discipline perhaps has less institutional space in terms of named degree courses, there are other ways it is being practised. Cultural studies involves the establishment of spaces where culture and power -- where the nature of the conjuncture -- can be explored through interdisciplinary openness and experimental methodologies and connected to actions and movements for progressive social and cultural change. Events and connections and courses -- and networks and assemblages -- can be created in all kinds of ways, wherever there is a crack of possibility, wherever we can. There are initiatives here that give me hope; not the false hope of 'cruel optimism', but instead the potential of existing practice to supply what Williams called 'resources of hope'.<sup>xx</sup> My list is short, partial, subjective and culturally and geographically limited. Other people's lists would be different.

For instance, ten years ago when I went to conferences and mentioned neoliberalism and popular culture, people would look at me like I was a freak from a strange political sect. Now at many conferences you cannot move for papers on neoliberal culture! Even taking into account criticisms of it being thrown in as a buzzword, or with the necessary provisos about the diverse quality that entails, there simply is a much more widespread and strong awareness



of the extent to which rampant corporate capitalism attempts to bulldoze over contemporary life. Plus, there is now such exciting work around unpacking ‘neoliberalism’ and its workings<sup>xxi</sup>. This encourages me. It encourages me that there is a renewed emergent academic engagement with activism: in several media departments there’s a rash of new undergraduate and postgraduate courses on media, activism and social change; and that there’s a new ‘activism in sociology’ forum in the British Sociology Association.

Cultural studies never made a lot of headway connecting to politics departments; but at Brighton University in the UK there’s a centre for PPE which is politics, philosophy and *ethics*, rather than the traditional technocratic politician’s training ground of politics, philosophy and economics; and in 2015 they ran a large conference on neoliberal culture. It encourages me that there’s widespread student discontent with the way economics is being taught. In 2014, after economics students at the University of Manchester created the *Post-Crash Economics Society* to protest at the narrow curriculum which they see as failing to address global financial instability and climate change, they joined forces with like-minded students from 19 different countries.<sup>xxii</sup> It encourages me that there are networks like the New Economy Organiser’s Network (NEON) connecting activists with each other and with academics. It encourages me that in the UK, students have set up their own free art MA, the School of the Damned, overseen by a board of academic advisors in protest of unaffordable education ‘and a plutocratic state’.<sup>xxiii</sup>

CCCS demonstrated that cultural studies needed to reach beyond the academy. Today it encourages me that alongside established networks and publications and journals – which for me are spaces like *Crossroads in Cultural Studies*, *Cultural Studies*, *New Formations* and *Soundings* - there are newer media outlets like Zero Books, which put out long

pamphlets/short books which mix polemic, politics and a vibrant use of theory; and the burgeoning zone of podcasts on cultural politics, including Novara FM, *The Cultural Studies Podcast* and *Left Business Observer*. It encourages me that there's been a popular revival of interest in 'left' philosophy. That there are journalists like Gary Younge, Christopher Hayes, and Aditya Chakraborty who dialogue so effectively with academic work. It encourages me that after being repeatedly flung into the wilderness feminism is resurgent and in good academic and popular health (the regular international *Console-ing Passions* media and feminism conference being an inspiring example) and a zone of renewed popular 'fourth wave' visibility (*The F Word*, *Feministing*, *Jezebel*, *The Vagenda*). It encourages me that, despite the wave of new racisms, there are simultaneously anti-racist initiatives that flourish, like the final opening of the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, London and the *darkmatter* online journal. It encourages me that there is an urgent engagement with the ramifications of and activism against advancing and ongoing environmental collapse.<sup>xxiv</sup> 2014).

Of course there are not enough initiatives, and there are plenty of problems, but I spend most of the time when I am writing, writing about the problems, and here it seems more appropriate and productive to focus on the glimmers and offers of hope. Most of these projects, like any project, have their own issues, shortcomings and weaknesses. Some may not even last as long as it takes for this book to be published. But these are just a few of the zones where interesting possibilities for anti-disciplinarity are opening up and could be extended. There are, and will, of course be many others.<sup>xxv</sup>

Sometimes, in the rush to interrogate neoliberal politics, its synthesis with the cultural dimension, which CCCS always foregrounded as the terrain of lived experience and the space of possibility, can be neglected. This is why cultural studies is important. It is also why the

initiative from which this book springs -- to discuss the heritage of CCCS and to archive the stencilled papers for people who *weren't* there as well as those who were -- is important. Not because we should fetishise CCCS, but because we should celebrate its political spirit, and learn from it as a formative victory for intellectual emancipation, even though other transdisciplinary victories will today have to take different shapes and forms.

## Notes and References

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<sup>i</sup> I have written about this recently in J. Littler 'Consumer culture and cultural studies' in Deirdre Shaw et al (ed) *Ethics and Morality in Consumer Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> John Clarke and Hudson Vincent 'An interview with John Clarke' *Cultural Studies* 27:5, 2013, p734

<sup>iii</sup> Jo Littler 'Cultural studies and consumer culture' in M. Carrington, A. Chatzidakis, T. Newholm and D. Shaw (eds) *Ethics and Morality in Consumption: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2016)

<sup>iv</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (eds) *Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992); Simon During (ed) *The Cultural Studies Reader*. (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>v</sup> Janice Winship 'Woman Becomes an Individual - Femininity and Consumption in Women's Magazines 1954-1969' CCCS Stencilled occasional papers, Birmingham: University of Birmingham. Online at <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/historycultures/departments/history/research/projects/ccs/publications/stencilled-occasional-papers.aspx>.

Many thanks to my other PhD supervisors: Rachel Bowlby, Craig Clunas and Roger Silverstone.

<sup>vi</sup> Ackbar Abbas and John Erni, *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); *Block* journal; Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. (Durham, Duke, 2010); *Marxism Today*; Suzanne Moore, *Head over Heels* (London: Viking, 1996); Gilbert Rodman, *Why Cultural Studies?* (Oxford: Wiley, 2014); Tom Steele, *The Emergence of Cultural Studies 1945-65: Cultural Politics, Adult Education and the English Question* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997); Jeremy Gilbert, *Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical theory and popular politics* (London: Berg, 2008); Judith Williamson, *Deadline at Dawn: Film Writings 1980-1990*; (London: Marion Boyars, 1992); Handel K. Wright, 'Dare we De-Centre Birmingham? Troubling the Origin and Trajectories of Cultural Studies'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1, (1) 1998, pp33-56.

<sup>vii</sup> S. Hall (1987) 'Gramsci and Us', *Marxism Today*, June p17

<sup>viii</sup> Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, Jon Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis*. Macmillan 1978; Hall 1980, Gilbert 2008 *op cit*; Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing it all Back Home* (Durham, Duke 1997). Grossberg 2010 *op cit*;

<sup>ix</sup> Gramsci 2005

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<sup>x</sup> Articulation as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Verso 2001; the dominant, residual and emergent as developed by Raymond Williams *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)

<sup>xi</sup> This paragraph draws from Littler 2016, given that the subjects of these chapters -- whilst looking in different directions -- overlap in their shared concern to define practices of cultural studies.

<sup>xii</sup> CCCS at 50 conference, audio recording.

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/historycultures/departments/history/research/projects/ccs/conference/conference-programme.aspx>. Accessed July 2015.

<sup>xiii</sup> Brett de Bary (ed) *Universities in Translation: The mental labour of globalization*. (Aberdeen: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Ros Gill, 'Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia' in Roisin Ryan-Flood. & Ros Gill (Eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*. (London: Routledge 2009); Andrew Ross, *Creditocracy* (New York: OR Books, 2014); Marina Warner, 'Learning my Lesson' *London Review of Books*, 37:6, 2015, pp8-14.

<sup>xiv</sup> This alternative CCCS is currently in the process of being renamed 'Step Change', according to its website as of April 30 2015:

[http://www.stepchange.org/?WT.srch=1&WT.mc\\_id=270000&WT.seg\\_1=cccs&gclid=CMC B0IKZnsUCFa\\_LtAodSGwA3g](http://www.stepchange.org/?WT.srch=1&WT.mc_id=270000&WT.seg_1=cccs&gclid=CMC B0IKZnsUCFa_LtAodSGwA3g)

<sup>xv</sup> See Ann Gray's chapter in this volume.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, Sixth Report 1969-1971*, p6. Online at

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/historycultures/departments/history/research/projects/ccs/publications/annual-reports.aspx>. Accessed July 2015.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, Sixth Report 1969-1971*, p6. Online at

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/historycultures/departments/history/research/projects/ccs/publications/annual-reports.aspx>. Accessed July 2015.

<sup>xviii</sup> Hudson Vincent, 'Space for Cultural Studies: Conversations with the Centre' in *Cultural Studies*, 27:5 pp671

<sup>xix</sup> David Graeber *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015)

<sup>xx</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope*. (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>xxi</sup> For example, Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos*. (Zone Books, MIT Press 2015); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-9* translated by Graham Burchell. (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (ed) *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2011); Jeremy Gilbert (ed) 'Neoliberal Cultures', special issue of *New Formations*, 2013, 80-81; David Theo Goldberg, *Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. (Oxford: Wiley 2008); Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin, *The Kilburn Manifesto* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2014). I apologise in advance to the authors of all the texts I left out.

<sup>xxii</sup> Inman, 2014

<sup>xxiii</sup> <http://schoolofthedamned.tumblr.com/>

<sup>xxiv</sup> Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Phaedra C. Pezzullo (ed) *Cultural Studies and the Environment, Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2010).

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Carmen Rojas 'At the forefront of a new field of study: Petrocultures'  
<http://www.woablog.com/2014/09/at-the-forefront-of-a-new-field-of-study/>. 25 September 2014. Accessed July 2015.

<sup>xxv</sup> Given that it is now keen on reclaiming the legacy of cultural studies, perhaps the University of Birmingham could open a centre for cultural politics, which I often think is a more accurate name for cultural studies.