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What It Is and What It Isn't: Cultural Studies Meets Graduate-Student Labor

Toby Miller*

This Essay performs two functions. First, it surveys cultural studies. Second, it takes issue with criticisms of cultural studies for being socially irrelevant by pointing to its capacity to galvanize opposition to exploitation even though many of its operating assumptions are awkward for governmental normativity (such as the law) to accept.

Cultural studies is a tendency across disciplines, rather than a discipline itself. This is evident in practitioners' simultaneously expressed desires to refuse definition, to insist on differentiation, and to sustain conventional departmental credentials (as well as displaying pyrotechnic, polymathematical capacities for reasoning and research). Cultural studies is animated by subjectivity and power—how human subjects are formed and how they experience cultural and social space. It takes its agenda and mode of analysis from economics, politics, media and communication studies, sociology, literature, education, the law, science and technology studies, anthropology, and history, with a particular focus on gender, race, class, and sexuality in everyday life, commingling textual and social theory under the sign of a commitment to progressive social change. Cultural studies' continuities come from shared concerns and methods: the concern is the reproduction of culture through structural determinations on subjects versus their own agency, and the method is historical materialism.1 In this sense, it is vitally connected to issues of collective self-determination, or how social movements gain control over the means of their existence. This link became manifest to me via the significance of cultural studies in the struggles by graduate-student employees at American universities to attain the right to vote for or against unionization, and then through the way in which legal proceedings to determine that struggle excluded certain approaches associated with

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* Thanks to Marie Leger and the editorial group for their comments.
cultural studies. Hence my interest here in bracketing these topics.

Rather than focusing on canonical works of art, governmental history, or quantitative social data, cultural studies devotes time to subcultures, popular media, music, clothing, and sport. By looking at how culture is used and transformed by “ordinary” and “marginal” social groups, cultural studies sees people not simply as consumers, but as potential producers of new social values and cultural languages. The political significance of popular cultural practices is perhaps best exemplified in subcultures. Subcultures signify a space under culture, simultaneously opposed to, derivative of, and informing official, dominant, governmental, commercial, bureau-cratically organized forms of life—a shift away from culture as a tool of domination and towards culture as a tool of empowerment. This move wants to find out how the socially disadvantaged use culture to contest their subservient positions. Historical and contemporary studies conducted through the 1960s and 1970s on slaves, crowds, pirates, bandits, and the working class emphasized day-to-day non-compliance with authority. For example, British research into Teddy Boys, Mods, bikers, skinheads, punks, school students, teen girls, and Rastas had as its magical agents of history people who deviated from the norms of schooling and the transition to work by entering subcultures. Such research examined the structural underpinnings of collective style, investigating how bricolage subverted the achievement-oriented, materialistic, educationally-driven values and appearances of the middle class. The working assumption was that subordinate groups adopt and adapt signs and objects of the dominant culture, reorganizing them to manufacture new meanings. Consumption was thought to be the epicenter of such subcultures; paradoxically, it also reversed members’ status as consumers. They become producers of new fashions, inscribing alienation, difference, and powerlessness on their bodies. (The decline of the British economy and state across the 1970s was exemplified in Punk’s use of rubbish as an adornment: bag-liners, lavatory appliances, and ripped and torn clothing.) But then commodified fashion and convention took over when capitalism appropriated the appropriator. Even as the media announced that punks were folk devils and set in train various moral panics, the fashion and music industries were sending out spies in search of new trends to market.2

An awareness of this double-edged investment in commodities, that they may be appropriated by subcultures as acts of resistance, then recommodified with rebellious connotations resignified as gimmicks, makes socioeconomic analysis via critical political economy a good ally of representational analysis via cultural studies. But a certain tendency on both sides has maintained that they are mutually exclusive—that one is

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concerned with structures of the economy and the other with structures of meaning. But this need not be the case. Historically, the best critical political economy and the best cultural studies have worked through the imbrication of power and subjectivity at all points on the cultural continuum. Graham Murdock puts the task well:

Critical political economy is at its strongest in explaining who gets to speak to whom and what forms these symbolic encounters take in the major spaces of public culture. But cultural studies, at its best, has much of value to say about . . . how discourse and imagery are organized in complex and shifting patterns of meaning and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated, and struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life.³

Ideally, blending the two approaches would heal the division between fact and interpretation and between the social sciences and the humanities, under the sign of a principled approach to cultural democracy. To that end, Lawrence Grossberg calls on cultural studies to provide a dynamic way of "politicizing theory and theorizing politics"⁴ that combines abstraction and grounded analysis. This requires a focus on the contradictions of organizational structures, their articulations with everyday living and textuality, and their integration with the polity and economy, refusing any bifurcation that opposes the study of production and consumption, or fails to address such overlapping axes of subjectification as class, race, nation, and gender.⁵ Later on, I shall address a key site where political economy and cultural studies have forged such an ongoing connection: academic labor.

FATHERS AND OTHER ORIGINS

Richard Maxwell has provided a useful representation of global cultural studies:⁶

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5. See id. at 9-10.
Four founding parents of British cultural studies are listed, all of them post-War English-based intellectuals: Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams. These men were adult educators and university professors on the left who wanted to understand the intersection of class and nation at the level of lived experience and social structure by foregrounding “the culture and sensibilities of industrial workers.”

Hoggart was a left Leavisite who favored uplift of working-class people.
through literary study at the same time as he took their popular pursuits seriously. His classic work, *The Uses of Literacy*, appeared in the 1950s while he was at the University of Leicester. Thereafter, he became a celebrated member of various public-review bodies into questions of culture, a star defense witness at the trial of Penguin Books for publishing *Lady Chatterley*, and in the mid-1960s, the founder of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. He went on to be a senior culturecrat at UNESCO and latterly a memoirist.

Thompson’s key contribution came through his work on the history of the English working class, a focus on labor that concentrated on the past from “below” rather than on high and eschewed theory in favor of ordinary people’s accounts of their lives. This rejection of theory involved strong opposition to structuralist Marxism, which had entered British cultural studies of the 1970s under the sign of Louis Althusser. Thompson was also active in Britain’s Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, in both its 1960s and 1980s heydays.

Hall started as a left Leavisite and worked as Hoggart’s deputy at the CCCS for some years, ultimately running the Centre for a decade from 1968 and marking out its classic period of collaborative, engaged Gramscian scholarship that investigated state stereotyping and ritualistic resistance. He concluded his career at the Open University with a shift towards Foucauldianism and the postcolonial, brokering cultural studies’ relationship to sociology and media studies, and becoming a key influence in the U.S. Throughout, Hall sought a means of analyzing signs, representations, and ideology.

Williams drew heavily on his experiences growing up in Wales to make sense of cultural change and power dynamics. He has provided the largest body of theory for ongoing cultural studies work, via a wide array of noted volumes on literary history and theory, media and communications, culture, and society. His work models a hybrid between critical political economy and cultural studies, so I shall dedicate some space to its concerns and methods.

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14. The Festschrift entitled *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Kuan-Hsing Chen & David Morley eds., 1996) collects some of his work, reacts to it, and provides a useful bibliography.
Williams is critical of idealist conceptions which assume that culture is a march towards perfection as determined by universal values that are basic to the human condition, as if these were timeless rather than grounded in particular conditions of possibility. He also questions documentary conceptions of culture which seek to record artistic work so as to preserve specific insights and highlight them through criticism. Instead, Williams proposes that we concentrate on the ways of life and values of particular communities at particular times, noting benefits and costs in how they are represented. 15

Williams's method, cultural materialism, works with Karl Marx's insight that people manufacture their own conditions of existence, but often without a conscious or enabling agency. Social practices, not nature, genius, or individuality, make a way of life and change it over time. This insight directs us away from views of historical and contemporary culture that privilege aesthetic civilization, the experiences of rulers, and the impact of religion delivered from on high. 16 Instead, we should engage culture by reading its products and considering their circumstances of creation and circulation. Art and society—Williams calls them "project" and "formation" respectively—intertwine, with no conceptual or chronological primacy accorded to either term. The relations of culture, their twists and turns, the often violent and volatile way in which they change, are part of the material life of society. For example, language neither precedes nor follows the social world, but is part of it. That means allowing a certain autonomy to intellectual work from the prevailing mode of economic production, but not from its own micro-economies of person, place, and power. 17 There can be no notion here of an organic community that produces a culture of artworks, or a culture of artworks that reflects an organic community. Each has its own internal politics as well as a connection to the wider economy.

Cultural materialism articulates material culture (buildings, film, cars, fashion, sculpture, and so on) with sociohistorical change, explaining how the culture produced by ordinary people is repackaged and sold to them. Williams divides culture into dominant versus residual and emergent forms, as per Antonio Gramsci's model of hegemony, 18 a process of securing consent to the social order that makes dominant culture appear normal and natural. It exists alongside extant residual cultures, which comprise old meanings and practices that are no longer dominant but still influential, and emergent cultures, which are either propagated by a new class or incorporated by the dominant, as part of hegemony. These

maneuvers find expression in what Williams terms a "structure of feeling": the intangibles of an era that explain or develop the quality of life. Such indicators often involve a contest—or at least dissonance—between official culture and practical consciousness. In short, Williams's view of culture insists on the importance of community life, the conflicts in any cultural formation, the social nature of culture, and the cultural nature of society.

Of course, there are many other sources of today's cultural studies apart from these four men. Manthia Diawara has provided a multicultural trace of U.K.-U.S. cultural studies that complicates the standard fatherly narrative, albeit foregrounding the later work of Hall. Diawara connects the Birmingham CCCS with London-based black cultural workers and people of color in black and feminist studies areas of American colleges. This trajectory involves certain key transformations of perspective. The initial animating force of cultural studies came from a desire to understand British culture in terms of class dominance and resistance, and the search for an agent of history that could propel radical politics. But that agency fell into doubt, with masculinity and Britishness/Englishness up for debate in ways that criticized sexism and white nationalism.19 And as per Maxwell's schema, other, semi-autonomous forces have shaped cultural studies. Latin American influences include the socialism manifested in New Latin American Cinema and Paolo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed in the 1960s and 1970s, the Marxist media analysis done for Salvador Allende's Chile by Michèle and Armand Mattelart,20 the hegemony studies of Colombian Jesús Martín-Barbero,21 and the Argentinian-Mexican sociologist Néstor García Canclini's22 integration of social and cultural theory.23 In Africa, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ngugi wa Mirii, and others at the Kamiriithu Centre linked cultural critique to production.24 In South Asia, the work of subaltern studies intellectuals such as Ranajit Guha25 and Partha Chatterjee26 has been pivotal for

23. See Maxwell, supra note 6.
What do these different legacies mean for cultural studies today? John Frow and Meaghan Morris contrast the view of hegemonic power-brokers, who see culture as a route to economic efficiency, with cultural studies, which questions power and subjectivity rather than using them to extract surplus value from ordinary people or educate them into obedience. Frow and Morris want to audit the denial, assimilation, and invention that occur each time such words as nation, community, or society are brought into discourse, moving away from essentialist definitions of national identity and towards plural accounts of person and polity.  

Morris glosses the concerns of cultural studies as “racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, class, generational and national differences (roughly in that order), as these are produced and contested in history,” along with “a critique of cultural universals.”

The deployment of categorical devices from the social sciences as grids of investigation brings their usual status as machines obliterating difference into question, the result being a productive intellectual polyphony that draws out contradictions and dissonances. If we link this to Frow and Morris’s litany of interdisciplinarity, we can specify a desirable cultural studies as a mixture of economics, politics, textual analysis, gender theory, ethnography, history, postcolonial theory, material objects, and policy, animated by a desire to reveal and transform those who control the means of communication and culture, and undertaken with a constant vigilance over one’s own raison d’être and modus operandi. This could be connected to Grossberg’s map of cultural studies along twin axes of cultural method and social theory on a grid comparing five methods (literary humanism, dialectical sociology, culturalism, structuralist conjunctures, and postmodern conjunctures) with eight theories (epistemology, determination, agency, social formation, cultural formation, power, specificity of struggle, and the site of the modern) to produce historicized cultural analyses.

So what is cultural studies not? Clearly, attempts to list what does and does not count as cultural studies are fraught, especially when they engage in an absolute binarization (cultural studies frequently disavows binary

29. Frow & Morris, supra note 27.
oppositions for failing to acknowledge the logocentric interdependence of supposed opposites, such as that whiteness depends for its sense of self on blackness, for example). But binaries are good to think with and good to tinker with, like any form of inclusion and exclusion. So here goes my list of what’s in and what’s out.

**Cultural Studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT IT IS</th>
<th>WHAT IT ISN’T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
<td>Physical anthropology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Textual analysis of the media</td>
<td>Literary formalism and canon formation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social theory</td>
<td>Regression and time-series analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and technology studies</td>
<td>Mathematics, geology, and chemistry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political economy</td>
<td>Neoclassical economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical geography</td>
<td>Planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychoanalysis</td>
<td>Rational-choice theory and cognitive psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postmodern art</td>
<td>Art history</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical architecture</td>
<td>Engineering and quantity surveying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmentalism</td>
<td>Industrial development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminism</td>
<td>Human biology</td>
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<td>Queerness</td>
<td>Deviance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Globalization</td>
<td>Nationalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postcolonialism</td>
<td>World literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continental philosophy,</td>
<td>Analytic philosophy</td>
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<td>structuralism, and post-</td>
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<tr>
<td>structuralism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Popular music</td>
<td>Musicology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social semiotics</td>
<td>Formalist linguistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>Technical design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural and social history</td>
<td>Political history</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical public health</td>
<td>Medical training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical legal studies and</td>
<td>Legal training and legal formalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>critical race theory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcultures</td>
<td>Interest groups</td>
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</table>

The left side articulates knowledge with social change. It represents a will to link the professoriat to social movements as primary *loci* of power, authorization, and responsibility. The right side articulates knowledge with social reproduction. It represents a will to link the professoriat to universities and professions as primary *loci* of power, authorization, and responsibility. One is concerned to transform the social order, the other to
We can see the force of this divide in a raft of journal publications that stand for the recent and profound impact of cultural studies on a host of disciplines. There is a rough bifurcation in academic publishing between journals of tendency and journals of profession, each seeking to establish hegemony within particular spheres. They operate in binary opposition to one another, although there can be overlap of topic and authorship in certain cases. Here is a schema of this opposition:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JOURNALS OF TENDENCY</th>
<th>JOURNALS OF PROFESSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avowed political project seeking to make interventions, situated in time and space</td>
<td>Avowed truth project seeking a universalist, timeless pursuit of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-house manuscript reviewers who argue for and against authors’ manuscripts along grounds of politics and cohesiveness</td>
<td>External manuscript reviewers who engage in double-blind review of manuscripts in terms of disciplinary competence and falsifiability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open calls for manuscripts, theme issues, response to contemporary social questions</td>
<td>Access restricted to members of professional associations, lengthy period of review and revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeks hegemony of a position across disciplines</td>
<td>Seeks hegemony over entry and success within disciplines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial collectives that are self-selecting</td>
<td>Editors chosen by disciplinary associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prone to inefficiency, sudden</td>
<td>Prone to efficiency, “normal”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

bursts of energy and newness, and an eventual sense that the “moment” of particular journals has passed


As noted above, journals on the right-hand side of the grid are refereed. Double-blind refereeing, in which the author’s identity is hidden from reviewers and vice versa, arose in the social sciences as compensation either for being methodologically unfalsifiable (as per their fantasies about the sciences) or amenable to utilitarian auditing (in the case of some humanities sectors). The system gradually spread across universities, although some of the sciences have stayed with single-blind review, in which the author’s identity is revealed to reviewers. Most refereed journals are financially and intellectually supported by professional organizations. *PMLA* only publishes papers submitted by dues-paying members of the Modern Language Association, and all such offerings are read by fellow initiates. Your work is not even reviewed unless you are a member of the club. The results leave many of us ambivalent. Research on peer review shows that it generates caution and reproduces an “invisible college” of elite scholars and disciplines.32 An editor of *Nature*, for example, has even bemoaned the fact that refereeing would have prevented publication of the letter announcing the double-helix which appeared in the journal in 1953.33 This college is prepared to be very political, as required: The editor of the American Medical Association’s journal was sacked for daring to print a paper during the Clinton impeachment controversy that showed sixty percent of undergraduates at “a large mid-Western university” (how many times have we read that expression in survey research?) in 1991 did not think they had “had sex” if it involved oral contact rather than intercourse.

Some journals cross the divide. Over a five-year period, *Continuum: A Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* was transformed from a group of four of us in Western Australia obtaining manuscripts, editing them, and putting in desktop codes, to a journal that had a senior editor, an editor, a photography editor, two reviews editors, four corresponding editors, seven members of an editorial collective, fifty-nine editorial advisors, and a


British commercial publisher, with only one of those earlier artisans numbered among the above. So this schema is not a comprehensive divide. The editors of the journal *Cultural Studies* in fact welcome the academic formalization of cultural studies. They view publishing growth in the area as “signs of its vitality and signature components of its status as a field,” but continue to call for “knowledge formations” that are “historically and geographically contingent” rather than obedient to disciplines.34 The inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* promised to localize knowledge and be “post-disciplinary,” making “academic research itself” into an object of inquiry and engaging the fact that “‘cultural studies’ is now a management and marketing skill.”35 These instrumental uses of cultural studies always involve a risk that its flexibility, innovativeness, openness to critique, and relationship to radical democracy will be compromised. At the same time, they ensure having a place at the table, as links to recent union action suggest.

The brigands on the left of the grid have gathered force in book publishing, too. The 1990s saw the appearance of numerous cultural studies anthologies, such as feminist readers edited by Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey, Terry Lovell, and Morag Shiach36; an omnibus internationalist survey37; a volume on black British Cultural Studies38; and national mixtures of solid gold and future memories about Australia, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Asia, Russia, Canada-Australia, and the United States.39 Textbooks have been available for some time.40

The gigantic *Cultural Studies* collection came out in 1992, and family-resemblance volumes exist in lesbian/gay/queer, legal, multicultural/postcolonial, regional, and political theory, whilst there is a call within biomedicine to adopt a cultural-studies research agenda, and notable contributions have been made in areas such as AIDS. Several *Cultural Studies at the Crossroads* conferences have been held, and Honolulu convened a major event in 1993, with one block dedicated to cultural studies journals from New Zealand/Aotearoa, Australia, India, the Philippines, and the United States. Major scholarly bodies have been transformed from within by cultural studies tendencies, notably the International Communication Association, the International Association for Mass Communication Research, and the National Communication Association. Finally, there is the inevitable raft of web sites.

Cultural studies has not avoided the eyes of academic and political invigilators, as the right-hand side of the publishing grid has analogues on the right of politics. Cultural studies' concerns with identity and its struggles against a canon of supposedly elevating aesthetic work lead to accusations of a fall from the grace of connoisseurship. Kenneth Minogue polemizes in the *Times Literary Supplement* about this "politicointellectual junkyard of the Western world," while neoconservative readers of *Partisan Review* and the *New Criterion* are alert to the danger as well. Chris Patten, former Conservative Member of the British Parliament and the last Governor of Hong Kong, calls cultural studies "Disneyland for the weaker minded" and Simon Hoggart, son of Richard

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50. *See Blackwell Cultural Theory Resource Centre* (Sarah Berry & Toby Miller eds.) at http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/cultural.
51. *See Kenneth Minogue, Philosophy, Times Literary Supplement*, Nov. 25, 1994, at 27.
and a notable journalistic maven, is an implacable foe. He could be seen on British television in February 2000 chiding local universities for wasting time on this nonsense when they should be trying to be in step with Harvard and MIT. As there have been several conferences at Harvard Law School about cultural studies, and MIT is forever promoting itself as a site for related work, cultural studies has obviously hit even these hallowed targets. On the other hand, some right-wing libertarians welcome cultural studies. Virginia Postrel, editor of Reason magazine, wrote a 1999 op-ed piece for the Wall Street Journal in which she described cultural studies as “deeply threatening to traditional leftist views of commerce” because notions of active consumption were so close to the sovereign consumer beloved of the right: “The cultural-studies mavens are betraying the leftist cause, lending support to the corporate enemy and even training graduate students who wind up doing market research.”

In the United States, some sociologists, confronted by departmental closures, amalgamations, or a transmogrification into social policy, bury their heads in methodological anguish when confronted by cultural studies, or claim the turf and terminology as their own. What do you get when you cross Talcott Parsons with Émile Durkheim and Harold Garfinkel? A New Proposal for Cultural Studies. This position says Marxism has been overtaken by a revised functionalism that uses interpretative cultural anthropology and “subjective perceptions” to link meaning with social structure. Symbols and ideals, not power relations, are the appropriate focus. To underline the point, Cambridge University Press’s Cultural Social Studies series is an avowedly Durkheimian project. It echoes both the Editor’s Note that inaugurated Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies twenty-five years ago as an attempt to “elucidate the essential nature of the American character,” and claims that cultural studies is just symbolic interactionism. So conventional critics either throw up their hands in horror, or seek to incorporate the upstart hybrid as normal science.

On the left, cultural studies’ concerns with identity have led to accusations of a fall from the grace of “real” politics (recalling Don DeLillo’s character in the postmodern novel White Noise, who complains of his university that “There are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes”). New Yorker journalist Adam Gopnik has accused radicals in the United States of being over-committed to abstract intellection and the assumption that “consciousness produces reality,”

57. See SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND CULTURAL STUDIES (Howard S. Becker & Michael M. McCall eds., 1990).
58. DON DEILLO, WHITE NOISE 10 (1985).
such that the “energy on the American left is in cultural studies, not health care.” To this one can only reply that work on consumption should include questions of pleasure and resistance as well as domination, and that debates over health care are partially conducted through the popular. The longstanding cultural studies journal Social Text (1979-present) became mired in public controversy over social constructionism and scientific truth claims in 1996-97 when a physicist published a paper there stating things he did not believe, then announced this in a populist academic magazine, claiming his hoax as a sign of the area’s sloppy thinking and its weakness as a site for radical politics. There was massive media attention. Given the deceitful nature of this conduct, we can see why it is necessary for the U.S. Government to house a full-time bureau dedicated to scientific fraud by holders of Federal research grants!

What is going on with these critiques? It seems as though cultural studies occupies the space of 1960s British sociology—an irritant to hegemonic forces because of its radical anti-elitist critique. This antagonizes both traditional academic disciplines and media mavens, who see it as the humanities’ sacred duty to elevate the population (or at least segments of it) through indoctrination into a sacred array of knowledges carefully removed from the everyday. The DeLillo quip about full professors reading cereal boxes is funny and pointed, but it is wry in a myriad of ways. Of course, it is odd to turn away from high-cultural pursuits and invest one’s academic capital in the banal, to shift direction from the Bauhaus to the Mouse House. The Patten quip about “Disneyland for the weaker-minded” is also funny and pointed. But in each case, there is something behind the remark. Understanding the iconic significance and material history to American food is of great importance, while acknowledging the pleasures of ordinary people rather than privileging the quasi-sacerdotal pronouncements of an elect may not be so much “weaker-minded” as threatening to cultural elites and the corporate university. In addition to querying traditional humanities work, cultural studies has also questioned co-opted knowledge.

In the research domain, today’s college system clearly endorses “partnerships” between state, education, and industry. Such relationships merit scrutiny rather than an amiable blind faith. In the United States, university consultancies date to nineteenth-century museums, observatories, and agricultural-experimentation outposts, but the shop was really set up in the late 1950s. Considerable effort since then has gone into clarifying the significance of tailoring research priorities to contemporary political parties and corporations: “pork-barrel science,” as it is known.

59. Adam Gopnik, Read All About It, NEW YORKER, Nov. 4 1994, at 84, 96.
60. I have been involved with the journal since 1994 and its co-editor since the summer of 1997. I did not bear the brunt of this crisis, but was present throughout. It became clear that the desire to attack cultural studies was very intense indeed, regardless of the alibi of the moment that was used to do so.
Ralph Nader's Center for Universities in the Public Interest was set up because of such concerns, which are even evident to former supporters of government/college/industry relationships who have experienced the obstacles they can pose to disinterested research outcomes. (I am thinking here of Harvard's Derek Bok and a very traditional sociologist, Robert Nisbet.) The complications are obvious in a hot topic such as bioethics, but there are issues too for other fields, such as anthropology (consider the unfolding controversy over the Yanomami in Venezuela and Brazil, involving the best-known American anthropologist, Napoleon Chagnon, sociobiology, measles vaccines, and money from the Atomic Energy Commission) or the less spectacular case of psychology and the requirement that undergraduates present themselves as research subjects as a condition of enrollment, with the results—publication, presentation, or commodification—of no tangible benefit to them and frequently undertaken without their knowledge or participation.

And there is a problematic history to much academic participation in democratic government. Consider language-spread policy and the part played in it by linguists, let alone the work of economic advisors (Robert Triffin acting as plenipotentiary for the United States to the European Economic Community and then as a European delegate to the International Monetary Fund, just a few months apart, in the 1980s), political scientists (Project Camelot in the 1960s), biomedical researchers (relations with pharmaceutical companies), public-relations consultants (a critical concern of the professional associations), nuclear physicists (Red-baiting of scientists), and communication studies. The very existence of communication research raises questions of ideological distortion, given the discipline’s formation under the sign of war and clandestine government activity and later corporate and foundation support. The policy sciences, originally conceived as a connection between democratic and executive action, have degenerated into an “unrepresentative expertise” that lacks articulation with the everyday. Thomas Streeter points out that in the United States, “policy” frequently connotes a pro-corporate position that turns highly contestable positions into absolutes, with consultant professors simultaneously performing objectivity and applicability. (For example, the policy and program management of our National Parks has consistently owed much more to bureaucratic force majeure, tourism money, and “development” than to ecological science.)

This sorry history long predates contemporary concerns about the corporatization of the American university, which arose once we lost the


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relatively disinterested Cold-War stimuli to big science and we witnessed the privatization of public life.

Of course, applied research does not have to be carried out on behalf of corporations or those government offices that back corporate welfare. Indeed, cultural studies sociologists like García Canclini design policy recommendations to elude the production and reception parameters fostered by corporate interests. Research with the United States-Mexico Fund for Culture and other Latin American governmental and nongovernmental initiatives is predicated on respecting citizen and cultural rights over capital accumulation and traditional elites. Critiques of applied research can be too knee-jerk, putting into the same category radical-democratic actors like Sonia Alvarez (formerly of the Ford Foundation) and Tomas Ybarra Frausto (of the Rockefeller Foundation) with those who promote the interests of capital and the status quo from the well-heeled offices of RAND, Olin, or Brookings.

In fact, cultural studies connections between universities and social movements can ground research in radical democracy. Consider how the place of indigenous cultures in the representational apparatuses of Mexican national identity was called into question in the late 1970s by pressure from indigenous groups and anthropologists and sociologists who worked with them, like Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, and García Canclini. They challenged the role of intellectuals in maintaining essentialized constructions of nativeness that restricted indigenous people to empirically erroneous and politically debilitating representations of their culture. Stavenhagen, for example, denounced assimilation to Mexican identity, as promoted by anthropological, museological, and social-service institutions. Bonfil called for a redefinition of the researcher as a collaborator with subaltern communities—a necessary retooling for social scientists who were seeing their traditional functions disappear, due not only to paradigm crises in the social sciences but also to such political and economic transformations as neoliberalism and privatization. García Canclini sought to influence the organization of popular culture.63

These debates center key deliberations in the areas of citizenship and consumption: identity, authenticity, aesthetics, postcoloniality, capital, and the state. Clearly, this is appropriate terrain for applying the insights of the professoriat, with two questions always kept in mind: What controls exist on applied research that has no links to social movements? And what can social movements do without ties to research? When we think about oppositional theory, the Italian semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco, linguistics professor and corporate-media critic Noam Chomsky, French philosopher of the postmodern Jean-François Lyotard, Garcia Canclini, and contemporary queer theory recur as signs. Some of their most famous

63. See GARCÍA CANCLINI, supra note 22.
work was born of cultural consultancy and applied research: Eco’s TV
semiotics was undertaken in the 1960s for Italian state broadcasting;64;
Chomsky’s transformational generative grammar arose from research
funded by the Joint Services Electronics Programs of the United States
military;65; Lyotard’s report on the postmodern was written for the
government of Québec;66; García Canclini’s theory of hybridity derived
from a report on indigenous crafts;67; and queer theory’s ur-archaeological
text, Harold Garfinkel’s study of transsexuality, was funded by Cold-War
contract research.68

There is, then, a strong lineage to applied cultural studies, and cultural
studies in the United States has been in the forefront of activism and
documentation of contemporary labor conditions in education.69 Social
Text published The Yale Strike Dossier (1996) and an Out Front dossier
(1999) on sexual politics and the labor movement, which included an
essay by AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney.70 Perhaps most notably, it
was the cultural studies left amongst graduate students and professors in
the Modern Language Association that pressed for the landmark study on
labor produced in late 2000 by the Coalition on the Academic
Workforce.71

I offer an instance of cultural studies’ relevance below, in two forms.
First, I foreground my own experience in the American labor relations
system. Second, I offer a rebuttal of an anti-unionization diatribe from a
management apparatchik.

BEFORE THE NLRB

For the first time in my adult life, I am in a non-unionized industrial
sector. As if in some communistic utopia, I work for a self-managed
autonomous collective. It is called a privately-owned American university.
These places are so extraordinarily collaborative and non-hierarchical that
they transcend employer-employee relations. Why? We are all embarked
on a collegial quest for truth. So it is essential that we not know the truth
about what other people earn, that our pay not be set through transparent
categories of productive labor, that our rights and responsibilities rest
uncodified, and that those studying under and working for us also join the

64. Umberto Eco, Towards a Semiotic Inquiry into the Television Message (Paola Splendore
67. García Canclini, supra note 22.
69. See, e.g., Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University (Randy
70. See Out Front, 61 Social Text (1999); The Yale Strike Dossier, 49 Social Text 1 (1999).
71. Ana Marie Cox, Study Shows Colleges’ Dependence on Their Part-Time Instructors, Chron.
party on these terms. Such truths, if known, would break down a sense of trust and common purpose. Uh-huh.

Coming to this country in 1993 from Australia, a place where university employees had recently (ten years earlier) won the right to collective bargaining once the courts held that education was an industry, I was struck by the atmosphere engendered by my new environment. In Australia, when I was paid a third of the money given to certain people I worked with who performed identical tasks (except that they didn’t publish), I felt able to say: “You are paid a lot of money; kindly do some effin work.” Suddenly, at NYU, I had no idea what anybody was being “compensated” (such a sweet euphemism—where I came from, it referred to payments to those injured at work). I had no idea what the norms of performance were and no sense of the poles of collaboration and competition that I was seemingly meant to swing between. This became all the more puzzling once people around me sought to organize.

A 1999-2001 struggle by graduate students at New York University (NYU) to be permitted to have a democratic vote about affiliation with the International United Automobile, Aerospace and Agriculture Implement Workers of America (UAW) put me in conflicting subject positions. I am not a reliable student’s “friend” or “co-worker.” I am a Professor who wants extremely dull, decidedly non-developmental tasks, such as endless photocopying and the filling out of forms, to be performed by others. As someone who has held many jobs where such duties were constitutive, I do not hesitate to describe them as routine and awful. Their execution is, of course, vital to a chain of labor that produces, one hopes, an active and empowered citizenry through the educational process. That’s what we’re here for, right?

I am also the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) in my Department, with responsibility for graduate degrees and students’ progress towards them. In that subject position, I speak with incoming Graduate Assistants (GAs), who are assigned to professors to do banal administrative and research tasks. I tell them that the performance of these tasks is crucial, both to the success of the Department and their selection as suitable Teaching Assistants (TAs) further down the track. Then I move into another mode, driven by ideology and a commitment to unionism: I encourage them to recognize my DGS subject position for what it is—managerial, non-consultative, and directive. How might they deal with “people like me?” By organizing.

This Janus face was clearly on display when I was called by attorneys for the UAW to give evidence and submit to cross-examination by NYU’s union-busting attorneys in NYU, 2-RC-22082 N.L.R.B. (1999), the late August 1999 National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) case. My technical competence to testify derived from my professional position as DGS, and my comments were juridically restricted to that competence. Many things germane to the topic that an ordinary reasonable cultural studies person
might have thought crucial—such as the unsustainability of a binary opposition between learning and labor—were essentially unsayable. NYU's attorneys argued vigorously that GAs perform tasks that are critical to obtaining the doctorate and moving on to professorial rank (a.k.a. the serried ranks of the gentried poor). Anything that is done for money is not done because NYU needs it done, but because it will assist students in one day telling their own GAs what to do. It is postulated that if some of these tasks involve learning on the part of the GA, they are "developmental." Photocopy thousands of pages of *Social Text* in a semester and you might learn something. Somehow.

It struck me during the proceedings that this position implies a dim view indeed of American employers, and hence NYU itself (I presume it does actually employ someone—they must be blue-collar, and the University must accept their unionization, as it doesn't threaten to impair collegiality. Right?). The dim view is this: Employers should not seek to develop their employees by training them, thereby precluding opportunities to learn and increase their labor-power/income potential. If such development occurs, then the employer-employee relationship is undercut. This is the corollary of arguing that a smidgen of development puts an end to claims for student unionization because development excludes employment, as it is a pure category of learning.

I endeavored to explain to the NLRB that the primary task of GAs was to provide a cheap labor pool for crucial but dull tasks that we did not want to undertake ourselves. I also explained that there was very little time available for such students to undertake research for us, so onerous were these clerical duties. And that what research they did manage was of no necessary benefit to their studies. Most of this was ruled inadmissible.

Some of the difficulties I experienced before the NLRB derived from my desire to speak colloquially. So when I said that GAs were expected to "keep their noses clean," this was incomprehensible, as was the idea that something was "as rare as hen's teeth." I promised to eschew metaphor from that point on, so that the assembled attorneys would be able to follow. Other communicative problems flowed from my attempt to talk about the contradiction that is at the heart of NYU and other such institutions. We rely on discounted labor performed by students, even as we claim that they need these "fellowships" to become more like us. The NLRB's presiding officer and the cross-examining lawyers for NYU may have been troubled by my figures of speech and appealed to a House Un-American Metaphors and Similes Committee, but they were much more deeply disturbed by my use of the word "contradiction." The identification and explication of contradiction were deemed "opinion" and hence unsayable, before I had detailed why I found the concept helpful and what the relevant contradictions were. "Contradiction" as a category was, in this sense, inadmissible. Why am I not surprised that this useful wee word should so exercise the minds of those assembled before it? Might it be that

https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol13/iss1/3
its lineage lies in a conflictual view of social thought rather than an integrative one—that it stresses power inequalities over behavioral norms? The claim that this went beyond my technical capacity to testify seems highly procedural, rejecting even the conceptualization of practices as laden with contradiction.

The other unsayable aspects to my testimony detailed the respective career benefits of teaching as a TA and an adjunct. The learned gentleman cross-examining me for the University sought to establish that I saw the sale of this labor-power as part of financial aid assisting study, rather than remuneration. Of course, it is both. To compete with other leading schools for graduate students, we have to offer money. At the same time, to sustain our undergraduate cash crop, the graduate students must provide cheap services. GAs and TAs exist to perform both these functions and such administrative tasks as fronting the offices of those departments that NYU elects not to staff with qualified full-timers. In a tuition-driven institution like NYU, TAs are crucial to the delivery of a credible and profitable undergraduate curriculum. Their noses clean and their interpersonal fumbles as rare as hen’s teeth, we unleash GAs onto recitation sections, where they, in a sense, replicate and develop what they have done as GAs in the new subject position of TA. They are still performing tasks that Professors would rather not do (intersubjectivity with the Great Unwashed, a.k.a. undergraduate students) and that the University would rather not fund through people who are either fully qualified in their discipline or regularly available to students and in a position to vouch for the curriculum. Adjunct professors at NYU, currently the subject of a campaign by the American Association of University Professors and the UAW, are crucial educational workers. These are also key jobs for graduate students, since many of our doctoral candidates who have finished their course work receive no financial assistance in order to write up their research. They must compete to teach as adjunct professors in the curriculum, with their own TAs selected from the student cohort behind them. So TA and adjunct labor is different from GA work, in that it presumes a mastery of academic material and of pedagogy, though how these abilities are attained is a mystery—they just burst forth from the collegiality that is allegedly native to non-unionized workplaces.

In a University that places science at the heart of knowledge, I find NYU’s position on unions and collegiality not only politically dubious, but analytically spurious. Let’s leave to one side ideological issues and focus on methodology and truth claims. How does anybody know that there is collegiality at NYU? How would they know if it were absent? Where is it deemed strongest and weakest on the campus, and how is this divined? What is done to rectify the loss (or, worse still, the absence) of collegiality? And what is the who/what/when/where/why of the negative correlation that is claimed to inhere in unions and collegiality, here and
elsewhere? Definitions and data please, and testing.

In short, let's have some rigor in this discussion. NYU is claiming that something (collegiality) exists—good, let us know how to define and identify its presence and absence. NYU claims that a relation (unions destroy collegiality) exists—good, let us know the same answers. Otherwise we are dealing with a set of assertions that lack any basis whatsoever. I think a TA would not give good grades to a term paper that demonstrated such tendencies. That is, a TA committed to the collegial quest for truth, of course.

THE DEAN

Early in 2000, many months after my testimony, the NLRB found in the union's favor and against NYU, so an election was held permitting the students to decide whether they wished to be represented by the UAW. But the results were then sealed pending the outcome of an (ultimately unsuccessful) appeal by the employer—that-says-it's-not-an-employer. While all this was going on, Catharine Stimpson, Dean of the NYU Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, wrote an opinion piece in the Chronicle of Higher Education.72 Her remarks represent one managerial view of the issue from within NYU, but they dovetail with widely-held academic superstitions that are implacably opposed to (a) student-employee unionization and (b) the opportunity for students to express their democratic views on this matter.

The NYU Administration certainly has some support amongst the faculty, but there is a significant group that is opposed to managerial superstition. One hundred and seventy faculty members signed a petition requesting that the University not appeal the NLRB's decision permitting graduate-student employees at NYU to participate in an open and free electoral process to determine whether a majority favored collective bargaining machinery as a means of improving their material conditions of existence. Of those 170, many of us supported the principle of unionization and some of us did not. But we were all horrified by the automatic denunciation of the right to vote, which violated the principle that democratic self-expression over the desirability of union representation should be the right of a financially disadvantaged but intellectually, administratively, and professionally important fraction of the University population, whose contribution to everyday life is both crucial and systematically undervalued in material terms.

Stimpson's article is a farrago of non-sequiturs and distortions. I shall deal with its manifold misrepresentations serially. First, she claims that unionization institutionalizes an adversarial versus a collegial means of

72. Catherine R. Stimpson, A Dean's Skepticism About a Graduate-Student Union, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC., May 5, 2000, at B7.
governance. 73 This is simply asserted without evidence. Whilst there may well be profound differences of standpoint and interest generated by the division of labor, these do not always color the interactions of employers and employees. At NYU, a fervently anti-union employer at each and every level of its operation, there are such difficulties. But they arise from the administration’s implacable opposition to industrial organization. As for the foundational claim that the current modus operandi is collegial and not adversarial, I shall turn to that below.

Second, Stimpson asserts that graduate students “do valuable work, but they aren’t employees.” 74 This fudges, for the umpteenth time, the dirty little secret of American university life—that student workers function as discounted labor, allowing these institutions to operate at a fraction of the cost they would incur if proper salaries were paid in return for the discharge of innumerable professional duties, from teaching through photocopying and waiting at functions. The only national data on this suggest that in the humanities, graduate-student labor sustains up to 42.5% of introductory classes and between seven percent and thirty-four percent of all undergraduate instruction. 75 If they are not employees, perhaps the NYU Administration might care to use the resources at its disposal to calculate and publish the cost of substituting their work for people paid at rates set by the market or collective bargaining rather than “stipends.”

Third, Stimpson claims that the industrial model embraced by union membership cheapens the historic mission of the University. 76 But this begs the question of where that process of industrialism began and how it is currently managed. The short answer lies in the corporatization of University life, not a function at all of graduate student organizing, but of universities’ adherence to forms of funding and social influence that are to do with providing research and development services to government and business and borrowing fashionable forms of managerialism from corporations (such as practicing divide-and-rule forms of administration to centralize power deconally and keep faculty from participating in the actual versus the apparent allocation of resources on campus, despite legal obligations to do so under the Supreme Court’s NLRB v. Yeshiva University decision 77).

Fourth, Stimpson quotes approvingly an anonymous alumnus hurrumphing that the graduate students are “Damn well paid.” 78 This is amateur-hour economic analysis. It can hardly be indicative of her fellow managers’ methods of financial planning and prudentialism—at least I

73. See id.
74. Id.
75. See Cox, supra note 71.
76. See Stimpson, supra note 72.
77. 444 U.S. 672 (1980).
78. Stimpson, supra note 72.
hope it’s not. But more than that, it shows a shocking disregard for questions of a living wage in New York City in terms of the costs of health care, housing, and basic subsistence.

Fifth, Stimpson maintains that the UAW’s presence as a representative of student concerns over these basic questions of life and limb would stifle debate and influence basic academic decisions at NYU. My understanding is that this is not intended by the union, the NLRB, or anyone else. Mandatory collective bargaining does not typically include such issues—they fall into the voluntary category and require the agreement of both sides in order to be included in negotiations. The idea that there would be a loss of “shared and collegial academic governance” presumes, in any case, that such governance exists at NYU. The huge centralization of power in the hands of Deans (for example routinely denying departments the right to select their own Chairs and centralizing admissions decisions) makes a mockery of such claims and has led to the revival of an AAUP chapter by faculty themselves.

Sixth, Stimpson says that graduate students are a transient population, and as such should not be permitted to vote on matters that will bear on others. At another point in the piece, she describes herself as a feminist. Perhaps she might ruminate on the arguments made against women workers gaining similar representation on the grounds that they are transient populations, engage in piece work, and so on.

Last, Stimpson objects to the NLRB’s exclusion of certain students from the vote. It seems incredibly bad faith, even from an NYU Dean, to make this point, since it arose because NYU’s own claims on this point were backed up by both the UAW and the NLRB—that students funded by professorial grants to undertake collaborative work that directly addressed their dissertation topics were not undertaking labor on behalf of the University such as photocopying course outlines or grading papers.

This entire affair has laid bare NYU’s desire to prevent graduate-student employees from expressing their views on a key topic that differentiates open from repressive societies—namely, the right to organize. Whatever your views on unionism, this is a shocking breach, and it has led to condemnation of NYU’s anti-democratic conduct across the world, as the self-styled “global university” draws global and national condemnation for its authoritarianism from The Economist, The New York Times, Doonesbury cartoons, and legislators. The list goes on and on. The notoriety spreads. The Administration and its anti-democratic confrères

79. See id.
80. See id.
81. See id.
82. See id.
83. See Pupil Power, ECONOMIST, Nov. 18, 2000, at 40.
84. See Unions and Universities, N.Y.TIMES, Nov. 25, 2000, at A18.
looked uglier and uglier and lonelier and lonelier until, early in 2001, they finally gave up and agreed to abide by the law of the land.

To repeat, the opposition to such logics has seen cultural studies students and faculty at the forefront, as was the case during the Yale strike (which drew similarly barren ideas and brutal reactions from the administration, including many Faculty nominally on the left). It is no accident that numerous activists at both NYU and Yale have been associated with cultural studies. And no accident that their opponents have hewed more closely to disciplinarity. For the very styles of analysis associated with cultural studies, such as the constitutive nature of conflict and contradiction, challenge the myth of collegiality in corporate universities (a.k.a. student-maintenance organizations), and the iniquities of discounted labor and casualization.

CONCLUSION

Any undertaking that aims to map cultural studies is partial and potentially controversial, because the terrain is up for grabs in definitional and power terms, and is avowedly political. Let it be so. My own view? For what it's worth, I maintain that cultural studies should look at social movements and actionable policy as lodestars. In recognition of this, we must turn our gaze onto shifts in public discourse between self-governance and external governance, and track the careers of the commodity sign and the state sign as they travel through time and space—Stuart Hall’s “circuit of culture” that focuses on practices of representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. This means recalling Foucault’s provocation that the modern has as much to do with the governmentalization of the state as of the social. Then we shall have something to say about the institutional control of culture and the democratic potential of everyday life, pointing out erasures in the former, and the potential of the latter. As Justin Lewis puts it, a concern with political power exercised over majorities need not be at the expense of specificity and marginality; rather, it should be regarded as a precondition to empowering the marginal. Richard Maxwell stresses articulations between the two:

People work to make culture. Not only the writers, technicians, artists, carpenters and all those who put together movies, books and such; culture is also made by labour not directly involved in the culture industries. Consider your own daily works of judgement and interpretation about a film plot, your grammar or a classmate’s joke. Think of all those whose efforts built the bridges you have crossed,

86. See Justin Lewis, The Opinion Poll as Cultural Form, 2 INT’L J. CULTURAL STUD. 199 (1999).
the roads travelled, the means of transport and human relationship . . .
your love story, a brief encounter . . . and all the hardship, strikes,
solidarity, death, wage negotiations, debt and satisfaction embodied
in those structures. 87

So graduate students are definitely at work, no? And not just in a
Marxist sense—they are paid money by an employer in return for making
things happen. The links between study and labor should not be so
difficult for higher education to conceptualize—they are the stuff of our
world. And cultural studies also puts together seeming opposites that are
actually natural syntagms. I recall my excitement when I first saw the
front cover of the Birmingham Centre’s Working Papers in Cultural
Studies 4 of 1973. Alongside a bricolage graphic of a thoughtful cherub,
some compass points with dollar and pound signs, and a few printers’
codes, the bottom center-left read like this:

**LITERATURE ~ SOCIETY**

**MOTOR RACING**

It seemed natural to me for these topics to be grouped together (as is the
case in a newspaper). But of course that is not academically “normal.” To
make them syntagmatic was utterly sensible in terms of people’s lives and
mediated reality, and utterly improbable in terms of intellectual divisions
of labor and hierarchies of discrimination. By the same token, the efforts
of cultural studies graduate students (and others) to strike a blow for their
own democratic rights and secure livable remuneration have sent shock
waves through Catherine Stimpson and her fellow-travelers. The New
York Times says, “American graduate programs, the envy of the world, are
not so fragile they cannot coexist with unions, or provide workers the
rights they enjoy elsewhere in the economy.” 88 Bravo.

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87. Maxwell, supra note 6, at 281.
88. Unions and Universities, supra note 84.