

2. The heart of cultural studies (excerpts)

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I. Introduction

I believe that the project of cultural studies, which binds different people and work together, involves a commitment to a particular practice of intellectual-political work, and to the claim that such intellectual work matters both inside and outside of the academy. Cultural studies is a way of inhabiting the position of scholar, teacher, artist and intellectual, one way (among many) of politicizing theory and theorizing politics. The project of cultural studies is an effort to find an intellectual practice that is responsible to the changing context (changing geographical, historical, political, intellectual and institutional conditions) in which it works. As such, it constructs for itself a more limited and modest claim to authority than one is used to from the academy; it refuses any and all dreams of universal, absolute, complete and perfect truth, and at the same time, it refuses to give up the dream of truth to the burdens of relativism. Its modesty is based in its rigorous efforts to tell the best story that can be told, about any context, within that context. It accepts that knowledge and politics, as well as the tools of their production, are always, unavoidably, contextually bound. But it refuses to conclude that knowledge or judgments about competing knowledges are impossible; it wants to hold on to a more modest conception of the possibility and authority of knowledge. At the same time, its modesty undermines any assumption that being a cultural studies scholar (or having an expertise in culture and in practices of interpretation) makes one into an expert on everything and anything. Instead, cultural studies takes work!

I want to try to define that common project, to perhaps explicate something about the “heart” of cultural studies as both its center and the source of at least some of the passion behind the work. . . .

III. Cultural studies as radical contextuality

I have been arguing that cultural studies is defined by its practice; I want now to suggest that that practice defines its project as a rigorous attempt to contextualize political and intellectual work, so that context defines both its object and its practice. Hall (Hall, unpub.) is quite explicit about the “intellectual perspective” of cultural studies as an interrogation of contexts (Hall uses the term ‘conjuncture,’ which I shall explain shortly as a particular way of constructing contexts): “It has an intellectual vocation to produce a critical understanding of a conjuncture, a cultural-historical conjuncture.” And again, speaking of the collective project of the Centre: “The commitment to understanding a conjuncture is what from the beginning we thought cultural studies was about.”

It starts with an assumption of relationality, which it shares with other projects and formations, but it takes relationality to imply or more accurately, to be equivalent to, the apparently more radical claim of contextuality: that the identity, significance and effects of any practice or event (including cultural practices and events) are defined only by the complex set of relations that surround, interpenetrate and shape it, and make it what it is. No element can be isolated from its relations, although those relationships can be changed, and are constantly changing. Any event can only be understood relationally, as a condensation of multiple determinations and effects. Cultural studies thus embodies the commitment to the openness and contingency of social reality where change is the given or norm. This radical contextualism is the heart of cultural studies.¹

This is why, for example, writing about *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. (1978, 192) says:

If you'd just taken race as a black issue, you'd have seen the impact of law and order policies on the local communities, but you'd have never seen the degree to which the race and crime issue was a prism for a much larger social crisis. You wouldn't have looked at the larger picture. You'd have written a black text, but you wouldn't have written a cultural studies text because you wouldn't have seen this articulation up to the politicians, into the institutional judiciary, down to the popular mood of the people, into the politics, as well as into the community, into black poverty and into discrimination.

Similarly, Hall always locates (i.e. contextualizes) his work on race, as when he declares (1995, 53-4): "I have never worked on race and ethnicity as a kind of subcategory. I have always worked on the whole social formation which is racialized." The result is, of course, that any discussion of issues of race and ethnicity cannot be separated from the particular context in which it is located and into which it is directed. Hall (1997a, 157) is rigorously consistent about this: "I don't claim for my particular version of a non-essentialist notion of race correctness for all time. I can claim for it only a certain conjunctural [for the moment, read 'contextual'] truth." It is too easy to forget—and too often forgotten, that the work on racism and, moving out from there, on identity in its various forms, is undertaken in the context of and as a response to questions about a specific changing social formation. That is to say, cultural studies' radical contextuality, while theoretical, is never purely theoretical; it is both defined and limited by its political concerns. In Hall's (personal communication, April 10, 2005) terms, it approaches its contextualism "practically."

This radical contextualism is embodied in the concept of articulation. Articulation names both the basic processes of the production of reality, of the production of contexts and power (i.e., determination or effectivity), and the analytic practice of cultural studies. It is the transformative practice or work of making, unmaking and remaking relations and contexts, of establishing new relations out of old relations or non-relations, of drawing lines and mapping connections.² But articulation is not a single or a singular practice. Different connections will have differing forces in particular contexts and these must be measured; not all connections are equal or equally important. In fact, there are as many different practices of articulation as there are forms of relationship. Using the notion of context must not be allowed to flatten all realities, as if talking about contexts necessarily makes every system of relationality equivalent, or puts them on the same plane or scale. Cultural studies' sense of context is always of a complex, overdetermined and contingent unity. If a context can be understood as the relationships that have been made by the operation of power, in the interests of certain positions of power, the struggle to change the context involves the struggle to map out those relations and, when possible, to disarticulate and rearticulate them.

Articulation calls for both deconstruction and reconstruction: One must first see that what appears to be a harmonious whole without seams or cracks, or a natural unity whose contradictions are inevitable and unavoidable, have been forged from diverse and divergent pieces, as has the very appearance of wholeness and naturalness. That is, the very processes of articulation has been erased and must now be rediscovered in the possibility of disarticulation. Articulation begins by discovering the heterogeneity, the differences, the fractures, in the wholes. But it cannot end there, in the negativity of critique, because heterogeneity never remains purely and simply there as heterogeneity. It is always re-articulated into other wholes; that is the very

being of the relation of life and power. And if cultural studies intellectuals do not enter into this struggle, with all the work (of analysis and imagination) that it requires, if they do not attempt to think through the realities of articulations and the possibilities of re-articulation, then cultural studies abandons the very sense of political possibility that drives it.

This does not mean that reality is entirely open. Cultural studies operates with a logic of “no guarantees,” what Paul Gilroy (1993a) has called “anti-anti-essentialism.” Essentialism embodies a logic of guarantees; it assumes that the relations that constitute social and historical existence are necessarily the way they are. Essentialism is the assertion that all the relations that make up lived and knowable reality had and have to be the way they are, because the relationships are already and always intrinsic to the terms of the relationship themselves. In essentialist positions, the answers are guaranteed and everything is sewn up in advance. Identities are fixed. Effects are determined before they are even produced, because all the important relations in history are necessarily contained in the very fact that something is what it is, in its very origins. If history doesn’t appear to be unfolding according to this inevitable trajectory, it is the result of some external interference or principle of negation, such as false consciousness.

Cultural studies, like all anti-essentialisms, denies that the shape and structure of reality is inevitable. But it also refuses the universalization of contingency that characterizes many versions of anti-essentialism, which too easily deny any stability or reality to relationships or the structures they define. Cultural studies is committed to the reality of relations that have determining effects, but it refuses to assume that such relations and effects have to be, necessarily, what they are. They did not have to be that way but, given that they are that way, they are real and they have real effects. Cultural studies operates in the space between, on the

one hand, absolute containment, closure, complete and final understanding, total domination, and, on the other hand, absolute freedom and possibility, openness and indeterminateness. It rejects any claims of “necessary relations” (guaranteed) as well as of “necessarily no relations” (also guaranteed), in favor of “no necessary relations” (while accepting that relations are real). Thus, cultural studies can be seen as a contextual analysis of how contexts are (or even better, of how a specific context is) made, challenged, unmade, changed, remade, etc., as structures of power and domination.

Articulation is cultural studies’ version of what is generally called constructionism, the claim that reality is constructed rather than given; reality is always a complex organization or configuration that is being put together constantly. Putting it this way lets us see one very simple truth: the fact that something is constructed does not make it any less real, regardless of what the pieces are that go into its construction. The fact that cultural studies asserts that some of those pieces are, of necessity, discursive, and even meaningful, similarly does not make it less real. A table is not imaginary because it was put together from separate pieces of wood, and the fact that other sorts of elements were used—nails or screws for example—does not make it any less real. Cultural studies does not deny that there is a material reality but it does argue, contrary to some, that it is impossible to separate what some would call brute facts from social facts. The fact that some facts are treated as brute facts, as if they were not constructed, says more about the particular organization of reality in which such a distinction is necessary than it does about the facts themselves. Constructionism, then, refuses to assume that there are two kinds of modes of being: the real and the discursive or symbolic, which exist on ontologically separate planes that can only be bridged by distinctly human acts of consciousness. Constructionism asserts that the world is made up of complex organizations of various kinds of events, some of which are

expressive (or discursive). That is, just as a table is made up of wood and nails, glue and varnish), all reality is a complex articulation of many different kinds of elements or events.

Cultural studies believes that cultural (or discursive) practices matter because they are crucial to the construction of the specific contexts and forms of human life. Human beings live in a world that is, at least in part, of their own making and that world is constructed through practices (of many different forms of agency, including individual and institutional, human and non-human) that build and transform the simultaneously and intimately interconnected discursive and non-discursive (both material) realities. Not only is every human event or practice culturally articulated, cultural practices are constantly involved in the ongoing production of reality, not necessarily as the intentional accomplishment of human actions. To put it simply, what culture we live in, what cultural practices we use, what cultural forms we place upon and insert into reality, have consequences for the way reality is organized and lived. Cultural practices contribute to the production of the context as an organization of power, and construct the context as a lived everyday experience of power. That is why culture matters, because it is a key dimension of the ongoing transformation or construction of reality. But that does not mean, as much contemporary theory would have it, that culture, by itself as it were (e.g., as the production of signification or subjectivity), either constructs reality or is a modality of power.

Cultural studies tries to understand something about how an organization of power is being constructed through the disarticulation and rearticulation of relations, by taking culture as its starting point, its entrance into the complex balance of forces constructed out of the even more complicated relations of culture, society, politics, economics, everyday life, etc. Cultural studies is, in the first instance, concerned with cultural practices, as its entrance into the material context of the unequal relations of force and power. But the context itself cannot be separated

from those cultural practices and the relations of power, because they articulate the unity and specificity of the context as a lived environment. And this leads to one of the most visible commitments of cultural studies: its practice is necessarily interdisciplinary. This is often misunderstood as some sort of a priori commitment (or as a political attack on the disciplinary organization of the academy) rather than as a conclusion of the logic of radical contextuality. Cultural studies work has to be interdisciplinary because contexts—and even culture--cannot be analyzed in purely cultural terms; understanding contexts and within them, specific cultural formations requires looking at culture's relations to everything that is not culture. But where, how and how much interdisciplinarity is necessary? Again, the answer has to be contextual and practical. Its interdisciplinarity has to be shaped by the need to produce useful knowledge even while it is limited by the strategic possibilities of the context, that is to say, limited by a grounded sense of what is possible, what can be accomplished, in the present.

Raymond Williams' (1961, 63) influential definition of cultural studies given above, posed two problems: first, where is the privilege of culture located? And second, how does one specify the concept of a whole way of life so as to identify the most pertinent elements and relations, thus making the task possible? We can advance Williams' vision by recognizing, as he sometimes did, that the space of a whole way of life is a fractured and contradictory space of multiple contexts and competing ways of life and struggle.³ (As I shall argue, this mode of contextualization is what cultural studies refers to as a conjuncture-- a complex articulation of discourses, everyday life and what Michel Foucault would call technologies or regimes of power.) Within any given space, such contexts are always plural. Moreover, within any context, as a result of its complex relations to other contexts, power is always multidimensional, contradictory and never sewn up.

Cultural studies attempts to strategically deploy theory (and research) to gain the knowledge necessary to describe the context in ways that may enable the articulation of new or better political strategies. It takes what Marx (Hall, 2003a) called the “detour through theory” in order to offer a new and better description, moving from “the empirical” to “the concrete,” where the concrete is produced through the theoretical work of the invention of concepts. But it also must take a detour through the real, through the empirical context, in order to be able to go on theorizing. It attempts to arrive at a different and better understanding of the context than that with which it began (or which it could have predicted solely on theoretical grounds) based on the political demands and questions placed before it at the beginning. *Cultural studies is not supposed to rediscover what we already know.* That is why it is only at the end that one can raise the critical questions of politics, why politics and strategy are only available after the work of cultural studies. While it puts knowledge in the service of politics, it also attempts to make politics listen to the authority of knowledge (and hence, its refusal of relativism). Thus I want to defend cultural studies as rigorous knowledge-producing activity, without disconnecting it from other sorts of activities and engagements.

This radical contextuality affects every element of the very practice of cultural studies, starting with its object, which as I have said, is always a context. Consequently, the object of cultural studies’ initial attention is never an isolated event (text or otherwise) but a structured assemblage of practices--a cultural formation, a discursive regime--which already includes both discursive and non-discursive practices. But even such a formation has to be located in overlapping formations of everyday life (as an organized plane of modern power) and social and institutional structures. That is, ultimately, there can be no radical break between the

initial object or event and study and the context in which it is constituted. As Hall et al. (1978, 185) put it in Policing the Crisis:

There are, we argue, clear historical forces at work in this period, shaping so to speak, from the outside, the immediate transactions on the ground between "muggers," potential muggers, their victims, and their apprehenders. In many comparable studies, these larger and wider forces are merely noted and cited; their direct and indirect bearing on the phenomenon analysed is, however, left vague and abstract--part of "the background." In our case, we believe that these so-called "background issues" are indeed, exactly the critical forces which produce "mugging" in the specific form in which it appears.

Unfortunately, that "background" all too often inhabits the opening chapter or is relegated to the footnotes of so many academic works. That background is precisely the context which constitutes any possible object of study but even more importantly, for cultural studies, that traditional notion of an object of study is only the opening, the point of articulation, through which one enters into the context that is the very object of analysis.

This initial object of study must never displace the context as the real object of concern and investigation. It is the entrance point into the context, an assumed point of articulation or a crystallization of lines of determination, which is not the same as a symptom, since the latter can be read in Hegelian terms, and suggests a hidden cause. A symptom is always a symptom of something else.⁴ Such small moments distill or articulate larger moments, movements, contradictions, and struggles. They are strange attractors. These points of entry are social facts as it were, which tell us, at least that is the gamble we take when we choose them, that there is a story to be told but we do not yet know what it is. Most commonly, that story is told in terms that

connect the point of crystallization to the contradictions at work in the various domains of the social formation: social, economic, political and cultural contradictions—and the relations among them. The work of contextualism involves mapping the configuration that surrounds and constitutes that social fact, for example, around the “fact” of mugging in Policing the Crisis, or the changing treatment of kids in my own (2005) Caught in the Crossfire.⁵

Cultural studies' radical contextuality also reshapes its relationship to theory. While cultural studies is committed to the necessity of theoretical work, it sees theory as a resource to be used strategically to respond to particular problematics, struggles and contexts. The measure of a theory's truth is its ability to enable a better (re-) description of the context, where “better” is defined first in terms of a relationship to the complex realities of the context, without reducing that relationship to some notion of some simple or direct correspondence, and second, in terms of its ability to open up new possibilities, perhaps even new imaginations of possibilities, for changing that context. The choice of theoretical paradigms is always a wager about what will work.

In cultural studies, theory and context are mutually constituted, mutually determining. In that sense, cultural studies “desacralizes” theory in order to take it up as a contingent strategic resource. Thus, cultural studies cannot be identified with any single theoretical paradigm or tradition; it has, and continues to wrestle with various modern and postmodern philosophies, including Marxism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and with the theoretical (and political) agendas of feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, discourse theory, etc.

This is the significance of Hall's (1997a, 152) eloquent refusal of the mantle of theorist:

“I have a strategic relation to theory. I don’t regard myself as a theorist in the sense that that is my work. I am interested always in going on theorizing about the world, about the concrete, but I am not interested in the production of theory as an object in its own right. And therefore I use theory in strategic ways . . . it’s because I think my object is to think the concreteness of the object in its many different relations.” For Hall, this defines a different practice of theory: “This may be theoretical work of a seemingly loose kind, porous but not unrigorous. It is always connected to the specifics of a concrete moment” (Hall, unpubl.). This particular relation to theory is at the center of cultural studies: “cultural studies . . . can only really work by moving from historical conjuncture to historical conjuncture using an evolving theoretical framework which is not conceptually purified” (Hall, unpubl.). Consequently cultural studies is not driven by theoretical questions; it does not derive its questions from its theoretical concerns. *Otherwise theory becomes a way of avoiding the risks of research.* By defining the questions and the answers in advance, theoretical investments often reduce the very possibility of telling a different and better story, of surprise and discovery.

At the same time, cultural studies does not deny the importance of abstract or general categories such as commodification, racism, or colonization, which seem to transcend particular sites and territories. The appeal to certain logics or processes that seem in some way to escape the context is not necessarily a retreat from radical contextualism, but a demand for further analysis of the complexity of the context in terms of both spatial scale and temporal duration, expanding the possibility that the analysis of a context (as a conjuncture as we shall see) opens onto a multiplicity of overlapping contexts, of contexts operating at different scales, and of what we might call embedded contexts. Such abstractions and concepts are themselves always contextual, and have their own material conditions of possibility; they can be seen now as

regional concepts. This is not simply a question of the level of analysis at which critical work has to be done. While an abstraction like commodification may tell us something about what distinguishes capitalism from feudalism, it does not necessarily help us distinguish capitalism from other forms of market economy, and it does even less to help us understand historical and geographical differences amongst specific configurations of capitalism — precisely what we need to understand if we hope to imagine new futures, and new strategies for realizing them.

The same is of course true of the theory of culture. Even if culture defines the beginning of one's trajectory into and across a context, there is no essential operational mode of cultural practices, no guarantee how they are working in a particular context. Cultural studies does not have a general theory of culture. It views cultural practices as the site of the intersection of many possible effects. It does not start by defining culture or its effects, or by assuming ahead of time the relevant dimensions within which to describe particular practices. Instead, cultural practices are places where different things can and do happen, where different possibilities intersect.

If cultural studies is politically driven, it also believes that politics is contextual. Assuming that one knows in advance the political stakes, or the politically correct solution, guarantees that one tells the same story by substituting political commitments for the intellectual work necessary to come to a contextually appropriate analysis of the political complexities and to formulate viable strategic and imaginative interventions. The sites, goals, and forms of struggle can be understood only after one has done the work of reconstructing the context so as to better understand the relations of power. One cannot assume, despite appearances, that the political stakes or constituencies of any particular context can be taken for granted. One cannot simply assume that because a certain kind of political struggle made sense in the 1980s, it will make sense in the 2010s. One cannot assume that because a certain kind of political struggle made

sense in England, it will make sense in America. Cultural studies must always seek to balance political desire, theoretical resources, and empirical work.

Cultural studies sees power as complexly and contradictorily organized, along multiple axes and dimensions that cannot be reduced to one another. One cannot explain gender or sexual relationships solely through economic and class relationships, for instance, nor can one explain economic and class relationships solely through gender and sexual relationships. If gender and sexual relationships are changed, there is no guarantee that class relationships will change (in a similar or comparable way), and if class relationships change, there is no guarantee that gender and sexual relationships will change (in a similar or comparable way). Power is, unfortunately, more complex than that. But on the optimistic side, power is never able to totalize itself. There are always fissures and fault lines that may become active sites of struggle and transformation. Power never quite accomplishes everything it might like to everywhere, and there is always the possibility of changing the structures and organization of power. One cannot describe relations of power in the simple terms of domination and resistance, where the latter is always and only a response that at best limits rather than shapes power itself. The relations, within power, of forms of control and counter-control are themselves both contextual and complex. Moreover, while power operates in institutions and in the state, it also operates where people live their daily lives, and in the spaces where these fields intersect. Cultural studies is always interested in how power infiltrates, contaminates, limits and empowers the possibilities that people have to live their lives in just, dignified and secure ways. For if one wants to change the relations of power, if one wants to move people, even a little bit, you must begin from where people are, from where and how they actually live their lives. And that means, you must do the work of figuring out “where” that is.

IV. Theorizing Contexts (toward an ontology of contexts)

. . . The third modality of contextualization, the diagram, involves the ontological-- or transcendental conditions of any--context. Such diagrams have to be seen as historical or contextual ontologies, rather than universalist, essentialist or transcendent; they describe the forms of existence, the ways of being in space-time, that are possible and that constitute the contingent conditions of possibility of milieus and territories and their relations. These diagrams as ontologies of contexts are crucial in the attempt to theorize the context in ways that enable us to understand not only what is going on but also the ways contingencies have been realized and possibilities opened.

Let me briefly offer some sense of what such ontologies offer that has influenced current critical work. The starting point of much of this ontological work is the hermeneutic ontology of Heidegger's Being and Time (1962), which enacts an analytic that moves from the ontic (empirical) to the ontological "modes of being-in-the-world" of any being, including that sort of being that Heidegger calls Dasein (which includes the human) as well as "the world-hood of the world." Dasein is constituted by/as a set of spatial and temporal relations and involvements. But in his later writings, after attempting to de-humanize and de-subjectivize ontology, Heidegger offered a more explicit ontology of contexts. In Heidegger's terms, an epoch is not only that which makes possible any mode of being in the world, it is that in which we find ourselves. (In fact, it is that which is given to "Man.") It is a matrix of spatial-temporal possibilities, a structuring of involvements in which particular configurations of both locations and places can be specified, particularized and made intimate.

In Heidegger's terms, the epoch specifies the possible ways in which "Man" can "dwell" in and with the world. Such forms of dwelling define both the ways the world gives itself to us

and the ways we can organize and relate to the world. For example the current (ontological) context, defined so completely by technology, in terms of what Heidegger calls the Gestell (“enframing”) and “the world-picture”(Heidegger,1982). The Gestell is an ontological diagram in which we as humans find our own existence, as well as the existence of the world and the beings that inhabit the world. It defines a particular mode in which the world gives itself to us, and a particular mode of our opening up and relating to the world. In the Gestell, reality exists as resources to be used and used up. For Heidegger, humans do not create the epoch and they cannot choose to end it. But epochs do end, and new ones come to be.

These days, when one approaches ontological questions, one is more likely to encounter Deleuze and Guattari’s (1977) notion of reality producing itself. Standing against the anthropocentrism and semio-centrism of much of contemporary theory, they offer a realist ontology in which reality is constantly producing itself and hence, that change (or becoming) is the only ontological given. Their philosophy of immanence stands in opposition to Kantian transcendental philosophies, which are built upon the assumption of an unbridgeable gap between the subject and the object (the phenomena and the noumena), and which call into existence any number of universal structures/processes of mediation. Against this, Guattari (1996, 210-11) writes, “Everything that’s written in refusing the connection with the referent, with reality . . . puts itself into the service of all hierarchies.” Deleuze and Guattari take reality to be both real (productive) and contingent (produced). They refuse to reduce reality to a single dimension, whether semiotic, social, unconscious or material, or to bracket the efficacy of any dimension.

They start with the assumption that reality has two modalities of existence, both of which exist on a single plane--hence a flat ontology. They refer to these two planes as the planes of

consistency and organization. The former modality, the virtual, is the realm of unrealized but realizable capacities to affect and be affected (which they distinguish from the possible, which is not real). On the plane of consistency reality is the substantial multiplicity—rhizomes-- of lines of intensity or becoming. But the plane of consistency is always and already organizing itself—organized--on the same plane; a particular configuration of reality is actualized—produced--by the operation of multiple and specific machines or technologies. These machines—they use the term to avoid humanistic and voluntaristic notions of agency—create, distribute and organize populations (modes of individuation) and impose regimes of conduct, agency and effectivity on them. Such an actual reality, while ontologically flat, is also articulated into and across many different plateaus (e.g., inorganic, organic, human, etc.). Unlike other philosophies (e.g., pragmatism), Deleuze and Guattari do not assume that the same machines operate everywhere, on every level, in the same ways. This production of the actual is accomplished by three kinds of machines—stratifying (or abstract machines), coding (inscribing) and territorializing, embodying three forms of relationality or articulation—connective, disjunctive and conjunctive respectively.⁶

Every plateau or level of an actual reality is stratified into two assemblages—expression and content--or populations. The former is an assemblage of “functional or transformational” populations, that is, of individualities characterizable as forms of activity and agency. The latter describes a "precise state of intermingling of bodies . . . including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alternation, amalgamations, penetrations and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in the relations to one another" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 90) while the latter are populations given as self-evident. If the former describes the forms of active perception and action (including discourse), the latter describes the modes of givenness or self-

evidence, assemblages which, while never passive, are nevertheless not constituted as agencies; it is that which is perceivable, say-able, etc. The stratifying machine produces two assemblages defining what we might naively call a non-subjective agency and a non-passive materiality. It is important to realize that there is nothing inherent or essential about particular events (virtual lines of becoming) that guarantees in advance to what strata they will be "assigned." What varies from one reality to another, or from one plateau to another, is the nature of this real distinction, the location of the line separating these assemblages (and the respective position of different individualities), and the specific effectivities of these assemblages. . . It is this organization of matter and functions, of content and expression, in multiple stratifications of contexts, that defines the real as a practiced and practice-able reality. One might consider Hardt and Negri's (2000) theory of Empire to be offering a description of an emerging abstract machine.

The stratifying machine accomplishes a second production: each strata—expression and content—is itself articulated as a relation between form and substance. For example, the forms of the plane of content impose a statistical order, while those of the plane of expression are functional structures. The plane of content is the plane of formed matter; the plane of expression is the plane of formalized function. It is upon these two dimensions—form and substance—that the remaining two machines operate. Coding machines inscribes grids of differentiation on forms of both content and expression; territorializing machines distribute the substances of the both content and form. Coding machines produce disjunctive lines that inscribe formal differences on and across the strata, producing a logic of propriety (either/or/or . . .). Codes work extensionally to bind apparently independent realms through mechanisms of normalization and logics of identity and difference. Territorializing machine performs an intensional distribution that produces a spatial distribution, according to a conjunctive logic of alterity (and . . . and . . .). It conjunctively links events into relations of proximity and distance,

defining distances and proximities, mobilities and stabilities.

The operation of these machines, however, is not so straightforward. Apart from the fact, as I have said, that there are always many different machines operating, every machine—every line of becoming in fact-- works in both directions: becoming, unbecoming, rebecoming: stratifying, destratifying, restratifying; coding, decoding, recoding; territorializing, deterritorializing, reterritorializing. Moreover, machines always fail to control the actualization of the virtual, producing lines of flight that are both the product of and the escape from the diagram, whether because of their very make-up or because they are always confronting other machines on the same field. Consequently, such machines are always bound to fail, if only because each machine produces the very possibility of escaping (“lines of flight”). The machines producing reality are constantly changing, even changing themselves—and according to some calculations, improving--because they fail. We might say that the malfunctioning of such machines is not an error but the very possibility of their continuing operation. That is how reality changes.

It is worth noting that this ontology offers critics two analytic possibilities. The first is a kind of deconstructive strategy that dismantles the plane of organization, the specific configuration of an actualization of the virtual, to get back to the virtual so to speak: we can always discover the rhizomatic, the flat ontology, the plane of consistency (immanence).⁷ This strategy, moving from the “molar organizations” to “molecular becoming,” is crucial if we are to hold together the recognition that any empirical reality is both a construction (reality produces itself mechanically) and simultaneously, a contingent and stochastic outcome. Any struggle to change the world—even in ways that we know we cannot control—must begin with the understanding that the world does not have to be the way it is. Although this is perhaps the most common appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari, the second strategy will prove more central in

my argument in the rest of this book. It involves the analysis of the particular machines⁸ by which a concrete actual reality is produced and sustained, often in ways that make it appear to be inevitable. This is captured, for example, in their statement (1987, 210) that “the question is not whether the status of women or those on the bottom is better or worse but the type of organization from which that state results.”

This second possibility takes us back to the work of contextual analysis—whether or not one is a Deleuzean--and the moment in which an ontology of contexts demands to be complemented on the one hand, by theories of both locations and places, and on the other, by the actual empirical work of describing what is going on (as a production of power). While one may not adequately grasp the contemporary contexts of human life—the possibilities and limits of locations and places-- without an understanding of the diagram in which we live, that ontological context is far from an adequate description of the contextual realities of human life. Too often, ontological analysis is substituted for the necessarily complex effort to offer better understandings of what is going on in particular contexts. The ontological and the empirical are necessarily articulated, but they are also necessarily not the same. Ontologically, reality may be rhizomatic, or flat, and social existence may be conditioned by the inoperative community (Nancy) or the multitude, but these are hardly descriptions of the concrete contexts in which people live their lives. In fact, it is precisely the distance from the ontological that we have to measure, for it is here that power operates to produce the actuality of specific configurations of the ontological possibilities.

V. From Context to Conjuncture

There are a number of models of critical analysis that offer practices of radical contextualization, which have, to varying degrees, been taken up to articulate different

formations of cultural studies: Marx's practice of historical specificity; Foucault's analysis of *dispositifs* and discursive apparatuses; pragmatism's sense of situated knowledges and actions; and Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the production of the actual. And while these all have had or might have an impact on cultural studies, they do not define the predominant way in which context is understood in cultural studies. If context is the real object of study of cultural studies, that context is generally understood as a conjuncture. The concept of conjuncture emerged out of debates with and within Marxism and political theory, especially in and around the work of Althusser and the re-vitalization of Gramscian theory.⁹ But the concept was reworked within the cultural studies' project, in the empirical and theoretical researches of the Centre, as well as others like Martin-Barbero, Canclini, and Guha.

For cultural studies, conjuncturalism is a political choice, based on the assumption that there are certain kinds of political struggle and possibility that are best approached at a certain level of analysis understood as the attempt to establish a temporary balance or settlement in the field of forces. Thus, Hall (Hall, unpub.) makes it clear that he is "not driven to a general philosophical proposition that conjunctures are all that we can study There are many other different forms of working. Not all histories . . . need be conjunctural histories." It is at the level of the conjuncture that cultural studies believes that knowledge can be usefully and concretely articulated to political struggles and possibilities.

A conjuncture is not defined a priori by a location, territory or diagram. It is constituted by specific articulations of these different modalities of contextuality. But more specifically, it is characterized by an articulation, accumulation and condensation of contradictions, a fusion of different currents or circumstances. A conjuncture is a description of a social formation as fractured and conflictual, along multiple axes, planes and scales, constantly in search of

temporary balances or structural stabilities through a variety of practices and processes of struggle and negotiation. It is the complex product of multiple lines of force, determination and resistance, with different temporalities and spatialities. Yet a conjuncture has to be constructed, narrated, fabricated.

Conjuncturalism is a description of change, articulation and contradiction; it describes a mobile multiplicity the unity of which is always temporary and fractured. A conjuncture is constituted by, at and as the articulation of multiple, overlapping, competing, reinforcing, etc. lines of force and transformation, destabilization and (re-) stabilization, with differing temporalities and spatialities, producing a potentially but never actually chaotic assemblage or articulations of contradictions and contestations. Thus it is always a kind of totality, always temporary, complex and fragile, that one takes hold of through analytic and political work. Contexts and conjunctures have complex relations. Potentially, any context may encompass more than one conjuncture, and both contexts and conjunctures have to be seen as multiple, overlapping and embedded.

A conjuncture is that accumulation/ condensation that produces a particular problematic (or set of problematics)—a term I will explain shortly—that constitutes the conjuncture. Conjunctural analysis focuses on the social formation as a complexly articulated unity or totality (that is nevertheless not an organic totality). Conjuncturalism looks to the changing configuration of forces that occasionally seeks and sometimes arrives at a balance or temporary settlement. It emphasizes the constant overdetermined reconfiguration of a field producing only temporary stabilities. Conjunctures have differing temporal scales: some are protracted and some are relatively short in duration. However, such conjunctural analyses cannot be understood as totalizing projects (in which everything is connected to everything else).

What constitutes the unity of the conjuncture then is its problematic(s), which is usually lived (but not necessarily experienced per se) as a social crisis of sorts. According to Hall (1988, 127), the concept of a conjuncture describes “the complex historically specific terrain of a crisis which affects—but in uneven ways—a specific national-social formation as a whole.”¹⁰ These are moments when the instabilities and contradictions appear at almost every point of the social formation, and when the struggles become visible and self-conscious. At a certain moment this collocation of contradictions and struggles is itself articulated as a socio-political (organic) crisis. While some conjunctures may be characterized by a profound—organic—crisis, others are characterized by smaller uncertainties, imbalances and struggle and still others may appear to be settled or at least characterized by more “passive revolutions.” The crisis is neither objectively given nor the direct creation of the analyst; it becomes the point-sign of a struggle to constitute the conjuncture and as such, the framing of a larger political struggle built upon forms of coalition and alliance across the various contexts, rather than a battle between two completely distinguishable and separable camps. Moreover, since the crisis is a general one, the struggle can only be fought across the full spectrum of social issues and differences. This is what Gramsci described as a war of positions between competing political blocs (alliances). These blocs seek neither total domination nor ideological consensus, but the ability to define the crisis and to lead in instituting solutions across the entire expanse of the social formation.

The common assumption that the conjuncture is always and necessarily defined by the nation–state may fail to see the possible complexity and contingency that the concept of conjuncture brings to the analytic table, precisely because it enables us to see the complexity and contingency of the nation-state as a conjuncture. The nation-state is precisely an articulation of a multiplicity of contexts, under the sign of a particular regime (or regimes) of euro-modernity.

Thus, on the one hand, there is no doubt that the nation-state continues to assert itself as a dominant modality and trope of contextuality. And yet, as various analysts have argued, it is also an impossible form—a doubling tied together by an “unstable hyphen” (Gupta, 1998). While some suggest that the current crisis is the undoing or re-articulation of that hyphen, I agree with John Clarke’s (2004) suggestions that such views of a break in the history of the nation-state assign too much solidity to its past incarnations, and that we are better off seeing it as “a partial and unsettling dislocation” of an always loose and contingent articulation that has to be constantly worked upon and maintained. A conjuncture must always be seen as the result of a complex and fragile set of articulations, which requires various labors to maintain its every-changing shape and density. I will suggest that we locate contemporary struggles over and around the nation-state within the broader conjuncture of struggles over modernity.

Conjunctural analysis (as a theoretical-analytical-political practice) poses at least three key interrelated tasks: The first involves judging “when and how we are/are not moving from one conjuncture to another.” That is why the primary question for cultural studies is always “what is the conjuncture we should address” (Hall, unpubl.). The second, closely related, demands that every analysis must try to get the balance right—between the old and the new (or in Raymond Williams’ (1977) terms, the emergent, the dominant and the residual), between what is similar and what is different, between the organic and the conjunctural (and the accidental). The final task is to interrogate the articulations within and across what I will later call the dimensions of locations, territories and regions. For the moment, suffice it to say that conjunctural analysis has to look at the non-necessary articulations of the socio-material, the lived-experiential, and the ontological realities of the conjuncture. That is to say, above all, conjuncturalism remains committed to complexity and work!

To some extent, then, in different conjunctures, cultural studies has had to be made again (or has remade itself) in response to different and changing “problematics.” I am arguing that cultural studies takes its shape in response to its context – that cultural studies is a response in part to “experienced” changes, to changing political challenges and demands, as well as to emerging theoretical resources and debates. Without such a sense of the complexity of the project and history of cultural studies, one is likely to fall into a trap common to many of its critics (e.g., Mulhern, 2000) of identifying all of cultural studies with a single vision – e.g., the cultural critique of social change – and with the questions that Williams (1958) identified as constituting what he called the “culture and society” tradition and missing what, for Williams constituted cultural studies: precisely, its break with that tradition in its refusal to separate culture and society (within a radical contextualism).

Let me try to explain this notion of “problematics” by briefly taking up David Scott’s argument that too much of cultural criticism is content to challenge taken for granted answers — in the name of deconstruction, historicization or anti-essentialism, for example — but rarely questions the questions themselves. Scott proposes that we think of conjunctures as “problem-spaces:” “think of different historical conjunctures as constituting different conceptual-ideological problem-spaces; and . . . think of these problem-spaces less as generators of new propositions than as generators of new questions and new demands” (7). In other words, if cultural studies responds to conjunctures, they must be understood as posing their own specific questions and demands. Of course, while the problem space is only available in what might be metaphorically called a conversation between analyst and context, the identification of the problem space is crucial to the constitution of the conjuncture. Moreover, since conjunctures are themselves constructed out of overlapping contexts, one cannot assume that there is only one

problem-space at stake. Still, to mis-analyze a conjuncture, to misidentify its problem-space, is to fail to understand what's going on and likely, to fail to formulate political strategies that can get us from here to some other imagined/better place. It is the problem space that constitutes the context or conjuncture, both in terms of its boundaries and in terms of the pertinence of various possible elements and lines of determination. As Massey (2005, 175) puts it, "the real political necessities are an insistence on the recognition of [the site's] specificity and an address to the particularity of the questions they pose" but without a "vision of an always already constituted holism."

Similarly Foucault (n.d.) suggests that a site is circumscribed (and pertinence assigned) through what he called a "problematization," a term he used to distinguish his "nominalism" from both realist and social constructionist positions:

When I say I am studying the 'problematization' of madness, crime, or sexuality, it is not a way of denying the reality of such phenomena. On the contrary, I have tried to show that it was precisely some real existent in the world that was the target of so much real discourse and regulation at a given moment. The question I raise is this one: How and why were very different things in the world *gathered* together, characterized, analyzed, and treated as, for example, 'mental illness'? What are the elements which are relevant for a given 'problematization'? And even if I won't say that what is characterized as 'schizophrenia' corresponds to something real in the world, this has nothing to do with idealism. For I think there is a relation between the thing which is problematized and the process of problematization. The problematization is an 'answer' to a concrete situation which is real.

VI. Conclusions

. . . But all of this is preparatory to the real work of cultural studies. One has to begin to put the data/analyses together in an effort to articulate a conjuncture, to fabricate the real. This is a practice of articulation and assemblage. I often use the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle (or a Lego project or, harkening back to an older moment, an erector set) although ideally, it should be a puzzle that is constantly changing, in fact, changing itself. Imagine someone has dumped the pieces of many different puzzles into a box and thrown away the cover pictures. You may start out with only a vague sense of what you are trying to construct, and where any piece belongs; what its function is will not be readable from its appearance. The pieces will not always, perhaps not even usually, fit neatly together because other pieces are missing, and one is always trying to manage rather than be overwhelmed by complexity. The pieces will articulate together in many different ways, and there will often be frictions, overlaps, antagonism; they will often transform one another as easily as they will play against each other. Obviously the metaphor cannot be sustained but it perhaps does help describe the process whereby one reconstructs the context as an embodiment of and a set of struggles that articulate the problematic.

It follows that any formation of cultural studies has to continuously reflect on its own contextuality, on the questions it poses for itself, and on the tools it takes up in response to those challenges. Such a contextualizing—and therefore concrete — self-reflection is necessary if cultural studies is to respond to the demands (the questions posed), the constraints and the possibilities of the context, including the dispersed possibilities for intellectual practices and resources that can constitute committed political intellectual work in that context. Cultural studies always has to reflect on its assumptions about the context it is analyzing, and its place within or relation to it. It has to question its own questions—and the categories and concepts

within which such questions are thinkable — and this is why the most difficult part of any project in cultural studies is figuring out the question. The context is the beginning and the end of our researches. The trajectory from the beginning to the end provides the measure of our success at mapping and arriving at a better description/understanding of the context.

Such radical contextualization interrupts any desire that we speak before we have done the work, for then we are likely to abandon the commitment to complexity, contingency, contestation, and multiplicity, which is a hallmark of cultural studies. Too often, in the face of seemingly urgently felt political necessities, even cultural studies scholars may too easily embrace the very sorts of simplifications, reductionisms and essentialisms against which cultural studies is supposed to stand. Too often, as intellectuals, we are unwilling to start by assuming that we do not understand what is going on, that perhaps what worked yesterday over there will not work today over here. Instead, we carry with us so much theoretical and political baggage that we are rarely surprised, because we almost always find what we went looking for, and that what we already knew to be the explanation is, once again, proven to be true. Cultural studies is, I believe, committed to telling us things we don't already know; it seeks to surprise its producers, its interlocutors, its audiences, and its constituencies and in that way, by offering better descriptions and accounts—again, accounts that do not shy away from complexity, contingency and contestation — it seeks to open up new possibilities.

Therefore cultural studies has to avoid two increasingly seductive traps that let the analyst off the hook. The first takes its own political assumptions (however commonsensical they may be) as if they were the conclusion of some analysis, which is always assumed to have been completed somewhere else (but always remains absent). Political desire trumps the actual empirical and theoretical work of analysis. At its extreme, partisan political journalism

(sometimes deteriorating into rants) substitutes for intellectual work. Cultural studies has to combat the self-assurance of political certainty, by recognizing that whatever the motivations, hopes and assumptions that brought one into a particular study, politics arrives at the conclusion of the analysis. The second assumes that the world exists to illustrate our concepts. Instead of a detour through theory, it substitutes theory for social analysis, as if theoretical categories were — by themselves — sufficient as descriptions of a conjuncture. It often mistakes philosophy and ontology for the contextual analysis of the concrete. Cultural studies requires that one brings the conceptual and the empirical (although the separation is never so clear cut) together, with the possibility that the latter might actually disturb the former even as the former leads to a new description of the latter. It is this possibility that seems to often recede in some versions of contemporary critical work.

Finally, cultural studies refuses to go along with the increasingly common effort to reduce all intellectual work to a single logic of productivity and efficiency (usually functionalist), as if all scholarship operated within the same temporality. On the contrary, cultural studies, reflecting on its own existence as a cultural practice, has to accept and even defend the almost (but not quite) inevitable displacement of its own effects and effectiveness. After all, one of the things cultural studies has made visible is that the effects of cultural practices are rarely where and when you expect them to be. They are almost always somewhere else, at some other time. While it would be nice if the effects of intellectual work (and interventions) were as immediate and obvious as we imagine some other forms of political interventions to be, it is unfortunately not usually the case.

While cultural studies seeks to change the context of its own work, it is rarely able to point, with any confidence, to the immediate benefits of its own work. Yet cultural studies

continues to believe that its intellectual work matters, even if it is not our salvation. Cultural studies is not going to save the world or even the university; rather it is a modest proposal for a flexible and radically contextual intellectual-political practice. It attempts to produce the best knowledge possible in the service of making a better world. And as such, it may help us get a little further toward our goal of making the world a more just and equitable place for all people. After all, bad stories makes bad politics does not guarantee that better stories make good politics. There is no necessary relation between knowledge and politics, only the possibilities of their articulation.¹¹

Notes chapter 2

¹ I want to acknowledge another line of radically contextual thinking in contemporary analysis—namely, that of Foucault’s genealogy. Foucault (1977) offers one of many descriptions of genealogy as a contextual practices: (1) understanding events as the articulation of singularities within relationships of force; (2) a theory of contingency; (3) seek out events “in the most unpromising places;” and (4) counter-memory, to transform the temporality of history itself. My thanks to Josh Smicker for his help on these and other matters.

² It is related to, but not exactly the same as, the Deleuzian concept of assemblage. See Deleuze and Guattari, 1987.

³ This is a controversial subject: exactly to what extent did Williams write about the whole way of life as if it were almost always a harmonious –communicative—unity? See Hall (1993) and Gilroy (1987).

⁴ Thus, I agree with the spirit but not the letter of Rustin’s reading of Hall’s practice.

⁵ One question that might be raised is whether, in general, a contextual analysis can be built around a single point, or whether it is not necessary to have a number of different sites, so that one can use their cross-articulation to constitute the context. My own position would likely favor the latter.

⁶ I am aware that identifying the forms of machine with the forms of lines is at best an oversimplification but I nevertheless think it is a useful one. deLanda has done some of the most important work linking Deleuze and Guattari to the concerns of social and cultural analysts. It may be helpful for me, given what I will later do with their work, to differentiate my argument from de Landa’s assumption that such a theory is opposed to theories of totalities. The latter are characterized by “relations of interiority: the component parts are constituted by the very relations they have to other parts in the whole.” (8) In opposition, a realist social ontology (his term) is built on a theory of emergence in which the elements exist outside the assemblage. de Landa assumes that all theories of totality are Hegelian, postulating wholes in which “the parts are fused together into a seamless web.” (10). I want to argue for a contextualist ontology in which—except at the level of the virtual—the components do not exist outside of assemblages, outside of totalities, but that these components themselves are assemblages always changing through the very machinic processes that are always mutating and changing reality, so that the latest rearticulation, the latest process of assemblage reconstitutes the part. In this way, I want to continue to assert that the identity of the parts are constituted inside the assemblages, without falling back into Hegelian models of relationship and interiority. de Landa’s theory depends upon a new dualism he creates between the properties defining a component or entity and its capacities, where the exercise of capacities are always defined by relations of exteriority. This distinction oddly resembles that of the British empiricists between primary and secondary properties. But what if one assumes that the properties are only the contextual actualization of capacities. If assemblages are heterogeneous and contingent (i.e., non-Hegelian), then it is still possible for relations of exteriority to be defined within the assemblage and by their functioning within the plateaus. de Landa cannot follow this move because he equates strata with assemblages, rather than seeing the strata as the result of specific kinds of stratifying apparatus, rather than seeing multiple assemblages on the plateaus. (In this way, he allows no space of milieu, and thus no theory of territory). The result is that de Landa locates assemblages inside of populations, rather than as the production of reality by the production and organization of

populations. The final difference is that, as a result, de Landa argues to describe such a theory as postulating a flat ontology affirms that reality “contains nothing but different scaled individual singularities.” Without denying that any assemblage is a singularity, I want to define flat ontology as the claim that all singularities, all assemblages, exist on the same plane (but not the same plateaus) and hence, that there can be no transcendental power of position that stands outside of the assemblages and plateaus.

Further, de Landa collapses the production of strata through stratifying machines, which distribute the components, producing two populations-- the material (content) and the expressive, with the “synthetic processes” of territorialization (and deterritorialization). And he equates these in turn with the effects of stabilization and destabilization. He then introduces, in a kind of secondary role, another synthetic process—coding and decoding, as operating only on the plane of expression and in very narrow terms: the “production and maintenance of identity by specialized expressive entities,” including genes and words. (14)

⁷ They describe this somewhat deconstructive process as thinking “n-1.” That is, one subtracts any claim to unity or organization, in order to reveal the virtual as pure “becoming.”

⁸ They are also sometimes described as machinic processes, technologies or apparatuses.

⁹ See for example Althusser (1970), Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe, and Balibar.

¹⁰ One needs to carefully distinguish between a conjuncture, which as I will argue, can be described in terms of a problem-space, from the hegemonic formations struggling to claim the leading position and to offer a new settlement, a new temporary balance. Thus, we were not living or do not live in a neo-liberal or new conservative conjuncture, although such positions may claim the hegemonic position for a time.

¹¹ I am grateful to Eduardo Restrepo for pointing this out to me.