Cultural Studies and the Culture of Politics: Beyond Polemics and Cynicism

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What does it mean to take seriously, in our present conjuncture, the thought that cultural politics and questions of culture, of discourse, and of metaphor are absolutely deadly political questions?

—Stuart Hall

If the dominant media and its army of professional pollsters are to be believed, the American public is increasingly embracing a culture of cynicism. This growing phenomenon casts doubt on both the validity of public commitment and civic engagement and the legitimacy of investing in a vibrant culture of politics that educates people to struggle for the development of a radical democratic society and that makes good on its promises of equality, social rights, freedom, and justice. Cynicism has always occupied a prominent place in American political culture. In the last few decades, however, it has moved from ironic satire to a mocking posture of distrust and disbelief that dismisses as futile both the discourse of critique and the call for social transformation. Political and social agency appear to have limited currency in the face of a massive rise in corporate power, increasing economic inequalities, a long-term decline in real wages, a massive defunding of public services, and a full-fledged assault on the welfare state by the forces of neoliberalism. Signs of exhaustion appear to be everywhere, and the loss of political commitment in an age of political cynicism cuts across ideological, class, and generational lines. For example, in The Future of American Progressivism, Roberto Unger and Cornel West argue that Americans increasingly harbor a distrust of collective efforts and institutional interventions to solve major social problems. This distrust is evident in the growing refusal on the part of many people to participate in social movements and political parties or to invest in the power of the government to implement

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social, economic, and political reforms. Political indifference is also borne out in the widespread refusal on the part of many adults and young people to vote or participate in the political system. For instance, voter turnout in the 1996 presidential election was the lowest of any election since 1924. Moreover, in the mid-term elections of 1998, little more than twelve percent of eighteen to twenty-four year-olds voted, compared to nineteen percent in 1994 (Moseley 35).

Of course, political cynicism is not simply about the refusal of large sections of the population to vote. Socially engaged citizenship as the refusal of political cynicism is about the willingness of people to participate individually and collectively in administering the basic institutions that shape their lives, and to exercise control in wielding power over organizations as diverse as the government, workplace, home, and school. Crucial to any viable notion of social citizenship is the project of developing social movements that can challenge the subordination of social needs to the dictates of the “free” market in every sphere of society and that offer alternative models of radical democratic culture rooted in social relations that take seriously the democratic ideals of freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon point out, social citizenship combines traditional notions of individual rights, equal respect, and participation in public life with the “entitlement to social provision—the guarantee of a decent standard of living” (113). This notion of citizenship provides individuals and groups with “institutions and services designed for all citizens, the use of which constitutes the practice of social citizenship: for example, public schools, public parks, universal social insurance, public health services” (113-14). In its more substantive forms, citizenship provides the conditions for public participation and engagement in a vastly changing set of historical conditions. Undermining this conception of citizenship, cynicism becomes both an ideological weapon and a symptom of those cultural and institutional forces that subvert the individual and collective dimensions of political life and social transformation.

According to Kevin Mattson—a self-described spokesperson for Generation X—irony, detachment, and indifference are the hallmark characteristics of his generation. He alleges that many young people have lost faith in the culture of politics and that they now believe that what was once possible for previous generations is out of reach for their own. In Mattson’s view, rapacious neoliberalism and its market-driven conservative ideology—buttressed by the death of liberalism after the 1960s and the absence of a viable left movement—offer young people few
oppositional discourses with which to critically engage the cynicism that permeates almost every aspect of American culture, a cynicism that defines the social life of those he labels Generation X (59). In the eyes of many young people, politics as a sphere of concrete possibility appears to have given way to an unregulated and all-powerful market that models all dreams around the narcissistic, privatized, and self-indulgent needs of consumer culture. Generational stereotypes aside, the young increasingly bear the burden of a society that offers them an impoverished sense of politics; a future filled with low-paying, temporary jobs; and a growing gap between what is learned at all levels of education and the knowledge and skills of citizenship that they will need to address the most pressing social and economic problems of a troubled world.

The eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that as the bridges between private and public life are dismantled, major industrial societies—such as the United States—become increasingly incapable of both translating private troubles into public issues and understanding how public life affects private experience. One consequence is a politics that, in Bauman’s words, “lauds conformity and promotes conformity” (In Search 4). In an age that declares that ideology and history have reached their ultimate liberal democratic expression, politics increasingly means that “citizens” no longer need to bother themselves with “any coherent vision of the good society [or] of having traded off the worry about the public good for the freedom to pursue private satisfaction” (8) If Bauman is right, we are quickly moving toward a period in American history in which society has stopped questioning itself and, in doing so, not only ignores its most pressing social problems, but also produces a politics that offers nothing but more of the same.

The lack of political imagination that permeates mainstream culture is matched both by a lack of collective outrage against glaring material inequities and by the growing belief that today’s culture of investment and finance makes it impossible to address major social problems such as inadequate health care, education, and housing, on the one hand, and, on the other, the growing inequality of wealth, generational entitlements, and racial apartheid characteristic of inner cities (see Kazin). Michael Walzer, among others, has argued that such forces have drastically undermined the faith of the poor in either the possibility of politics or the sense that they have any power to change the direction of their lives (9-10). More and more people are dropping out of the middle rungs of society or are barely making it due to factors such as the growing unequal distribution of income, the continued reduction of the state to its policing functions, and
the permanent state of insecurity caused by the policies of neoliberalism. For many poor people, repression now replaces social investment as the state's central activity; public spending recedes as the market is increasingly deregulated; and as industries simultaneously merge and downsize, thousands of workers are laid-off or are faced with temporary employment. For those who occupy the poorest rungs on the social ladder, the threat of job insecurity—along with worsening economic opportunities—has displaced hope with a growing sense of apathy, resignation, and political indifference (see Aronowitz and DiFazio). The failure of the poor to participate in the culture of politics is, however, only one index of the failure of social justice and all too often is cited extensively by liberals as a way of overlooking the complicity of the middle and upper classes in undermining social justice and political agency. The poor are not solely responsible for the growing culture of cynicism; yet, more than any other group, they often bear the consequences of a devalued notion of citizenship.

The evisceration of political culture is especially evident in a post-Littleton, post-Lewinsky climate in which the vast majority of the nation's populace feel removed from a culture of politics whose impact seems to be most strongly felt in the dominant and tabloid media while it is largely absent from social life. As columnist Eric Alterman observed in The Nation, if the 1970s was the "age of the investigative reporter, then the late nineties may go down in history as the age of the blowjob reporter. . . . Ever since the word 'Lewinsky' entered the lexicon, nothing makes an editor's pencil perk up quite so much as the word 'oral' next to the word 'sex'" ( "Blowjobs" 10) The dominant media carpet bombs audiences with endless stories about oral sex, cigars, and presidential sexual indiscretions—not to mention the prime coverage given to Reverend Jerry Falwell's melodramatic announcement that Tinky Winky, a whimsical doll figure from Teletubbies (a popular children's television show) is gay and hence a menace to society. At the same time, the media have little to say about the decline of democracy itself—a decline characterized by the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the shameful increase in child poverty, the accelerating violence being waged against people of color and gays, and the diminishing access that the poor and the working class have to a political culture increasingly dominated by multinational corporate interests. In this scenario, politics becomes a matter of spectacle, voyeurism, and cheap thrills.

Millennial politics signals its own exhaustion when the only choice, as Russell Jacoby says, is "between the status quo or something worse.
Other alternatives do not seem to exist" (xi). Coupled with the general public's increasing loss of faith in government, public institutions, and the democratic process, the only form of agency or civic participation offered to the American people is consumerism rather than substantive forms of social citizenship. As Robert McChesney argues

To be effective, democracy requires that people feel a connection to their fellow citizens, and that this connection manifests itself through a variety of nonmarket organizations and institutions. A vibrant political culture needs community groups, libraries, public schools, neighborhood organizations, cooperatives, public meeting places, voluntary associations, and trade unions to provide ways for citizens to meet, communicate, and interact with their fellow citizens. Neo-liberal democracy, with its notion of the market *uber alles*, takes dead aim at this sector. Instead of citizens, it produces consumers. Instead of communities, it produces shopping malls. The net result is an atomized society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless. (Introduction 11)

The erasure of democratic politics from the cultural arena can also be seen in the suppression of dissent across a wide variety of public spheres—including the media, universities, and public schools—that are increasingly coming under the control of mega-corporations or are being corporatized. As conglomerates such as Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and Bertelsmann gobble up television networks, radio stations, music industries, and a host of other media outlets, it becomes more difficult for stories that are critical of these concentrated industries to see the light of day. When Viacom recently acquired CBS, most of the stories covering the event in the dominant media focused on the personalities of the top CEOs involved in the deal. With the exception of a few reports in the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, the threat that the deal posed to the free flow of information and the implications it might have for undermining a healthy democracy were largely ignored in the dominant media. Concentrated corporate control does not welcome stories or investigative reports that are critical of corporate culture and its policies and practices. For example, soon after Disney bought ABC, Jim Hightower—a popular radio talk show host—was fired for making remarks critical of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the Disney corporation. Similarly, in 1998 Disney-owned ABC refused to air a 20/20 segment by Brian Ross that was critical of Disney World and its hiring of employees who had previous criminal records (including sexual misconduct), a failure that resulted from Disney's refusal to do adequate
background checks. Similar examples can be found in all of the major networks.

Moreover, as higher education is increasingly corporatized, it also becomes subject to policies and practices that limit dissent and the pursuit of knowledge. For example, progressive and leftist intellectuals find it increasingly difficult to protect their existing appointments or even to get hired. The attack on the democratic principles of academic freedom and intellectual diversity are further exacerbated by the moral panic created in the media by conservative politicians, academics, and policymakers—such as William Bennett, Pat Buchanan, Roger Kimball, Charles J. Sykes, Roger Shattuck, and William Kristol—with the help of an endless amount of financial backing from such conservative sources as the John M. Olin Foundation, the Harry Bradley Foundation, The Smith Richardson Foundation, the Richard Scaife Foundation, to name only a few (see Alterman, “The ‘Right’”). These conservative public intellectuals are far outside of the mainstream of popular opinion on many issues. Yet, they are regularly hosted in the dominant media as celebrities, and they are unwaveringly dedicated to bashing progressive academics and offering instant sound bytes about the decline of civility, the corruption of Western values, and the growing need to purge the universities of dissenting voices, especially if they come from the left. Clearly, progressive positions that might offer a challenge to such views are conspicuously missing from the dominant media.

Such an assault on the culture of democratic politics is further strengthened as schools divorce themselves from pedagogies and models of learning that address important social issues, interrogate how power works in society, or engage crucial considerations of social justice as constitutive of the interrelationship between cultural practice and democratic politics in the name of standardization and testing. In short, the ascendancy of corporate culture in all facets of American life has tended to uproot the legacy of democratic concerns and rights that has historically defined the stated mission of higher education. In the neoliberal era of deregulation and the triumph of the market, many students and their families no longer believe that higher education is about higher learning. Instead, they believe it is about gaining a better foothold in the job market. Colleges and universities are perceived—and perceive themselves—as training grounds for corporate berths. Corporate culture has also reformulated social issues as largely individual or economic considerations while canceling democratic impulses by either devaluing or absorbing them into the imperatives of the marketplace. This suggests a dangerous turn in
American society, one that both threatens the democracy that is fundamental to our freedoms and removes the ethical referent from the meaning and purpose of higher education.

As corporations become more and more powerful in the United States, democratic culture is increasingly replaced by corporate culture, while educational leadership is stripped of its ethical and political obligations and is redefined primarily as a matter of management, efficiency, and cost effectiveness. In the name of efficiency, educational consultants all over America advise their clients to act like corporations selling products and to seek “market niches” to save themselves. In this corporatized regime, management models of decision making replace faculty governance. Once constrained by the concept of “shared” governance in the past decade, administrations have taken more power and have reduced faculty-controlled governance to an advisory status. Given the narrow nature of corporate concerns, it is not surprising that when matters of accountability become part of the language of school reform, they are divorced from broader considerations of social responsibility. Missing from much of the corporate discourse on schooling is an analysis of how power works in shaping knowledge, how the teaching of broader social values provides safeguards against turning citizenship skills into training skills for the workplace, or how schooling can help students reconcile the seemingly contradictory needs of individual freedom and democratic community so as to forge a new conception of public life. In the corporate model, knowledge becomes capital—a form of investment in the economy—but appears to have little value when linked to the power of self-definition or to the capacities of individuals to expand the scope of freedom. Nor does such a language provide the pedagogical conditions for students to critically engage knowledge as deeply implicated in issues and struggles concerning the production of identities, culture, power, and history. Hence, the corporate view of schooling has no way of recognizing that education must be more than simply a form of training. When education capitulates to the market not only does training replace education, but the idea of higher education as a public good is surrendered to the logic of the bottom line.

Although most commentators argue that political culture has been on the decline since Watergate, there is little understanding of the dialogical relationship between culture and democracy. Typically, conservatives believe that American culture is in crisis and that the problem is democracy (except when it provides new markets). In this discourse, democracy promotes unpatriotic dissent, moral relativism, the “dumbing down” of
schools, welfare, and the lowering of standards, most of which can be traced to the upheavals of the 1960s. Such sentiments are echoed in the halls of Congress by majority whip Tom DeLay, who believes that the culture of politics has been corrupted by the breakdown of religious values, the power of big government, and the bodies of welfare recipients who allegedly drain the national treasury (see Williams). In DeLay’s view, moral righteousness is the defining postulate of civic virtue and is considered far more important than the democratic principles of liberty, freedom, and equality. Furthermore, these principles, more often than not, give rise to forms of dissent that, in Anthony Lewis’ opinion, undermine true believers’ faith in “certainty” and “their absolute conviction [that] they are right.” Such views can also be expressed by high-profile conservatives, such as former presidential hopefuls Pat Buchanan and Gary Bauer. In this discourse, morality is invoked as a way of controlling individual behavior and of drawing public attention away from issues of economic and social justice.

For many liberals, in contrast, the crisis of political culture is presented in somewhat different terms. In the liberal perspective, democracy is in crisis and the problem is culture. Yet culture is less a problem for its lack of moral principles than for its proliferation of cultural differences, its challenge to patriarchal authority and to racial exclusions, its refusal to offer a unified homage to the dictates of the market, and its spread of violence and incivility through popular culture. In this model of liberalism, popular culture threatens the dominant image of the public sphere as male, middle class, and white; it also undermines the liberal notion of consensus and challenges the market-crazed celebration of instant gratification and the endless pursuit of getting and spending. In this view, the public sphere undermines the freedom associated with private gain and resurrects a notion of the social marked by political differences and the allegedly antagonistic calls for expanding democratic rights. Liberalism in its more “compassionate” strains advocates a culture of gentility and civility, one that dismisses the democratic impulses of mass culture as barbaric and the ethos and representations of an electronically-based popular culture as irredeemably violent, crude, and tasteless (see Postman). Both positions share a cynicism toward and a condemnation of popular culture, perceiving it as impure, sullied, and corrupted by the logic and discourse of difference. In addition, both positions condemn democratic, nonmarket, noncommodified forces that often provide a critical vocabulary for challenging the self-serving notion that the free market and corporate domination of society represent the ultimate expres-
sion of democracy or that the neoliberal view of society represents humanity at its best. Neither position offers any hope that America’s future will be any different from its present.

Finally, there is the notion—largely held by an orthodox materialist left—that culture as a potential sphere of political education and change undermines the very notion of politics itself, which is often reduced to struggles over material issues rather than struggles that accentuate ideology, language, experience, pedagogy, and identity. Left anticulturalists posit their concerns with class and economic justice against a cultural left largely organized around issues of race, sex, and gender. For instance, Micaela di Leonardo argues in *Exotics at Home* that a radical anthropology undermines any notion of critical politics to the degree that, as Sherry Ortner observes, it emphasizes culture “instead of the hard, objective realities of political-economic forces impinging on people’s lives” (107).

Similarly, Alterman dismisses the “racism/sexism/homophobia crowd” as political losers because they have no sense of the primacy of class politics in American history (qtd. in Willis xiii). Todd Gitlin echoes the culture versus class position by claiming that cultural studies is primarily about choosing sides, mistaking the academy for the larger society and undermining public engagement because its practitioners fail to stress the primacy of class and the materiality of power (see “Anti-Political”).

This position appears frozen in time, collapsing under the burden of its own intellectual weariness and political exhaustion. Weighted down in a nineteenth-century version of class struggle and domination, contemporary scholarship from the orthodox left often refuses to pluralize the notion of antagonism by reducing it to class conflicts and further undermines the force of political economy by limiting it to a ghostly economism. In addition, orthodox left criticism mirrors the increasing cynicism and despair exemplified in its endless invocation of such terms as *real politics* and its call for a return to materialism—a call premised on the elitist assumption that the average person is incapable of engaging in serious debates about political and cultural issues—just as it buttresses the notion that a pedagogy of persuasion has no role to play in opening up a space of resistance and political struggle. As such, its rhetoric largely appears as high-minded puritanism (“the only true members of the church”) matched only by an equally staunch anti-intellectual populism (radical social critique emanating from the universities is politically worthless), and an ideological rigidity that barely conceals its contempt for notions of difference, cultural politics, and social movements that do not focus exclusively on class and economic justice. In one of the more devastating
critiques of what she calls majoritarian left politics, Willis argues that the alleged opposition between class/capitalism and cultural politics constructed by left conservatives is simply wrong. She writes,

People's working lives, their sexual and domestic lives, their moral values are intertwined. Capitalism is not only an economic system but a pervasive social and ideological force: in its present phase, it is promoting a culture of compulsive work, social Darwinism, contempt for "useless" artistic and intellectual pursuits, rejection of the very concept of public goods, and corporate "efficiency" as the model for every social activity from education to medicine. In every sphere, Americans face the question of whether they will act, individually and collectively, in behalf of their own desires and interests, or allow established authority to decree what they must do, what they may not do, what they deserve, what they have a right to expect. If they do not feel entitled to demand freedom and equality in their personal and social relations, they will not fight for freedom and equality in their economic relations. (x-xi)

Willis is right in arguing against a left materialism that claims "we can do class or culture, but not both" (x). But there is more at stake than the refusal to connect economic and cultural issues; there is the broader refusal to engage in a political struggle that recognizes consciousness, agency, and education as central to any viable notion of politics. And it is this issue that links the material left to liberals and conservatives who also refuse to reform the basic institutions of civil society as part of a wider struggle to expand democratic identities, values, and social relations. What all of these ideological positions share is a widespread public cynicism regarding the need to develop schools and other educational sites that prepare young people and adults to become active agents of democratic politics; to develop vigorous social spheres and communities that promote a culture of deliberation, public debate, and critical exchange; and to encourage people to organize pedagogically and politically across a wide variety of cultural and institutional sites in an effort to organize democratic movements for social change. At stake here is the need both to register the crisis of political culture and to recognize the important role that cultural studies might play in addressing such issues. In part, this means acknowledging that many of the current attacks on cultural studies can be understood as part of a broader attack on the culture of politics and the attempt to undermine any linkage between culture, politics, pedagogy, and power, on the one hand, and, on the other, the discourse of social criticism and social change.
In what follows, I want to argue that the spate of recent attacks on cultural studies might best be seen as symptomatic of a broader attack on cultural politics in public life. Such a recognition allows cultural studies theorists to view such attacks as more than forms of academic sniping or as simply symptomatic of the self-reflexive character of debate that cultural studies generates both within and outside of its ranks. In “The Cultural Studies’ Crossroads Blues,” Lawrence Grossberg insightfully argues that the attack on cultural studies should be understood as part of a broader assault on the viability of the political as a crucial sphere for investing in social change, the courage to imagine the possibility of workable political communities, and the theoretical necessity for articulating a theory of critical agency, but one that does not focus exclusively on individual agency. If Grossberg is right, and I think he is, it becomes necessary to provide a sustained response to such attacks—particularly those waged in the mainstream media—in ways that are productive rather than simply defensive. I am referring in this case not to those critiques of cultural studies that are thoughtful, well-argued, risk-taking, and are intended to expand the possibilities of critical exchange and social engagement. Cultural studies has always been self-reflective about its own motivating questions, theoretical projects, and political formations (see Grossberg, Bringing 245-71). On the contrary, I am referring to a species of argument that condemns, provides no room for equal discussion, collects proof of the other side’s guilt, and treats an interlocutor as a suspect or as an enemy that must be eliminated. The distinctiveness of such assaults leads to my second point.

Responding to such polemics provides cultural studies theorists and its many practitioners with the opportunity to make clear how cultural studies might be useful for producing the knowledge, skills, pedagogies, modes of collaborative association, and forms of social engagement that might be useful in addressing a range of problems and public conversations that are shaping what Grossberg calls “the politics of policy . . . and public debate” (“Blues” 66). At stake here is the opportunity for cultural studies theorists to illuminate and defend the importance of cultural politics and the role it can play in expanding radical democratic struggles. In this instance, cultural studies theorists would seize on the primacy of the relationship between culture and politics by emphasizing that any viable notion of political and economic transformation involves connecting learning to social change, bridging the gap between broader systemic forces and those contexts where people actually live out their daily lives, and cultivating notions of social struggle that recognize the futility of
separating economics and class-based issues from other forms of antagonism and cultural considerations. Cultural studies advocates must articulate those elements of a political project—however unstable and provisional—that shape its own practices in opposing the evisceration of politics while simultaneously intervening pedagogically and politically in the shaping of public life. Of course, there is a need for cultural studies theorists to engage in both short and long-term projects—projects that undertake diverse approaches to producing and engaging theoretical discourses as well as developing knowledge more directly tied to social change. At the same time, to recognize this issue, it is imperative that these diverse approaches require what Willis calls a formulation of a radical democratic vision "of what kind of society we want and agitating for that vision, in every inventive way we can, wherever we find ourselves" (192).

If such a vision can move on the ground, it should not be mistaken for the irresponsible demand to develop what Derrida calls a political project whose object is the "logical or theoretical consequences of assured knowledge (euphoric, without paradox, without aporia, free of contradiction, without undecidabilities to decide)" (7). Nor should the call for such a project suggest that cultural studies work cannot assume multiple forms, directions, and expressions. On the contrary, such a project—while grounded in a compelling vision of a society that provides the greatest degree of security and justice for all of its citizens—would be anticipatory not messianic. It would hold democracy responsible to its promises and provide the groundwork for an ongoing political debate—marked by multiple forms of intervention—regarding the urgency of politics and the crisis of public life within the context of global capitalism. While cultural studies prides itself on being a politics that offers no guarantees, this does not relieve its practitioners of mapping existing relations of power, providing resources for engaging in acts of resistance, and confronting the dystopian forces at work in shaping our entry into the new millennium. In fact, many cultural studies theorists have been doing this work for some time, but such work must gain more visibility within broader public spheres.

Cultural Studies and the Politics of Polemics

In the current dystopian climate, there are increasingly frequent attempts on the part of theorists occupying various positions on the political spectrum not simply to engage cultural studies in a critical dialogue but to write its obituary (see Cohen, Ideology). Cultural studies becomes an easy target in the current historical conjuncture. Yet, in contrast to the
pervasive cynicism that cuts across the ideological spectrum, cultural studies theorists often work to further both a language of critique and possibility. Many of its practitioners view the relationship between culture and politics as pivotal to understanding and connecting the complex relations between theory and practice, power and social transformation, and pedagogy and social agency. Within these diverse traditions, culture is a site of struggle over material resources, communication, politics, and power. As Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg have pointed out, cultural studies is perceived as dangerous because “its practitioners see [it] not simply as a chronicle of cultural change but as an intervention in it, and see themselves not simply as scholars providing an account but as politically engaged participants” (5).

In the ideologically diverse and excessive rhetorical flourishes that dismiss cultural studies because it is considered politically radical, nihilistic, faddish, or unscholarly, there are not only the residues of anti-intellectualism, but also an attack on the basic presupposition that cultural politics can play a role in shaping democratic public life. For many critics, it seems unimaginable that cultural studies might play a crucial part in challenging the popular disinterest in the culture of politics by reenergizing the role that academics and other cultural workers might play as oppositional public intellectuals addressing multiple audiences and drawing attention to the important role that cultural pedagogy and politics can play in forging alliances between academics and various groups outside of the university. But before I address what I think cultural studies theorists might do in response to the ongoing criticisms that they are facing vis à vis the broader attempt to expand the possibilities of a radical cultural politics, I want to highlight some representative examples of such critiques and show that they are symptomatic of both a particular style of polemics and a part of a broader culture of depoliticization and despair that has become the hallmark of the present historical era.

The first commentary comes from Jeffrey Hart, one of the senior editors of the conservative magazine, *The National Review*. Hart positions his commentary on cultural studies in response to the question “What is a liberal-arts education suppose to produce?” He answers,

Select the ordinary courses. I use ordinary here in a paradoxical and challenging way. An ordinary course is one that has always been taken and obviously should be taken—even if the student is not yet equipped with a sophisticated rationale for so doing. The student should be discouraged from putting his money on the cutting edge of interdiscipli-
According to Hart, cultural studies is the enemy of higher education because it raises questions outside of existing disciplinary boundaries and attempts to be self-reflexive about "ordinary" knowledge with respect to its historical construction, ideological interests, and assumed truths. Equally disturbing to Hart is the role that cultural studies plays in challenging not only how canon formation might be used to secure particular forms of authority, but also its refusal to uphold the traditional sartorial style of male authority and professionalism. Of course, what disturbs Hart the most about cultural studies is that while often disguised under the rubric of "ordinary courses" it legitimates critical pedagogical practices that are self-consciously political, upholds the university as a space for dissidents to produce critical knowledge, and focuses on how power shapes and is reinvented in the interaction among texts, teachers, and students. Embodying the belief that what teachers, students, and other cultural workers do actually matters as part of a broader attempt to expand the possibilities of democratic values, identities, and relationships, cultural studies invokes the unimaginable if not subversive practice of making problematic that which precisely parades under the ordinary, commonsensical, and universal. Adding to the unpopularity of cultural studies is the recognition that it does not define itself as a technique but as a pedagogical and performative practice that unfolds in a wide range of shifting and overlapping sites of learning. Central to such a pedagogy are strategies of representation, engagement, and transformation that are used to investigate the complex contours of political and social agency and how such investigations translate into providing the conditions for students and others to address in the most rigorous way possible the more urgent and disturbing issues facing them in the current historical conjuncture.

In Hart's view, cultural politics has no place in the academy because it poses a clear threat to conservative assumptions about teaching, culture, and authority. The second commentary comes from Roger Shattuck, the
former president of the conservative group, the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. In *Candor and Perversion: Literature, Education, and the Arts*, Shattuck rails against Cary Nelson and me in particular and the field of cultural studies in general for challenging the assumption that pedagogy is neither disinterested nor innocent and is always implicated in questions of ideology, power, and authority. Shattuck views any notion of education and pedagogy that is associated with politics, transformation, or social change as a betrayal of the more noble conservative educational goal of “transmitting traditional knowledge and skills and . . . teaching as dispassionately as possible the history of our institutions” (25). In opposition to the notion that pedagogy is a moral and political practice, rather than merely a method or technique, Shattuck posits a notion of pedagogy that banishes issues of self-reflexivity and critique by refusing to address the different ways in which knowledge, power, and experience are produced under specific conditions of learning. Buttressed by an appeal to objectivity and disinterestedness, Shattuck reduces teaching to the transmission of facts. In this discourse, as Aronowitz points out, the teacher “becomes the instrument of approved intellectual and moral culture, charged with the task of expunging destructive impulses” (Introduction 5). Shattuck adamantly denies that education always presupposes a vision of the future, or that pedagogy cannot escape its ideological role as an interventionist practice designed to produce and legitimate particular forms of knowledge, identifications, values, and social relations. For Shattuck, cultural studies pedagogy is dangerous because it would “transform our schools and colleges into seedbeds of revolution” (25). Lost here is even the slightest understanding of how pedagogy works to put particular subject positions in place.

Rather than define the process of schooling and learning as integral to creating centers of critical learning and the production of socially engaged citizens, Shattuck defines schools as assimilation factories. As a consequence, Shattuck views the emergence of multiple cultures and differences within the university as a sign of fragmentation and a departure from, rather than an advance toward, democracy. Shattuck is indifferent to the Western-based, cultural-bound arrogance of his curricula and refuses to engage or trouble the historical origins of the perceptions it embodies and, as Susan Bordo puts it, “the social relations that sustain them, [or] the systems of thought in which they are embedded” (82). In this discourse, schools are unproblematically defined as regulatory agencies, requiring intellectual and discursive assimilation as a condition for students to participate in both the process of schooling and the pedagogi-
cal practices that ground it. Hence, it comes as no surprise when Shattuck argues that “schools will serve us best as a means of passing on an integrated culture” and “the vital process of education [should continue] to concern itself more with tradition than with change,” “more with the discovery of human universals than with the interests of rival groups” (25-26). Based on what Willis characterizes as a faith in “old-fashioned authoritarian pedagogy, indoctrination in morals, official inspirational versions of history, great books for the elite, [and] vocational training for the masses,” Shattuck displays both a retrograde notion of pedagogy and a disdain for critical forms of education that enable teachers and students to recognize anti-democratic forms of power and to learn the knowledge and citizenship skills necessary to fight substantive injustices in a society founded on deep inequalities (23).

Viewing pedagogy as transmission and schooling as a conservative force for social and cultural reproduction, Shattuck has little to say about what higher education should accomplish in a democracy and why such forms of education seem to be failing. Nor does he appear bothered by the increasing corporatization of the university and how his own views become complicitous with such a process, especially his attempts to cleanse higher education of its critical and emancipatory functions. Shattuck is alarmed by the notion that cultural studies theorists believe that the defining purpose of education is not to train students to take their place in either the corporate order or the existing society, but to encourage human agency as an act of social intervention. He wants to mold human behavior rather than provide the educational conditions for it to unfold. In the end, he confuses training with education and organizes his defense of educational training in the name of enduring values and an attack on the alleged evils of political correctness.

Shattuck can’t imagine a pedagogy designed to criticize the very foundation it puts into place; nor can he imagine a pedagogical practice that is about transforming knowledge rather than simply processing it. Hence, it comes as no surprise when he condemns Nelson for opposing “the reading of literature as literature in English department offerings and favors the ‘unashamed advocacy’ of social reform” (27). Nor does it come as a surprise when Shattuck claims that I have “betrayed an honorable profession by trying to plunge it into a vindictive politics of race,” because I have troubled his view of educational assimilation by raising questions about how racism operates both within and outside of the academy. But betrayal means more than simply warranting critique and generating debate; Shattuck actually suggests that I should be dismissed from my
When it comes to attacking cultural studies theorists, the conservative claim to civility appears to be stretched to the limit.

The third type of criticism aimed at cultural studies, as I mentioned earlier, often comes from some members of a materialist left who argue that the study of culture is both uncritical and unpolitical. According to this position, cultural politics is opposed, if not inimical, to the study of materiality and power. This position dismisses as a form of populism, or as shoddy scholarship, or as not counting as “real politics” the examination of the imbrication of power and symbolic forms; the study of representations, discourse, images, audiences, popular culture; and the analysis of the relationship between cultural forms and their history, practice, and transformation. In this discourse, cultural studies allegedly not only trivializes the meaning of politics, but also undermines the possibilities for building social movements around the primacy of a class-based politics sustained by a rigorous assault on the foundations of a capitalist social order. At its worst, this type of critique can be found in the work of Todd Gitlin, who urges cultural studies theorists to free themselves of the burden of imagining that they engage in apolitical practice by struggling over and within public sites such as the university, media, or public schooling (see “Anti-Political”). Gitlin believes that politics takes place largely in the streets: through consolidated demonstrations, through social movements organized around class-based labor struggles, or through political struggles aimed at dismantling the most pressing “concrete” problems produced by capitalist social relations. For Gitlin and others, the notion of “real politics” can only be embraced through the primacy of a materialism defined primarily through struggles over class, labor, and capital. Culture, in this view, has no politics, nor does it offer a site through which to understand, deploy, resist, and organize power. Some theorists argue that because cultural studies does not provide a systematic critique of capitalism and the market it has, in McChesney’s words, “become a joke in some universities in that it has become an ongoing punchline to a bad joke. It signifies half-assed research, self-congratulations, and farcical pretension” (“Is There” 3).

The materialist position is locked into a simple binarism that pits culture against a political economy perspective. As a result, it fails to make important connections and distinctions regarding how power is experienced within diverse social forms and how culture, in turn, deploys power to reproduce, mediate, resist, and transform such forms. Moreover, by universalizing class as the central category of politics, struggle, and
agency, such critiques do more than ignore how class is lived through the modalities of sexual orientation, race, and gender. They also fail to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of oppression and how such antagonisms expand the meaning and nature of pedagogical, political, and democratic struggles. Equally important is the failure of such critiques to understand how agency, identities, and subject positions are constructed through the pedagogical force of culture and what this suggests for engaging and struggling over and within those institutions and public spheres that articulate between everyday life and material formations of power.

All of these critiques, which extend from the left to the right of the political spectrum, mirror what has become a standard, almost generic type of attack on cultural studies. In some cases, they combine a residue of anti-intellectualism with what Foucault has called the sterilizing effects of polemicism (see Rabinow). That is, lost in these critiques of cultural studies is any attempt to persuade or convince or to produce a serious dialogue. What largely remains are arguments buttressed by an air of privileged insularity that appear beyond interrogation, coupled with forms of rhetorical cleverness that are built on the model of war and unconditional surrender and are designed primarily to eliminate one’s opponent. However, these arguments have little to say about what it means to offer alternative discourses designed to prevent the democratic principles of liberty, equality, and freedom from being put into practice in our schools and other crucial spheres of society (see Wallen). As Chantal Mouffe argues, this is the Jacobin model of scholarship in which one attempts “to destroy the other in order to establish [one’s] point of view and then not allow the other the possibility of coming back democratically. That’s the struggle among enemies—the complete destruction of the other” (Worsham and Olson 180-81). In short, the avoidance principle at work in political culture often finds its counterpart—both inside and outside of the academy—in forms of social criticism that do little more than instrumentalize, polemicize, obscure, or insulate. Of course, this discourse and pedagogy typically threatens no one. Foucault has argued that such polemics rarely offer new ideas or provide any constructive possibility of an equal discussion (see Rabinow 112-13).

I want to modify Foucault’s position on polemics by suggesting that much of what appears to be a polemical attack on cultural studies should be read as a broader attempt to promote a culture of political avoidance—that is, to undermine the very possibility of politics. I also want to argue that one way of responding to such attacks is to demonstrate how cultural
studies practitioners might live up to the historical responsibility that they bear for building a relationship between theoretical rigor and social relevance, social criticism and practical politics, and individual scholarship and public pedagogy as part of a broader commitment to put new visions into place that are grounded on radical democratic traditions. This suggests taking seriously Pierre Bourdieu's admonition that "[t]here is no genuine democracy without genuine opposing critical powers." It is therefore the obligation of such intellectuals "to make their voices heard directly in all the areas of public life in which they are competent" (8-9).

**Beyond the Culture of Cynicism**

In opposition to the positions I have outlined above, struggles over culture and pedagogy are not a "betrayal of enduring values" or a weak substitute for a "real" politics. They are central to forging relations between discursive and material relations of power, between theory and practice as they pertain to the relationship between education and social change. In addressing this position, I want to offer a rebuttal to the contemporary politics of cynicism by making a more substantial case for both the politics of culture and the culture of politics—as well as the primacy of the pedagogical as a constitutive element of a democratic political culture that links struggles over identities and meaning to broader struggles over material relations of power. In what follows, I address what it might mean to theorize cultural studies as a form of politics and pedagogy in which the performative and the strategic emerge out of a broader project informed by the shifting and often contradictory contexts in which popular politics and power intersect. At stake here is the necessity of reinvigorating the intellectual life necessary to sustain a vibrant political culture, one that puts, as Elizabeth Long suggests, "knowledge in the service of a more realized democracy" (17-18).

The regulatory nature of culture and its power to circulate goods, discipline discourses, and regulate bodies suggests that the nervous system of daily life is no longer to be found in the simple workings and display of raw industrial power—the old means of production—but in the wired infrastructures that compute and transmit information at speeds that defy the imagination. As it becomes increasingly clear that the politics of culture is a substantive and not a secondary force in shaping everyday and global politics, the culture of politics provides the ideological markers for asserting the ethical and public referents to think at the limits of this new merging of technology and politics. No longer relegated simply to the
Olympian heights of high culture, or summarily dismissed simply as a reflection of the economic base, culture has finally gained its rightful place institutionally and productively as a crucial object of debate, a powerful structure of meaning-making that cannot be abstracted from power, and a site of intense struggle over how identities are to be shaped, democracy is to be defined, and social justice may be revived as serious elements of cultural politics.

As the interface between global capital and new electronic technologies refigure and reshape the face of culture, the importance of thinking through the possibilities and limits of the political assumes a new urgency. What constitutes both the subject and the object of "the political" mutates and expands as the relationship between knowledge and power becomes a determining force in producing new forms of wealth, increasing the gap between the rich and the poor, and radically influencing how people think and act. Culture as a form of political power becomes a formidable force in producing, circulating, and distributing information while transforming all sectors of the global economy. Moreover, it has ushered in a veritable revolution in the ways in which meaning is produced, identities are shaped, and historical change unfolds within and across national boundaries. For instance, on the global and national levels, the foreshortening of time and space, as Baumann points out, has radically altered how the power and wealth of multinational corporations shape the cultures, markets, and material infrastructures of all societies, albeit with unevenly distributed results (Globalization). As wealth accumulates in fewer hands, more service jobs command the economies of both strong and weak nations. Furthermore, Westernized cultural forms and products erode local differences, producing increasingly homogenized cultural landscapes. Finally, as state services bend to the forces of privatization, valuable social services—such as housing, schools, hospitals, and public broadcasting—are abandoned to the logic of the market. For many, the results are far reaching: an increase in human poverty and suffering, massive population shifts and migrations, and a crisis of politics marked by the erosion and displacement of civic values and democratic social space.

Increasingly within this new world order, the culture-producing industries have occupied a unique and powerful place in shaping how people around the globe live, make sense of their contexts, and shape the future, often under conditions not of their own making. Stuart Hall succinctly captures the substantive nature of this "cultural revolution" when he argues,
the domain constituted by the activities, institutions and practices we call "cultural" has expanded out of all recognition. At the same time, culture has assumed a role of unparalleled significance in the structure and organization of late-modern society, in the processes of development of the global environment and in the disposition of its economic and material resources. In particular, the means of producing, circulating and exchanging culture have been dramatically expanded through the new media technologies and the information revolution. Directly, a much greater proportion of the world's human, material and technical resources than ever before go into these sectors. At the same time, indirectly, the cultural industries have become the mediating element in every other process. ("Centrality" 209)

On the one hand, culture has become the primary means through which social practices are produced, circulated, and enacted; and, on the other, culture is given meaning and significance. Culture becomes political as it is mobilized through the media and other institutional forms; these institutional forms, as is well known, operate pedagogically and politically to secure certain forms of authority, offer sanctioned subject positions, and legitimate specific social relations. In addition, culture is political to the degree that it gives rise to practices that represent and deploy power, thereby shaping particular identities, mobilizing a range of passions, and legitimating precise forms of political culture. Culture, in this instance, becomes productive and is inextricably linked to the related issues of power and agency. As Grossberg points out, the politics of culture is foregrounded in "broader cultural terms [of how] questions of agency involve the possibilities of action as interventions into the processes by which reality is continually being transformed and power enacted. . . . [A]gency involves relations of participation and access, the possibilities of moving into particular sites of activity and power, and of belonging to them in such a way as to be able to enact their powers" ("Identity" 99). What Grossberg is suggesting here regarding the possibilities for critical agency has important implications for engaging culture in both political and pedagogical terms. Culture has now become the pedagogical force par excellence and its function as a broader educational condition for learning is crucial to making forms of literacy operational within diverse social and institutional spheres through which people define themselves and their relationship to the social world (see Giroux, Border). The relationship between culture and pedagogy in this instance cannot be abstracted from the central dynamics of politics and power. Broadly conceived, culture is
always tangled up with power and becomes political in a double sense. First, questions of ownership, access, and governance are crucial to understanding how power is deployed in regulating the images, meanings, and ideas that frame the agendas that shape daily life. Second, culture can be used to deploy power through the institutional and ideological forces it uses to put certain forms of subjectivity in place. That is, the cultural sphere in its diverse locations and productions offers up identifications and subject positions through the forms of knowledge, values, ideologies, and social practices that it makes available within unequal relations of power to different sectors of the national and global communities. As a pedagogical force, culture makes a claim on certain histories, memories, and narratives. As James Young has noted in a different context, it tells "both the story of events and its own unfolding as narrative" in order to influence how individuals take up, modify, resist, and accommodate themselves to particular forms of citizenship, to present material relations of power, and to specific notions of the future (673).

Cultural studies theorists can respond to their critics by making clear that the current crisis of cultural politics and political culture facing the United States is intimately connected to the erasure of the social as a constitutive category for expanding democratic identities, social practices, and public spheres. In this instance, memory is not erased as much as it is reconstructed under circumstances in which public forums for serious debate are being eroded. The crisis of memory and the social is further amplified by the withdrawal of the state as a guardian of the public trust and by its growing lack of investment in those sectors of social life that promote the public good. Moreover, the crisis of the social is further aggravated, in part, by an unwillingness on the part of many radicals, liberals, and conservatives to address the importance of formal and informal education as a force for encouraging critical participation in civic life. There is scant attention given to how pedagogy functions as a crucial cultural, political, and moral practice for connecting politics, power, and social agency to the broader formative processes of democratic public life. Such concerns are important because they not only raise questions about the meaning and role of politics and its relationship to culture, but also because they suggest the necessity of rethinking the purpose and function of pedagogy in light of the calls by diverse ideological interests to corporatize all levels of schooling.

In short, the demise of politics as a progressive force for change within the cultural sphere is particularly evident in the recent attempts to
corporatize higher education, which, while offering one of the few sites for linking learning with social change, is increasingly redefined in market terms as corporate culture subsumes democratic culture and critical learning is replaced by an instrumentalist logic that celebrates the imperatives of the bottom line, downsizing, and outsourcing. Obsessed with grant writing, fund raising, and capital improvements, higher education increasingly devalues its role as a democratic public sphere committed to the broader values of an engaged and critical citizenry. Private gain now cancels out the public good, and knowledge that does not immediately translate into jobs or profits is considered ornamental. In this context, pedagogy is depoliticized and academic culture becomes the medium for sorting students and placing them in an iniquitous social order that celebrates commercial power at the expense of broader civil and public values.¹⁶

Under attack by corporate interests, the political Right, and neoliberal doctrines, pedagogical discourses that define themselves in political and moral terms—particularly as they draw attention to the operations of power and its relationship to the production of knowledge and subjectivities—are either derided or ignored. Reduced to the status of training, pedagogy in its conservative and neoliberal versions appears completely at odds with those versions of critical teaching designed to provide students with the skills and information necessary to think critically about the knowledge they gain, and what it might mean for them to challenge anti-democratic forms of power. All too often critical pedagogy, both inside and outside of the academy, is either dismissed as irrelevant to the educational process or is appropriated simply as a technique for “encouraging” student participation. The conservative arguments are well known in this regard, particularly as they are used to reduce pedagogical practice either to the transmission of beauty and truth or to management schemes designed to teach civility—which generally means educating various social groups about how to behave within the parameters of their respective racial, class, and gender-specific positions. Missing from these discourses is any reference to pedagogy as an ideological and social practice engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge, values, and identities in concrete institutional formations and relations of power.

Similarly, those liberal and progressive discourses that do link pedagogy to politics often do so largely within the logic of social reproduction and refuse to recognize that the effects of pedagogy are conditioned rather than determined and thus are open to a range of
outcomes and possibilities. Lost here is any recognition of a pedagogy without guarantees, a pedagogy that because of its contingent and contextual nature holds the promise of producing a language and a set of social relations through which the just impulses and practices of a democratic society can be experienced and related to the power of self-definition and social responsibility.¹⁷ In contrast, neoliberalism—with its celebration of the logic of the market—opts for pedagogies that confirm the autonomous individual rather than those that empower social groups, pedagogies that celebrate individual choice rather than those that support plurality and participation. In the eyes of too many neoliberals and conservatives, excellence is about individual achievement and has little to do with equity or providing the skills and knowledge that students might need to link learning with social justice and motivation with social change.

The decline of democratic political culture is also evident in the current attempts of conservatives and liberals to hollow out the state by withdrawing support from a number of sectors of social life that in their deepest roots are moral rather than commercial and that provide a number of services for addressing pressing social problems, particularly as they affect the poor, excluded, and oppressed. The shrinkage of democratic politics is also visible in the ongoing legislative attacks on immigrants and people of color, in the containment of political discourse by corporations that increasingly control the flow of information in the public sphere, and in the shrinking of noncommodified public spheres that provide opportunities for dialogue, critical debate, and public education.

**Toward a Practical Cultural Politics**

Central to any practical politics of cultural studies is the need to reinvent power as more than resistance and domination, as more than a marker for identity politics, and as more than a methodological referent for linking discourse to everyday life and its underlying institutional formations (see Grossberg, “Victory”). All of these notions of power are important, but none adequately signifies the need for cultural studies to foreground the struggle over relations of power as a central principle that views cultural politics as a civic and moral practice linking theory to concrete struggles and knowledge to strategies of social engagement and transformation. As such, the reinvigoration of political culture becomes a strategic and pedagogical intervention that has a purchase on people’s daily struggles and defines itself partly through its (modest) attempts to keep alive a notion of engaged citizenship as a crucial performative
principle for activating democratic change. Toward this end, cultural studies must be guided by the political insight that its own projects emerge out of social formations in which power is not simply put on display but signifies the struggle to expand the practice of social citizenship, to enlarge the commitment to social equality, and to broaden the possibilities for social justice and human freedom. Cultural studies is important because it has a crucial role to play in analyzing and interpreting events in a larger political and historical context. Similarly, it provides an opportunity to open up spaces inside and outside of the university in which teachers and students can find ways to connect knowledge to social change while restoring, as Paul Gilroy has recently suggested, an ethical dimension and critical vocabulary for shaping public life as a form of practical politics (see Smith).

Part of the challenge that cultural studies theorists face is not only the increasing cynicism and despair that has taken over national political life in the United States, but also the growing academicization and institutionalization of cultural studies. Cultural studies advocates and practitioners must be attentive to the ways in which the processes of accommodation and incorporation of cultural studies contribute to the atrophy of the discourse of democracy and ethics among progressive cultural workers and educators. Cultural studies, like education itself, increasingly appears to have little influence on producing the knowledge and skills that are necessary for students and others to extend the critical impulse of what they are taught so as to keep alive a sense of politics, social responsibility, and urgency regarding the ongoing acts of oppression being waged nationally and internationally against youth, the poor, workers, people of color, and women who fall victim to abuse, poverty, violence, illiteracy, and disease. In part, this might be ascribed, as some conservative theorists suggest, to the bad faith of careerism or the obscure discourse of hermetic academics. However, I think there is a more serious problem confronting the field of cultural studies. In a time of unparalleled neoliberal and neoconservative domination over economic and public life, there are numerous forces that threaten and undercut the possibility for cultural studies theorists to speak to students and a broader public about important political, economic, and social issues. Clearly, such conditions—largely promoted by the increasing vocationalization of the university, the right-wing attack on critical work, and the shrinking of public spaces for intellectuals to take a critical stand—must be addressed and resisted through an organized struggle to defend the university as a democratic public sphere.
Given the importance that cultural studies places on the everyday and the significance of addressing the historical and relational contexts of particular struggles, it appears crucial that cultural studies practitioners redefine what it means to address cultural politics as a realm of concrete possibilities. Clearly, this effort involves more than producing new theoretical discourses, however important this task is. I am not suggesting that cultural studies theorists and practitioners refuse a rigorous critique and debate among themselves and with others, nor that we reject the need for multiple and diverse forms of counter-hegemonic struggles. I am simply suggesting that we give more thought to how these crucial and diverse approaches reclaim cultural studies as both a dislocating intervention and a politics of social transformation. At the same time, cultural studies theorists must be more clear about what we have in common that will enable us to organize and use our collective resources to further fight against the increasing depoliticization of daily life. Cultural theorists as diverse as Grossberg and Aronowitz address this issue, in part, by arguing for the development of a more systematic critique of capitalism and the market within cultural studies, one that is not reducible to questions of ownership and labor relations.

What is also at issue is the ability of cultural studies theorists to contextualize and politicize their intellectual practices by being able to speak to multiple audiences and actively engage, where possible, in broader public conversations, especially as these might affect policy decisions. What might it mean for cultural studies advocates inside and outside of the university to take seriously their role as oppositional public intellectuals who believe that what they say and do can make a difference in creating strategies of understanding, engagement, and transformation? Such a position would suggest that cultural studies practitioners attempt to understand and engage how capital works pedagogically to secure its political interests, how it uses cultural politics precisely as an educational force in shaping a new generation of accommodating intellectuals. It would also show how capital legitimates the dismantling of the gains of the welfare state and eliminates those public spaces that provide the conditions for social movements to organize and spread their messages. Additionally, cultural studies requires greater attentiveness to linking studies about the ownership of the media to how the media functions pedagogically as a form of cultural politics; how the decline of the military-industrial complex has given rise to a prison-industrial complex buttressed by a politics of race and identity politics that permeates the cultural institutions of everyday life; and how cultural work in the
academy might articulate with and play a role in expanding the possibilities of radical democratic struggles (see Goldberg). This focus requires, in part, that cultural studies practitioners help to strengthen and build social movements and organizations capable of addressing and mobilizing against the numerous forms of violence and oppression that increasingly are being waged against large segments of the global population.

Publicizing the myriad forms of political work that are attempting to reclaim public space and expand democratic relations should be made available not only among politically similar allies but in the larger public sphere. Such work provides a concrete opportunity to challenge the culture of political cynicism and indifference. There is little doubt in my mind that such work goes a long way in challenging the culture of political avoidance while demonstrating that, as Bourdieu so succinctly puts it, democracies cannot exist "without genuine opposing powers" (8). It is particularly crucial that cultural studies theorists engage what Bourdieu calls "the function of education and culture in economies where information has become one of the most decisive productive forces" (27). Because it is precisely through such cultural and institutional formations that cultural studies practitioners—in conjunction with broader social movements—can produce analyses, questions, ideas, and pedagogical practices that the media ignore and offer the conditions through which people might be mobilized. Evidence of such work can be found in the writings of Stanley Aronowitz, Carol Becker, Susan Bordo, Rey Chow, Arif Dirlik, Michael Dyson, Nancy Fraser, Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, Stuart Hall, Joy James, Robin Kelley, Angela McRobbie, Toby Miller, Meaghan Morris, Chantal Mouffe, Edward Said, Michele Wallace, Cornel West, Ellen Willis, and many others to numerous to name. It can also be found in the struggles of young people today—many of them in higher education—who are breaking down the boundaries between academic life and public politics. Such struggle was recently visible in the actions of thousands of college students participating in the campus anti-sweatshop movement as well as in the activities of those brave students from the University of California at Berkeley who demonstrated and went on hunger strikes to save the Ethnic Studies department. It was also displayed in the demonstrations in Seattle at the World Trade Organization meeting.

Cultural studies theorists must revitalize a cultural politics that links political economy and the economy of representations, desires, and bodies to scholarly work, public conversations, and everyday life. Moreover, such work can be addressed as part of a broader attempt to reclaim
the culture of politics, to rethink and expand the possibilities for social agency as part of an ongoing effort to reverse the evisceration of public goods, and to prevent the increasing commodification and privatization of public spaces, especially the public schools and higher education. Similarly, cultural studies must directly engage the question of how to imagine and build political alliances and social movements. This suggests producing, whenever possible, the theoretical tools, political strategies, and pedagogical practices necessary to wage multiple struggles in a variety of sites against those institutions and cultural formations that provide social guarantees only to the privileged, and that provide suffering, uncertainty, and insecurity to everybody else. Cultural studies theorists should continue their efforts to raise questions about and rethink not only diverse articulations of culture and power, but also how such relations work both to close down and open up democratic relations, spaces, and transformations, and what the latter mean theoretically and strategically for how we think the meaning and purpose of politics. As admittedly difficult as such a task might appear, it offers the opportunity for cultural studies advocates to rethink their role as oppositional public intellectuals within a global context, and provides incentives for mastering new technologies of communication, exchange, and distribution.

In opposition to the alleged guardians of "authentic" radicalism who believe that cultural politics undermines "real" struggles, cultural studies theorists must demonstrate that cultural questions are central to both understanding struggles over resources and power as well as organizing a politics that enables people to have a voice and an investment in shaping and transforming the conditions through which they live their everyday lives. Such a collective voice and investment requires that people experience themselves as critical social agents along multiple axes of identification, investment, and struggle. Only then can we provide the basis for opening up the space of resistance, for imagining different futures, for drawing boundaries and making connections, and for offering a language of critique and possibility that makes visible the urgency of politics and the promise of a vibrant and radical democracy.19
1. See, for instance, Broder; Kuttner; McNiff; Mitchell; Pertman; and “With Impeachment Over.” For an excellent analysis of the role the media plays in fueling voter cynicism, see Cappella and Jamieson.

2. This theme is taken up in Bauman; Boggs; Capella and Jamieson; Chaloupka; Goldfarb; Jacoby.

3. There is an ongoing debate over the meaning and relevance of citizenship for a progressive politics, and I don’t want to underplay the problematic nature of my usage of the term. For some recent examples of this debate, see Shafir; Patton and Caserio.

4. On this issue, see Eliasoph; Unger and West. On the issue of social citizenship, see Fraser and Gordon.

5. See, for instance, the stories following the suppression of dissent on Disney-owned ABC or the increasing corporatization of the university. See Chomsky; Giroux, The Mouse; McChesney, Corporate; Mokhiber and Weissman.

6. This discussion of higher education draws from Aronowitz and Giroux.

7. This position becomes almost a caricature when it is applied to cultural studies by some conservatives. One typical example can be found in Rothstein. Identifying the 1960s as the source of most contemporary problems has become a fundamental tenet of right-wing ideology and includes the work of academics, such as Harold Bloom, and the strident commentaries of former house majority leader, Newt Gingrich.

8. Some typical examples include Gitlin, Twilight; Sokal and Bricmont; Sleeper; Tomasky.

9. For a brilliant critique of this issue, see Aronowitz, The Crisis. As Butler insightfully points out, the left’s call for unity around class prioritizes a notion of the common that is not only purified of race and gender considerations, but also forgets that those social movements that organized around various forms of identity politics emerged, in part, in opposition to the principles of exclusion in which such calls for class unity were constructed. Needless to say, there are a number of Marxists who focus on political economy, class, and power in ways that do not fit this description at all and make an enormously important number of theoretical contributions to left issues. Writers associated with the Monthly Review and Against the Current are representative examples.

10. Two examples are Bennett and Kellner. For essays that range from constructive critique to caricature, see Ferguson and Golding.

11. Shattuck appears particularly disturbed that Nelson and I are chaired professors. He repeats this point along with the claim that we are hackneyed writers and ideological storm troopers; he also asserts that we are unqualified for the positions we hold. These charges have more than a decidedly ideological ring; they also suggest something about the ongoing right-wing attack on
academic freedom often couched in the discourse of apocalyptic decline and moral panic.

12. For two brilliant critiques of the materialist attack on cultural politics, see Kelley (especially chapter four) and Willis.

13. For an excellent commentary on the mutually important relationship of class and social identity to any viable notion of organized politics, see McCreery and Krupat.

14. Lost from this discourse is any attempt to engage, guide, direct, and stimulate new forms of practice and expression. Rather than being a dynamic, critical force, such discourse becomes a kind of pretense for interviewing oneself—that is, a form of self-aggrandizement. On this issue, see Berger.

15. See, for instance, Bauman, In Search; Bourdieu; Giroux, The Mouse; McChesney, Corporate.

16. For some recent analyses of the corporate attack on higher education, see Aronowitz, Knowledge; Giroux, Impure and Corporate; and Martin.

17. On the issue of pedagogy, hope, and historical contingency, see Freire; Johnson; O’Shea.

18. For an excellent summary of this movement, see Appelbaum and Dreier. For a report on the strike at the University of California at Berkeley and its resolution, see Jordan. For a report on various forms of student-labor activism, see Naduris-Weissman.

19. I want to thank a number of people for commenting on this piece, none of whom bear any responsibility for the final product: Ralph Rodriguez, Eric Weiner, Larry Grossberg, Stanley Aronowitz, Arif Dirlik, Ted Striphas, Keith Gilyard, Lauren Berlant, and Susan Searls.

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Henry A. Giroux


