



A more modest cultural studies for more desperate times¹

[Unos estudios culturales más modestos para tiempos más desesperados]

[Um estudo cultural mais modesto para tempos mais desesperos]

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Abstract: Cultural studies is a set of contextually determined ways of doing rigorous intellectual work in the service of social and political change. It can and has taken many shapes, but given the challenges posed by the rise of increasingly authoritarian, illiberal, and extremely vitriolic and polarizing political formations, I argue for the usefulness of conjunctural analysis. I present cultural studies as an articulation of seven scenes, a composition of seven practices, an orchestra of seven voices. Many of these scenes will be part of other critical-intellectual efforts, which are neighbors and comrades of cultural studies. But it is not only the totality of the seven scenes that defines the specificity of cultural studies, but the unity forged by the particular relations among the scenes, which will always be determined contextually. The seven scenes composing the orchestra of cultural studies are: Conceptual thinking, constituting relations and simultaneously, levels of abstraction; Theoretical or critical thinking establishing the contingency of concepts and the givenness of reality; Critique (or genealogy) introducing the problem of constructionism and conditions of possibility; Radical contextuality of every relation; Conjuncture as an analytical and political choice of a particular level of abstraction; Conjuncture as a problem space defined by a struggle over an organic crisis; and finally, Conjunctural analysis.

Resumen: Los estudios culturales son un conjunto de formas de trabajo intelectual riguroso, determinadas contextualmente, al servicio del cambio social y político. Pueden y han tomado muchas formas, pero dados los desafíos planteados por el auge de formaciones políticas cada vez más autoritarias, liberales y extremadamente virulentas y polarizadoras, argumento a favor de la utilidad del análisis coyuntural. Presento los estudios culturales como una articulación de siete escenas, una composición de siete prácticas, una orquesta de siete voces. Muchas de estas escenas serán parte de otros esfuerzos crítico-intelectuales, que son vecinos y camaradas de los estudios culturales. Pero no es solo la totalidad de las siete escenas lo que define la especificidad de los estudios culturales, sino la unidad forjada por las relaciones particulares entre las escenas, que siempre estarán determinadas contextualmente. Las siete escenas que componen la orquesta de los estudios culturales son: Pensamiento conceptual, constituyendo relaciones y, simultáneamente, niveles de abstracción; Pensamiento teórico o crítico, estableciendo la contingencia de los conceptos y la preexistencia de la realidad; Crítica (o genealogía), introduciendo el problema del constructivismo y las condiciones de posibilidad; Contextualidad radical de cada relación; Coyuntura como una elección analítica y política de un nivel particular de abstracción; Coyuntura como un espacio problemático definido por una lucha sobre una crisis orgánica; y finalmente, Análisis coyuntural.

Resumo: Estudos culturais é um conjunto de maneiras contextualmente determinadas de fazer um trabalho intelectual rigoroso a serviço de mudanças sociais e políticas. Pode e tem muitas formas, mas dados os desafios colocados pelo surgimento de formações políticas cada vez mais autoritárias,

¹ This essay is drawn from my recent—hopefully forthcoming- book, *We would build a new world if we only knew how*.



iliberais e extremamente vitriólicas e polarizadoras, defendo a utilidade da análise conjuntural. Apresento os estudos culturais como uma articulação de sete cenas, uma composição de sete práticas, uma orquestra de sete vozes. Muitas dessas cenas farão parte de outros esforços críticos-intelectuais, que são vizinhos e camaradas de estudos culturais. Mas não é apenas a totalidade das sete cenas que define a especificidade dos estudos culturais, mas a unidade forjada pelas relações particulares entre as cenas, que sempre serão determinadas contextualmente. As sete cenas que compoem a orquestra dos estudos culturais são: pensamento conceitual, constituindo relações e, simultaneamente, níveis de abstração; Pensamento teórico ou crítico estabelecendo a contingência dos conceitos e a dada da realidade; Crítica (ou genealogia) introduzindo o problema do construcionismo e condições de possibilidade; Contextualidade radical de todas as relações; Conjunto como uma escolha analítica e política de um nível específico de abstração; Conjunto como um espaço problemático definido por uma luta por uma crise orgânica; e, finalmente, análise conjuntural.

Keywords: Cultural studies, conjuncture, articulation.

Palabras claves: Estudios culturales, coyuntura, articulación.

Palavras -chave: Estudos Culturais, Conjunto, Articulação.

Introduction

For over fifty years, I have been trying to actualize an ever-changing practice of cultural studies and for just as long, I have been asked to define the project. Such a definition has to recognize not only that there are many context-specific ways of realizing the project, but that there are many affinities with other political-intellectual efforts. For me, to begin, cultural studies seeks to avoid both the Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of certainty, both the rock of particularizing and the hard place of universalizing. It refuses to choose between the passions of political commitment and the rigors of intellectual work; it understands that the impossibility of ever achieving objectivity does not mean you should not try to be more objective but that the effort is only made more difficult by the claim of disinterest.

I will elaborate cultural studies in seven intellectual exercises: conceptual thinking, critical thinking, critique, contextual thinking, conjunctural thinking, the construction of problematics or problem spaces (i.e., organic crisis), and conjunctural analysis. Each one is itself a way of thinking involving both theoretical and empirical elements. Some can exist independently but most usually operate in specific relations. Sometimes they have to follow a specific sequence, but sometimes they can be combined in less prescribed relations. No one exercise (including the last) is a necessary and sufficient condition of cultural studies. I invite you to consider the possible articulations of these seven thought-processes as one way of understanding cultural studies as a tentative unity-in-difference.



Conceptual thinking

Most familiar ways of thinking involve concepts; concepts are the building blocks of thought. There may be other ways of thinking, and they may each have their own kinds of logic and rigor, but concepts are the only way I know of to keep hold of the rigor that is necessary to understand and change existing social realities. Concepts make the world intelligible, perceptible, livable. Concepts are abstractions that produce identities out of populations or multiplicities. Lines on an x-ray becomes sub-atomic particles; particular lines become neutrinos. Looked at another way, concepts establish relations among individual entities (whether people or buildings but notice that these terms already assume a certain relation among differences, a certain identity among particularities). Every concept is a generalization that imposes some kind of unity on a diverse set, but it need not posit any homogeneity, or single essential feature. Consequently, concepts define the ways we encounter the world as organized, allowing us to identify, differentiate, and aggregate, the things that “belong” together, although we may not know the basis of the relations (i.e., we may not immediately recognize the similarities and differences).

Concepts make visible and hearable the relations (selective qualities) that we take for granted. But they also obscure and even erase other possibilities, defining what can and cannot be seen or said. The fact that the realities into which we are born are constantly changing makes every conceptual order fragile and unstable, confronting us with the need for other, perhaps new, concepts, with the need to go on thinking. But concepts (and words as their public signs) don't name pre-existing, natural, fixed identities (as abstractions or relations). They are constantly open to change; sometimes they reproduce the same identities, but sometimes they call new forms of unity into existence, and thus, the possibility of new ways of belonging together.

But conceptual thinking has to face another problem: what may seem like an empirical population waiting to be conceptualized and given an identity at one moment, may appear as an abstraction (already conceptualized) at another moment.

There is no clear and sharp distinction between an individual and the collective, the particular and the abstract, because identifying something as a



particular something requires you to have already identified it as an example of an abstraction. Insofar as we are thinking, even commonsensically, there are only abstractions. But not all abstractions are equal, for there are levels of abstraction, ranging from the concrete to the universal. The danger is to assume that the former is simple and purely empirical with no conceptual organization, while the latter is merely speculative with no empirical content. Every level has its own sense of the empirical. And that empirical reality presents itself to us, at every level, through an already if inadequately recognized system of concepts. Further, each level has its own forms of complexity; it is too easy to assume that the higher levels of abstraction are less complex than the lower ones.

Each level defines the differences that matter, the discriminations that can be made, the measurements that can be taken. Each level specifies what concepts (and their relations) will be most appropriate or useful as you try to make the “truths” of that level intelligible. But levels of abstraction are not objectively discrete, stable, and permanent planes. They are more like the spaces marked by the chalk lines on playing field or crime scenes, interrupting a continuum.

We are left with questions. How do we identify the level of abstraction at which a concept is useful? How do we identify the most appropriate level of abstraction for the questions we are asking? How does thinking move between the different levels? Can we understand the richness of people’s lives at the levels on which quantum mechanics or cognitive science operate? If a particular question seems to move between levels, what sort of work needs to be done in the middle, to move between the levels? Do concepts produce the level at which they operate or vice versa? How do we judge the adequacy of any concept, whether it articulates differences in useful—and ethical—ways? Are there concepts—even levels of abstractions we are unwilling or unable to question, or where we are only able to speculate?

But concepts do not exist in isolation; they are themselves always relational. They exist in relations with other concepts, creating systems we refer to as belief systems, common sense, or theories. Each of these can be seen as providing the instructions for how to construct conceptual relations that are coherent within the terms of the system itself.



Critical/Theoretical Thinking

Critical thinking (or theoretical thinking) distinguishes itself from belief and common sense. The latter tend to limit themselves and their energies to defending and proliferating their certainties. They closed and ultimately inert. They seek the stability and security of agreement, and when necessary, they will endeavor to persuade others of the truth of their claims. Their stories only get you where you already wanted to go.

Critical thinking attempts to stand back from such ways of thinking, from such ways of systematizing concepts; it refuses to rest comfortably with common sense or with what it thinks it already knows. It questions whatever is taken for granted. It introduces a controlled skepticism, a reflective rigor, into thinking—controlled because it recognizes that you cannot question everything at the same time and that, indeed, there may be some things that are beyond question. It demands a kind of double consciousness with which we can stand back from ourselves and common sense². It makes the world strange—defamiliarizes it--enough to be enable the critic to see what work the familiar concepts are doing. It makes the critic into a stranger in their own land, a stranger in a now strange land; it denaturalizes whatever claims to be obvious, necessary, or natural. It demands an openness to being surprised, a self-critical willingness to have the limits, weaknesses, and deceptions of your concepts and tools shown for what they are. It asks that we be willing to discover that the world is not what we thought it was, that it is not operating according to our assumptions.

Critical thinking creates the capacity to hear that which one does not already recognize, to see that which has remained invisible. It is a creative act that synthesizes reason and imagination, going elsewhere in order to return to see our world in a different light. It offers the possibility of a more measured take on the conditions of lived reality without being beholden to them. Critical thinking seeks to know more and to think better, to go on thinking.

² For many of the most profound thinkers, that choice exists alongside, intertwined with, the double consciousness that they are forced to live, from which there is no respite.



Critical thinking also demands that we question our conceptual and empirical assumptions or starting points before we go on endlessly repeating them. Perhaps the most important assumptions an intellectual makes concern the concepts and theories they bring to bear on the world, or at least on the questions they pose. After all, that is at least the starting point from which you will try to tell a better story about what's going on, from which you might be able to derive a better political understanding of the possibilities.

Critique

If critical thinking shines a different light on reality, Critique offers one way to continue the task. But let's establish one simple thing right now: critique does not mean criticizing, opposing, rejecting; it is not about identifying whatever it is you do not like and condemning it. It is not simply calling out forms of oppression, nor declaring one's opposition to domination. Nor does it involve finding a deeper "hidden" reality – which is rarely actually hidden because we almost always already know it is there. Such practices may have their place, but they do not begin to capture the difficult task of critique.

Critique is a specific practice of thinking, which raises particular questions. First proposed by Immanuel Kant, critique is one of the intellectual tools that defines modern thought; it is not the only one, nor is it only found there. One of the best examples is Karl Marx's (1993) critique of the classical political economists (e.g. Adam Smith). Contrary to what is often said, he did not accuse them of offering a false description of capitalism, one that focused only on surface appearances (market exchange) hiding the true reality (production). He did not accuse classical political economy of being wrong but of misrepresentation, inadequacy, and partiality, of taking a part of whole, which is given and obvious, to be its entirety. It starts its story with markets but fails to see that the beginning of one story is the end of another. What is it that gives us markets in the first place? What are the conditions of possibility of markets that are not given in their story? What is "concealed" is not hidden but simply rendered absent by the account itself, and that is the complexity of whole, "the circuit of production" that also includes not only exchange but also production and distribution. The classical political economists' story "naturalizes" its



conceptual categories and universalizes them in both time and space; it assumed that the history of economy was over as soon as they began their work, that the final truth had been realized.

Can you see what this implies? If critical thinking questions what we think we know, what we are willing to assume, then it follows that those assumptions are contingent rather than necessary. Critique asks how we have come to believe what we believe. How is the obviousness of what we take for granted produced? How do some beliefs come to be "truths".

But there is more at stake. If reality itself is a configuration of relations, then our present reality is also contingent. The present does not have to be the way it is—or better, the way we take for granted; it could have been otherwise. How did the existing configurations of reality come to be? How is reality constructed? If things did not have to be the way they are, how were they made to be that way? How were they made to seem...so real, so obvious, so natural, so unquestionable?

Critique enables us to inquire into the possibilities for the future disclosed in the present. It opposes appeals to necessity and inevitability (it had to be that way, that's just the way things are). It puts contingency—both pure chance and unpredictability—back into the world so that nothing is ever guaranteed in advance. But it does not throw us into a random universe in which everything happens by accident. There are processes and agencies of determination that work alongside chance. Some of those agencies involve humanity; some involve the ways we think about and describe the world. But not all. Reality—and even the ways we think about it-- is produced in the spaces between chance and necessity, between the discursive and the material, through a creative and rigorous re-articulation of already articulated relations.

Critique goes beyond questioning what we think we know by foregrounding the contingency of their apparent taken-for-grantedness. It inquires into the practices by which they are inaugurated, maintained, and extended, and the multiple ways people are recruited into supporting, accepting, or contesting them, often without full self-awareness. That is to say, critique imagines and describes how the world and our accounts of it have been constructed. Such constructionist theories, of which



there are many versions, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, pose a challenge: how do you live and think in a contingent universe where everything is contingent, everywhere, all the way down? Constructionism asserts that reality is both constructed and real. We always and only live in contingent constructions. But while they could have been otherwise, the constructions are real and not mere illusions; their truth is given in the material reality of their effects.

We need the constructed artifices to be real because sometimes, at some places, they have valuable effects. You have to avoid becoming either complacent by simply asserting that this is the nature of the beast, or so cynical that you can't accept whatever meaningful benefits there might be, that you renounce ahead of time any point of meaning, coherence, or affective investment. Accept that the constructions themselves -whether of reality or thought- can be productive; that the fact that they are constructions need not paralyze you.

Critique denies that there is a moment of certainty, a moment of true, foundational reality (e.g., as described by science, whether quantum mechanics, informatics, bioinformatics, etc.) behind the constructions. But it also denies that the task, practiced by many academic theorists, is to identify and deconstruct every moment when the contingent appears to be real, when the construction become naturalized. Here the idea of a supposed non-contingent reality or Truth becomes the true threat to human sanity.

Instead, critique seeks to understand the conditions of possibility (not the same as studying history) of the particular reality and the truth of its accounts. How did it come to be this way rather than that? Why does this appear here but not there? What has enabled it to exist in the way it does, and what are the consequences? ³ Taken together, critical thinking and critique carefully loosen existing relations, seeing the processes by which some relations were recomposed into the taken-for-granted organization of relations. They attempt to move beyond what is already see-able, sayable and even know-able; it attempts to make visible what we do not yet

³ In a sense, then, we are all Kantians, disagreeing over where to locate the accent of the real.



know how to see or say or even question. Then we can begin to locate the possibilities of new ways of reconstructing a more humane reality.

Doing Critique: Stories

Critique results in the production of stories. I am using "story" broadly. There is no prescribed form that a story must take. Stories need not be narratives; they need not even be verbal. The tattoos I wear and the music I love tell the stories that make up my life and its trajectories. What you might recognize as a one kind of story might be a story of an entirely different sort. Calendars are stories. Stories crystallize ways of living, of inhabiting a world.

Stories construct and reconstruct particular presents or contexts. In a sense, a story need not have a beginning and an end (although it certainly can); it only needs a middle, a between. A story, like a song, is greater than the sum of its parts. Stories are articulations of various voices, not all of which need be human; but the human voices are usually the loudest and the most seductive. You can think of voices as characters or livable positions, each of which has particular capacities and forms of agency available to it, depending upon where and how it participates in the story and the context the story constructs for itself. It uses particular "billboards" - whether a narrative moment, a character, a relation of colors, or a sound-image -to call you into its space-times, its rhythms, its possibilities, its re-articulation of the world and of a way of being in the world.

Theories are condensed directions for the construction of stories. Theories tell us how to construct a story and are, therefore, stories in their own right. Theories express themselves in the stories we create. Understanding theory as story repositions it and multiplies the possibilities for theorizing to meet both the needs of the current moment and the hesitations and criticisms raised against the project of theory itself.

There are better and worse stories (although I doubt that there is ever, finally, the one and only best story), depending largely on what you expect the story to do, on how it may enable you to move elsewhere. A better story is determined in part by its relations to the world. A better story listens to the demands of the world, listens



to the problems that the world poses, and allows it to answer back to its efforts to tell its story. It is no less empirical than what we commonly think of as the most empirical sciences, but it refuses to think of knowledge as a passive representation of some reality that is unaffected by our efforts. Remember, concepts are productive. Truths emerge out of a constant conversation or collaboration between stories about reality and the reality being storied. A better story allows for the possibility that it may be wrong or dangerously oversimplified. Sometimes, stories fall apart, they are criticized, or they end in crisis, and new stories have to emerge.

A better story is concerned with making visible and enabling the possibilities of change; it constitutes a context of possibilities. Better stories seek to open up the present to other futures, to other "possible" realities, but insist on remaining firmly anchored in an understanding of the present. Better stories work in the gap between the failed present and the possible future, but there is no guarantee, no dialectical logic, which can guarantee the relation between the two. When critical work overemphasizes the negativity of the present, reinscribing its pessimism, it leaves the positive -the imagination of a different future- free-floating, dissociated from any sense of the ways it can be actualized. That is to say, cultural studies has to articulate the negativity of the present to the positivity of the future. The imagination of a possible future has to be constructed out of and enabled by the analysis of the present.

Critique starts with the assembling of an archive in which you gather together whatever universe of examples, events, documents, data, or "facts" -remembering that these are only those things that we agree upon as actually having happened- from various domains. The archivist is a collector, perhaps a discoverer of material some of which may have been ignored or actively erased. The archivist may have many things but does not know what they "mean" or how they are related.

Critique proceeds by composing stories from the archive. It begins when you recognize that what we generally call an interpretation (or even an explanation) involves assembling the archive into a set of relations. More accurately, it constructs these, not ex nihilo, but out of the resources provided by already existing stories, which have themselves already been shaped from other archives and other stories,



etc. Thus, critique is constantly re-configuring one set of relations into another, re-articulating already existing stories into new ones. Every story rearticulates prior stories, redefining what we know and what we see. It shows us how our present reality has been made and naturalized, defining the limits of our thinking and perceiving; it show us the processes by which particular relations and effects have been made real and seemingly inevitable, inescapable. And in so doing, it provides the possibility, not of escape but of transforming, of moving somewhere else. It opens up the possibility of a new story that can surprise us, showing us what we had not seen and often, what we could not have seen. It can make obvious what had not even been visible and wash away relations that we had taken for granted.

Contextual thinking

Critical thinking and critique both depend upon rigorous conceptual-empirical investigation. What does such investigation look like? I propose a method that elaborates on the notion of constructionism, starting with the assumption that the world is composed of relations rather than independent things. Nothing exists outside of, free of, relations. There is no situation in which something is not in relations. The relation precedes the terms that exist within the relation, for it is only within a specific relation that they take on the meanings and capacities that we then assume to exist outside the relation. The relation defines what the elements within it are, and what they are capable of doing (i.e., what kinds of effects they can have). As the relation changes, so do the elements. Fortunately, relations are themselves not independent entities but always exist in further relations; relations are themselves organized into larger sets of relations. Reality itself is all about the relations of relations! However, that does not mean that everything exists in the same way, that there is a single form of relationality itself.

History as change is the ongoing processes of the making/unmaking/remaking of relations. We can describe the process and its outcome as: composing/composition, configuring/configuration, assembling/assemblage, and articulation/unity-in-difference (my favored term). [When speaking of culture as the articulation of reality as lived (as I will explain), I



will often talk about particular kinds of compositions: expressive or discursive formations or regimes. What effects any regime actually produces will depend on its context and the relations constituting its specific form. What they all share is the capacity to produce effects at a distance.]

These processes work upon the cracks in the foundations and stories of previous organizations of relations as they attempt to hold back the chaos always threatening to overwhelm us. While it may be true that everything is related to everything else, it is not very helpful, for it only reaffirms the chaos. These processes work at every level of reality, from the quantum universe to the emergence of life and sentience, to the production of individualities and populations defined by particular behavioral codes and capacities, to the human and social forms of intelligence and agency.

Every composition (a relation of relations) has different capacities and produces different effects; there is no reason to assume that it will always, necessarily produces only that one, same effect. Every composition is constantly being recomposed by other compositions, resulting in the possibility that its capacities and effects will be changed. But this means that no composition is ever entirely pure; every composition is an articulation of a unity-of-difference from which the imagined single elements can no longer -could never have been- separated. Every composition is syncretic, hybridized.

Contextual thinking embraces the complexity -the multiplicity of relations and of compositions of relations- that constitute a context. It assumes that any instance or region of reality -a context- is always constructed through the organization of relations encompassing and constituting multiple (syncretic) agents, practices (including passivity and the maintenance of the status quo), determinations, contradictions, etc.-all in a larger field of contingency. This does not mean that the world has somehow suddenly become complex, that complexity is new. Or that complexity is always the best or only way to think about contexts. Contextual thinking assumes that complexity varies -both qualitatively and quantitatively- from one context to another. But it will also assume, more radically, that any claim about complexity is itself contextual.



A context here does not refer to an isolated spatio-temporal bit, nor to an amorphous background lacking detail, but to an organized configuration of relations, differentiated unities, organized multiplicities. And complexity is understandable only as a fragile and fluid of multiplicity (chaos) and organization (order). How the balance plays out, what balance is reached at any moment, is the struggle of history. The reality of particular contexts, and the contexts of reality are never guaranteed in advance; their structures are never necessary and unavoidable; their effects and expressions never inevitable. There were and are always other possibilities. The realities we live in are contingent, the product of processes and struggles, natural and social, of various forms of agency, that forge relations and condition their effects. Human beings are certainly part of this ongoing history, but that does not mean that human beings are somehow in control.

Following on critique, contextual thinking investigates how already articulated and contextualized relations are re-articulated -but only partially since they always carry the traces of their history- to produce different relations and contexts. It views particular contexts as sites of contestation at which historical realities are made, unmade and remade. If critique abandons necessity for contingency, contextual thinking abandons universality and simplicity for specificity. To use one very simple example, capitalism is not and has never been a simple, single, or stable thing. Even its birth was the result of the contingent and complicated intersections of numerous processes.

The most immediate implication of contextual thinking is that it rejects any claim that a relation is universal, that it transcends the particular context in which it exists. It is even suspicious of generalizations across contexts. While it may appear that the same relation or set of relations appear in different contexts, contextual thinking will always caution us to recognize the different ways the supposedly "same" relation is articulated, resulting in very different consequences. It might prefer to refer to such supposed equivalences as "family resemblances" or "the changing same." Hence, there can be no general theory of capitalism, or of race and racism, etc. Instead, it will always focus on the complex relations and differences between the complexities of different contexts.



This focus on specificity and complexity is sometimes said to be paradoxical: after all, isn't contextual thinking claiming to be valid across contexts? In fact, I think the answer is no, at least not in my understanding of the project of cultural studies. I am proposing it as a useful -contextual- response to a contextually specific set of problems, a way of thinking contextually about contexts that seem to demand such thinking.

Contextual thinking has profound implications. It makes us rethink our understanding of the simple separation of the old and the new, the before and the after. Contexts are never simply straightforward continuations or repetitions of the past. Things do change, but they rarely change by radically breaking with the past. It is not enough to talk about evolution or development. We need more specificity about the articulations of the old and the new. The old continues to operate, sometimes in the same way, and sometimes in different ways because it is placed into other relations, operating in a different context. Things change because new elements and relations come into existence, either by emergence, or struggles, or invention, changing the capacities and effects of elements that continue, that have moved into the present, taking only some of their old relations and effects with them. The result is not only new and unexpected effects but also transformations of the effects of older elements and relations. Events almost always have unintended consequences -capitalists dismiss them as side-effects- but they are often more telling than the so-called primary effects. The question is always to understand the balance of the old and the new, to understand what is new and what is old, and how they impact one another.

Contextual thinking avoids the seductions of reduction and simplification, as if any event or situation were somehow, whether in the first or the last instance, in the beginning or the end, all about one thing, caused by or an expression of one thing. There is no bottom line, no single story that stitches everything up into a neat, simple, and harmonious package, with the bad guy on one side and the good guy on the other. Nothing is ever all and only about one thing. Nothing is ever completely reducible to a single plane of effects, a single structure of power, a single political site. And binary thinking, thinking that everything is either a or b, is not much better



than assuming that anything is either all a or all b. On the other hand, contextual thinking does not understand complexity to be endless, absolute multiplicity (without any unities or structures), which can only end either in chaos or a sort of hyper-differentiation and accumulation of particularities. This too is a form of reduction. Rather, contextual thinking holds to a more modest logic: yes, it is about a, and (but) it is also about b, and c, maybe not d, but clearly e ...

Contextual thinking becomes even more disruptive when extended to questions of power and theory. If power at its most basic is the capacity to make relations, it operates through many processes and agencies; it takes on many forms. Contextual thinking investigates the reach, purchase, strength, and hybridity of multiple technologies, forces, principles, and organizations of power, and how they contribute to, constitute, and participate in the construction and organization of any specific context. Additionally, you cannot assume that there is a single mode of power (e.g., distribution of resources and wealth, racial formations) determining the politics of a context, or that you can know in advance what the political stakes are in any struggle over and within the context. Similarly, the outcome of any project of power itself is not guaranteed; no structure of power is ever completely successful; structures of power are always leaky. Assuming that you already "know" power before you begin, and then, ending up exactly where you knew you would, is simply a way of avoiding the responsibility of doing the work of thinking.

All too often, thinking is reduced to the search for the ultimately right theory, the one that would answer all our questions. Such a theory would define our stories in advance, give us certainty, close down the need for further conversations or at least limit them in all too predictable ways. Such a view of theory lets us off the hook, telling us in advance what we need to know, or simply repeating what we want to hear, rather than leading us to explore what we do not already know and may not expect. Theories become sacred mantras to be worshipped and brought to bear everywhere.

Contextual thinking starts with the complex relations of concepts and contexts. Concepts and theories are the products and expressions of the contexts out of which they arise; they hopefully enable us to hear some of the questions being asked, and



to begin to answer them with stories that describe the actuality and genealogy of the present. But they are also responses to those questions that attempt to reconfigure, re-story, the context, offering a different version of where we are, which makes visible some things -including possibilities- otherwise not seen.

This doesn't mean that concepts and theories are entirely bound to their origins —that would contradict the assumption of contingency -but it does mean that we have to be cautious and reflective of the fact that we are re-articulating them, so that they may not mean or do the same things when we are done. They have to be constantly questioned, treated as a set of profane tools that you take up, reshape, or puts aside depending on their ability to offer insights into and understandings of a particular context, and to open up new possibilities for struggling to rearticulate that context.

Contextual thinking teaches us that thinking never stops, that the usefulness of particular concepts or theories depends on how you take them up in different contexts, and that it is sometimes possible to overinvest in them, as if they were responsible for everything, your successes and failures. Nothing is guaranteed and nothing is ever finished and closed, once and for all. The task is to go on thinking.

Doing Contextual Thinking: Puzzling

How do you practice critical thinking-critique-contextual thinking? At a minimum, contextual thinking will always be radically interdisciplinary, and any “object” of study (whether racism or television) has not only to be contextualized (how is it constructed) but also decentered, so that you are no longer studying an object but a dispersed network of relations without a center, i.e., a context. But describing something as a composition or articulation is not the answer to a question; it is the question, inviting us to examine the forms and production of specific relations. Understanding (historical) specificity entails analyzing the actual processes and practices by which any context is constructed as an organization of relationships.

I have often described the practice of critical thinking-critique-contextual thinking as a form of intellectual experimentation, using jigsaw puzzles as an inadequate analogy. Picture a box with the pieces of an unknown number of puzzles (each with a thousand pieces, most of which are blue -sky? ocean? wall? car?



magazine cover? suit?). Now imagine that you have lost all the boxes, so you have no idea what the original puzzles -before the chaos- were supposed to look like (Actually, I think one puzzle of a thousand pieces will work, after watching my wife over Christmas). The pieces are not simply empirical and transparent facts that tell you what they mean or what they do. Maybe there is just a glimmer of where the pieces might belong, but it is always just out of reach. Most of the time, they are just not readable or meaningful on their own.

Sometimes, when you take a piece out of the box, it drags others with it; pieces are stuck together, sometimes loosely and sometimes strongly. Do they belong together or is it just an accident of the box? Even when the pieces come to you already embedded within relations; you may not recognize the combinations, nor understand their implications. You have to decide if and where to disconnect them, in order to find places where they seem to belong.

You begin to create a hypothetical picture -it could prove to be wrong- so you try to distribute the pieces into regions of the puzzle (Is that a car in the upper right corner?) . These look like they belong together maybe as...a bridge. Or maybe you discover, as you put together other regions, that there is no place for a bridge, so you have to redistribute those pieces. Moreover, pieces may repeat themselves -albeit with different functions- in different regions. It's okay, there are enough pieces to go around (you hope). Each piece you place into the puzzle is likely to change your sense of what is going on and modify the significance of all the other pieces.

Now imagine that the puzzle keeps changing over time (and space), so that where the pieces might fit and what they might do changes as well. Or imagine that pieces keep appearing and disappearing. So, the puzzle is constantly being reconstituted, even constantly re-making itself, presenting always unpredictable risks and possibilities. Perhaps it sounds more like a (Vulcan?) multi-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, or Dejarik (holochess, as played in Star Wars), or a moving erector set perhaps, but one that seems to be involved in its own production. Do you have some sense yet of the task at hand?

The question is how you put the puzzle together? How do you think the possible configurations? How would you know whether you are meant to construct



a single totalizing figure, or many related figures, or even completely autonomous figures? Where you start matters, because it will open up some possible relations and not others. From each possible starting point, different lines of organization reach out to others. There are so many pieces; with each piece you pick up, you have to ask yourself -more accurately, you have to guess, is this piece going to be pertinent? Is it going to contribute in some significant way to the picture I seem to be heading towards?

Actually, I do not mean these figuratively. They are actually descriptions of my own working practices: collecting and creating an archive out of disparate elements, never sure how they fit together or even if they do, and then constantly moving the pieces around into groups, which I then try to identify, until I begin to find some order in the chaos, some sense of the formal arrangements and their effects. When they don't quite work, or something changes, I rearrange the piles, until I think I have found some interesting way of describing the contemporary context. (I will, momentarily call this a conjunctural story). And then I start over again, rearranging the piles, looking for another story (a conjunctural analysis) that might tell me something surprising, something interesting. something I had not been able to see before, something that might point me in another direction.

But let me also acknowledge the limit, even inadequacy, of this way of thinking of the practice of contextual thinking, as assembling parts of a larger puzzle. But it is probably more accurate to see the particular pieces or story-elements (at least the sub-plots) as dimensions or planes that cut across and shape the entirety of the puzzle, affecting many of the other elements (dimensions), albeit perhaps not all. The result is that any actual location on the puzzle will be the result of the determinations or articulations of various dimensions (regions) cutting across the surface of the puzzle. That is, the intersections and articulations of multiple trajectories, each working at different scales, will result in the production of particular moments or contexts (regions of the puzzle) that claim their own reality.

Still, the question remains: how do we distinguish contexts? How do we find a context that is suitable for our task? There are two obvious ways of answering the question: scale and levels of abstraction. The first measures context in largely



spatio-temporal terms, such as size, distance (most commonly the global, the regional, the national, the state, the local) and duration. The second measures contexts according to their degree of abstraction, stretching from the fully abstract (time zones) to the entirely particular (this person in this house writing this chapter, on this computer, listening to this music, etc.). Unfortunately, too often, the two measures are assumed to be equivalent, as if the global were necessarily more abstract and the local necessarily more particular. And to make matters worse, the particular is usually identified with the empirical, so abstract thinking is treated as not empirical. And the abstract is identified with the conceptual, so thinking the particular is not at all conceptual. I am sorry to say that these equivalences and differentiations are wrong (and I cannot say that often enough)! The two measures are not correlated nor are they so neatly distributed.

Questions of scale involve, at least initially, matters of spatial and temporal relations and reach, however contextually defined they may be. But every scale can be treated both concretely and abstractly. Speaking about the global may pose unique conceptual challenges, but it is not void of empirical realities. And speaking about the local may offer up a host of empirical realities, but it is not void of conceptual abstractions.

Similarly, every level of abstraction will have its own measures of time and space, defined less by distance than relation to other levels. Every level of abstraction has its own forms of empirical realities as well as its own forms of abstractions. Every level of abstraction is characterized by its own forms of complexity on the one hand, and by its forms of organizations. And every level has different kinds of political struggles and possibilities. We can easily say that it is all in the details, or that we need more nuanced accounts, but how you define the detail, how nuanced you need to or can be, depends on the level on which you are working.

We tend to think of both scales and levels of abstraction as simple ladders, but they are not laid out in a linear hierarchy. Their relation is more like Escher's paintings with their mind-boggling geometries, or the moving staircases of Hogwarts Castle in the Harry Potter books/movies. I imagine multiple levels in simultaneous, complicated, and sometimes even impossible arrangements. The image of the



ladder seems to leave the in-between spaces empty, but in my understanding, it's all about what happens in between, in the relations that are constantly being constructed among them.

Conjunctural Thinking

Most commonly, a conjuncture is thought of as a particular social context, defined in scalar or spatio-temporal terms, such as the nation-state. We can specify it more carefully by locating it somewhere between the immediate event and the long duration of the epoch: an event is a matter of years, maybe a decade at most usually in a particular place; an epoch lasts for centuries or even millennia, usually over a broader expanse. A conjuncture is generally measured in decades, its spatiality somewhere in between. But that will only get us so far.

I define a conjuncture as a particular level of abstraction; its salient difference concerns the nature of the complexity and the kinds of interventions or determinations, as well as the kinds of stories (understandings) each allows. The complexities of these three levels (event, conjuncture, epoch) are significantly different; it is not that one is more complicated or more empirical or more abstract than the other, but that the ways in which the particularities of relations are differentiated and enumerated vary in important ways. It might be metaphorically expressed in this way: in the event, the density in which the relations accumulate is almost overwhelming, while in the epoch, the accumulation seems to stretch out over such vast distances that it can appear almost impossible to measure them.

A conjuncture is a unity-in-difference, an articulation of many constructed assemblages that shape each other. Moreover, the conjuncture itself is related to other contexts, themselves composed of all sorts of other assemblages -that shape each other. Some of these assemblages and contexts will be residual, remnants of the pasts, which continue to have effects, the nature and strength of which are not guaranteed; some will be emergent, coming into existence and once again, their nature and effects also not guaranteed; and some will already be dominant, exerting the most forceful determinations on the conjuncture. All the many residual, emergent, and dominant formations are constantly fighting to win or hold onto the dominant position, even if it means partly allowing itself to be re-articulated by



competing formations. A conjuncture, therefore, is never completely enclosed or isolated for there are always lines of connection and determination, cooperation, and antagonism, connecting it across broader geographies and histories. Every conjuncture carries with it an exteriority that is operating within its spaces, just as it is always locatable within larger configurations of conjunctures.

Second, the choice of conjunctural thinking is exactly that: a choice, a wager that this level of abstraction is a useful and effective level at which to work, both intellectually and politically, especially in terms of the relations of governance, institutions, movements, and populations. It offers a complexity that lends itself to the practices of articulation and story construction. It is here that cultural studies becomes political. Conjunctural thinking gambles that the sorts of knowledges and stories you can construct have the best chance of both articulating and rearticulating, storying and re-storying, the complex relations of power, opening possibilities for moving the world in more humane directions. Conjunctural thinking attempts to tell a story of the complexities, and of the interactions, crises, struggles, and conspiracies that set them in motion.

The conjuncture then is defined by a choice, but it is more: it is a construction of the conjuncture in its specificity. The conjuncture is not there, objectively given, waiting to be taken up and described by some dispassionate, neutral observer. Rather than assuming that all the pieces somehow neatly fit together and that these unities can be known in advance, conjunctural thinking acknowledges that it is producing the conjuncture in the very work that it does in the very act of (re) constructing a context. A conjuncture is always in process, although it is never simply determined by the agenda of the analyst. It has to be carved out as it were, a configuration of forces producing a temporary context within a more complicated geography of interlinked contexts.

Conjunctural thinking does not suggest that we should ignore other levels: the event or the epoch. For one thing, they each define their own significant political struggles, which demand their own kinds of knowledges and stories. For another, each has significant effects in the conjuncture itself: epochal processes and structures express themselves or articulated conjuncturally, and specific events



articulate and are articulated by conjunctural processes and structures. For example, Christianity is a powerful epochal force having profound conjunctural effects; and the presidential candidacies of Donald Trump are events that have resonated throughout the conjuncture.

Third, in the first and last instances, the question of conjunctural thinking is a political one: what is the present conjuncture? how is power organized and naturalized? How can we organize political struggle? Conjunctural thinking starts with a particular understanding of the configuration of power. It refuses to assume that the natural state of politics is a war between two cohesive and homogeneous camps, each seeking total victory over the other. It refuses to assume that the natural state of power is one of complete fragmentation and dispersion. It refuses stories that simply present a dialectic of power and resistance,

Instead, conjunctural thinking understands the relations of power—at least modern power—to be enacting an ongoing struggle to maintain or transform the existing state of affairs; different power blocs attempt to arrive at or impose a "settlement" that would establish a stable balance in the complex field of forces, however fragile and temporary that balance may end up being.

Finally, conjunctural thinking often starts by challenging some fundamental, taken-for-granted assumptions of modern social thought: for example, that a society is the sum of a number of distinct domains—the economy, the culture, the state, social relations, and that each stands on its own, with a high degree of autonomy. Yet modern thought is continuously having to confront the fact that, despite its apparent disconnection, each domain is continuously shaped by its relations to the other domains. When one domain is seen to "interfere" too much with another, it often becomes a public issue.

Conjunctural thinking, building on critique, recognizes that these domains have been constructed and naturalized as independent precisely by being disembedded or disarticulated from the totality of conjunctural relations. Yet, they continue to be both embedded and disembedded. More, the nature of their continued embeddedness partly defines the forms and degree of its disembeddedness. That is, for example, the very way in which, for example the particular way the activities



commonly thought of as economic are so dispersed in our lives, partly defines the way the economy seems to exist as a realm unto itself.

Remember: the recognition that this autonomy is constructed does not mean it is not real. The disembeddedness of the economy is real insofar as it has real effects. It makes a difference that it is autonomous. The question is, how has this autonomy been produced and naturalized? How have certain activities been produced as self-producing, regulated as self-regulating?

Here I want to return to my brief suggestion that instead of thinking of the archive as pieces of a puzzle, we might think of them as dimensions cutting across the surface of the puzzle itself. Rather than thinking of the domains as autonomous assemblages, conjunctural thinking denaturalizes them, to think of each as a dimension or plane of effects cutting across the entirety of a conjuncture, across all relations, although not every effect will be realized in every instance. For example, we might think of the economic in terms of the production of use-values. Each plane defines a set of vectors or lines that cut across and are articulated to one another at various points in the conjuncture. Such vectors will not be straight lines that neatly transect social reality; they will be plot lines, meandering all over the specific complexities of the conjuncture. The stories of the conjuncture will look more like a spider web than a jigsaw puzzle, describing a nonlinear distribution of forces and contradictions, of stabilities and mobilities, certainties and uncertainties. Any site of struggle, a point of crystallization, will be constituted by the web itself, by the complex and not guaranteed entanglements of any number of these lines of effects.

Sometimes, these story-webs will create a dispersion of crises, concretizing them in different ways at different moments (I will elaborate one such crisis, a crisis of commensuration, in the following chapter). These webs of distributed crises, lived troubles, and structural weaknesses may at times become dense enough to define a conjuncture as a unique problem space. And this is where the re-storying begins in earnest.

The construction of problem spaces

A conjuncture may put forth, so to speak, its own specific questions and demands. It constitutes itself by the problems it poses. To fail to listen to these questions,



although there is often more than one way they can be heard, is to fail to grasp the conjuncture while you are constructing it. Sometimes, in the complicated articulations involved in the effort, a particular problem emerges, not at the center of the conjuncture so to speak, and not merely dispersed across its surfaces. Rather the problem seems to have gained a certain weight with which it increasingly inflects the entire conjuncture. Or rather, this is the story you feel called upon to tell: the story of a problem space.

For the most part, such problem spaces arise when an entire social formation appear to be extremely unstable because its instability is defined not by one crisis (high inflation or attacks on democracy) but by an accumulation and condensation of multiple, expanding, and deepening crises and struggles. The crises intersect, strengthen, inflect, and unsettle each other. The result is that it seems that no settlement is able to establish itself and stabilize the social field.

This state of affairs describes an "organic crisis" and it can endure for decades if no settlement arrives (Others refer to it as a mega-crisis or a meta-crisis). An organic crisis destabilizes, disrupts, and unsettles the most taken-for-granted terms of social reality, especially of political possibility and struggle. It calls into question a society's understanding and imagination of itself, its sense of identity and purpose. It problematizes the forms of belonging by which 'the people' are constructed and the defining values of the society. It challenges the common logics by which people understand and value their relation to and place in the world.

An organic crisis signals that the driving questions of a social formation have been transformed as a result not of a singular and sudden historical rupture, but of the many changes and struggles that have altered the ways people understand their lives and the challenges they face. It expresses a shared sense that society has failed in some major way, and thus expresses a vitally felt need for radical social and political change. It demands a new vision, a new set of values and relations, perhaps even a new reality. This is a moment in which, to use Gramsci's often quoted description, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". Organic crisis are highly transitional moments, when people no longer feel comfortable in or confident in how they have been



thinking and living, but they also cannot give it up, at least in part because they do not know where to go; they cannot see an alternative. What had been a knowable and livable reality has been destabilized and shaken to its core by the floods of chaos and contradictions that have seeped through its boundaries.

People are caught between old forms that no longer work and the fears of living in chaos, in the total absence of forms. Not surprisingly, their many responses are often confused and contradictory. They commonly feel frustrated, dislocated, insecure, insignificant, and helpless. They grasp at outlets for such feelings, whether psychologically or socially, whether thoughtful or desperate. They seek answers-forms -whether old or new, whether generous or violent and vitriolic, whether seeking new forms of commonality or hatred- that will help them navigate the shared discomfort.

An organic crisis does not simply arise by itself nor is it objectively given. Yes, there are multiple crises, only some of which are recognized and even fewer understood. But an organic crisis has to be actively produced or actively resisted through political struggle and competing stories. An organic crisis is constructed by reconstructing the story of a problem space. Such a story re-composes the non-linear dispersal of the various crises and their articulations. It transforms the dispersed webs of distinct problems into a new unity-in-difference; the story gives the conjuncture the unity of an organic crisis that articulates the possibility of a single, however complicated, narrative. It constructs a new political cartography of the conjuncture, and in this rigorous but still creative, sometimes even experimental project of intellectual and political work, it attempts to reconstruct the conjuncture itself, knowing full well that it cannot escape its own position within the conjuncture itself.

There is no guarantee at any moment that such an organic crisis can or will be constructed, and no guarantee of how it will be constructed, or of whether or not it will succeed in reconstructing the popular imagination of the conjuncture. Different political formations offer their own diagnoses and stories of the crisis (or they may fight against its construction); each formation offers its own response on how to reconstitute the unity of the social formation and re-establish some sense of



equilibrium, some sense of identity and direction. Each formation proposes to settle the chaos by offering a new balance in the field of forces. Thus, an organic crisis poses a unique set of challenges and transforms the political field since the viability of any proposed settlement will depend on whether and how the organic crisis exists or better, is constructed. The organic crisis itself becomes the ground on which politics has to be fought.

I would add that, since that advent of European modernity -and its varied imposition via capitalism, coloniality, and imperialism, but especially since the second half of the twentieth century, culture -matters of discourse and expression- has played an increasingly important role in defining the problem spaces of contemporary societies. The nature of that role has to be understood-conjuncturally.

Conjunctural analysis

It is too easy to think of the effort to understand and transform a conjuncture as a simple sequence: first, to offer a description of the conjuncture as it is (so to speak), of where we are, of the dominant stories and relations; second, to re-articulate or re-story it as a (set of) problem space(s); and finally, to re-articulate or re-story it one more time in a conjunctural analysis. Unfortunately, it is never that neat; the stories insist on mixing it up, merging together, even rewriting each other. The world is messy, and it is impossible and even undesirable to keep the messiness entirely out of our thinking.

Like critical thinking, conjunctural analysis requires us to look at the world differently, not to see some deep, hidden meaning, nor to describe what is objectively there, waiting to be discovered. Conjunctural analysis constructs a story out of what is offering itself up to be articulated. Maybe I can start with the example of the Nazca lines or ancient geoglyphs, but without assuming that all you need to see such things is simply the right perspective (e.g., from outer space). What you need are the right tools for thinking. In conjunctural analysis, there is no way to stand above the conjuncture; you are stuck on the ground, in the conjuncture, like everyone else, but you have the tools of cultural studies at your command. Those tools hopefully enable you to see things happening across the surface of the conjuncture -in the existing configurations of the conjuncture, in the dominant stories and the struggles over the



balance in the field of forces, and across the relations of the problem spaces. They enable you to tell another story. Others will have to judge whether it is a better story.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me briefly identify a number of consequences for cultural studies. What articulation of intellectual practices are brought together to constitute a context-specific formation of cultural studies depends upon the challenges-the problem spaces- thrown up by and constructed in response to a particular set of conjunctural struggles. It is impossible to define the "proper" way of doing cultural studies.

And it is equally impossible, I believe, to define its "proper" politics. Cultural studies has no guaranteed political content or agenda, although many of my friends would vociferously disagree, although I will say that cultural studies is not a utopian project. But insofar as it understands intellectual work as an ongoing and open conversation, defined by humility and self-reflection, it does manifest a desire to find ways of living in which we can learn to live with differences. Refusing both vanguardism and populism, it refuses to blame "the people" for the failures of political struggles, as if they passively accepted or were duped into accepting their own exploitation and subordination. Political possibility lies somewhere in the space between where people are (materially, ideologically AND affectively in the popular) and the willingness to put our own feelings and certainties at risk.

Most importantly, it refuses to allow political desire to undercut intellectual rigor. It is not simply politics by other means, nor the servant of whatever political struggle someone supports. Cultural studies does not completely abandon "objectivity" just because it is an unreachable goal. We can continue to reach for better truths, not because we have put our interests and passions aside, but precisely because we have interests, because we want to build a new world. We need the best stories (built on the best thinking we are capable of, and the best knowledge we can produce) to make sense of where we are and the possible strategies that might move society somewhere else. To accomplish this, we have to use the best resources available, even if that sometimes involves using the master's tools, because you don't get to pull alternative tools out of thin air; but that does not



mean we cannot criticize and critique them, re-configure them, use them differently, and put them to new uses.

Cultural studies argues against the increasingly common propensity to bend intellectual labor to the demands of politics, to allow politics to define the trajectory of thinking. There has to be some autonomy of, some gap between, the intellectual and the political. Politics 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 truth (in some warped sense) and efficacy of our analysis. Our intellectual work would become an inherently political act, and our politics would become necessarily true.

I do not believe that it is our responsibility as thinkers and storytellers of the conjuncture to offer a normative politics or even morally based political judgments, although it is probably inevitable (and perhaps good) that we constantly admit to our own normative positions, precisely so that they do not drive the content of the knowledge we produce. There is no reason to assume that our moral capacities are more profound, our politics more rational, than those of other people. It is not my job -as a critical scholar- to tell people who they should be or what they 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 and moral values, or political action.

Politics has its place in the first and the last instances in cultural studies. In the first instance, the politics of intellectual work reside in the questions it asks, which may even be driven by our own political imaginations of a better world. While conjunctures pose their own questions, what we hear is partly determined by our political positions. In the last instance, at the end of the story, intellectual work seeks to open new possibilities, both imaginative and strategic, to fabricate the context anew, to build a new world. But cultural studies does not have a single, guaranteed ethico-political foundation other than to go on thinking, nor can the political implications of its analyses be guaranteed in advance. At the very least, you cannot control how the stories you tell will be taken up in the name of political struggles.



Between the first and last instance, in the analytic work of constructing better stories of how we might build a new world from the contradictions and failures -but also the successes and advances- of the contemporary conjuncture, truth is constructed and increasingly lost, responsibility is taken and increasingly abandoned. Politics may inform the heart of cultural studies, but its soul lies in its faith in better thinking and better stories.