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THE POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

E. San Juan, Jr.

Since the intervention of Cultural Studies in the Western academy began with violating the conventional protocols, I start with a similar transgression by some travel notes. Last March my wife and I attended a convention of the National Association of Ethnic Studies in Orlando, Florida, where we encountered the tourist holiday crowd in full force. Among the attractions disseminated by hundreds of brochures and media publicity is the Salvador Dali Museum located in St. Petersburg, Florida. The Museum's brochure describes the place in six languages (German, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Dutch); the English version reads thus:

World-famous, the Salvador Dali Museum ranks as one of the top attractions in Florida receiving the highest rating by the Michelin Green Guide—the only such attraction on the west coast to be so honored. Daily tours of the museum's fascinating collection will educate, yet entertain you, about one of the 20th century's greatest artist—Salvador Dali. Bewildering double images and incredible paintings will surprise; sculptures, holograms and art glass will amaze; and early impressionist-style paintings and melting clocks will delight you. You are assured of finding something special. Be sure to include time for the Dali Museum in downtown St. Petersburg in your plans.

The Museum is of course competing with such popular favorites as Epcot, Disney, Universal Studios, Sea World, Wonderworks, and a thousand other diversions, from restaurants, specialized shows, art galleries, curio shops, and diverse simulations and imitations of aspects of Disney World in numerous malls. We visited the Museum for verification. The reality was not far from the media hype. Shopping at the Museum, with surrealist-art mementoes of merchandise guaranteed to educate, surprise, entertain, amaze and delight, is indeed the avowed rationale.

Later in March, I participated in an international conference organized by the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences at Chiba Univer-

sity, Tokyo, Japan. The theme of the conference was “Searching for the Paradigm of Pluralism: Cultural and Social Pluralism and Coexistence in South and Southeast Asia.” Scholars from Thailand, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka came; the plenary lecture was given by a leading Japanese scholar, Prof. Mitsuo Nakamura, who spoke about “Islam and Civil Society—Hope and Despair,” while my topic was “The Paradox of Multiculturalism: Ethnicity, Race, and Identity in the Philippines.” Mindful of the Japanese Empire’s goal of building a “Great East Asia CoProsperity Sphere” and the peculiar ethnic homogeneity in Japan, I remarked that the dialogue was a good beginning in exploring the meaning and implications of “multiculturalism” which, initiated in the West as a theme, genre, policy, and disciplinary orientation, can be recontextualized in the Asian setting and articulated with the larger research and political projects of intellectuals, government officials, and other protagonists in the public sphere.

There is some distance, of course, between multiculturalism and cultural studies. Disneyworld, Dali and Japan are coeval in the frame of my experience. How do we connect both the Dali Museum and the Japanese interest in pluralism as phenomena in the field of cultural studies (CS)? Given the fact that the discipline or practice called “cultural studies” has acquired a distinct content at every case of “situational appropriation,” one can call both the placing of the Salvador Dali Museum in the tourist-shopping cosmopolis and the multiculturalist conference in Chiba, Japan, as potential points of trajectory for cultural studies research. As a comparative literature scholar from the Philippines, and also an expert in ethnic studies in the U.S. academy, I consider myself a conjunctural site for the encounter between various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, between “third” and “first” world cultures, and between popular/plebeian layers of culture and the mainly Eurocentric discourse of the academy. Obviously I may be an exceptional case, even though Taiwan has become also one site for the exchange between Western CS and its local practitioners. But in what way is this encounter productive of knowledge and pedagogical practice that can be used for undoing the Eurocentric, Western hegemony of global capitalism? Can the critical apparatus of concepts, idiom, rhetoric, and style be imported or transplanted from Birmingham and Chapel Hill, USA, to Asian, African, and Latin American milieus without reinforcing postcolonial and imperial hegemonies?

The inaugural collection *Cultural Studies* edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler has established certain

doxa: CS as a superior form of bricolage, context dependent but both anti- and multidisciplinary, pragmatic, strategic and self-reflective, with a tradition and lexicon that defies codification, no guarantees of validity or authoritativeness, endless self-reflexive interrogation. It is a contentious field crisscrossed by diverse positions and trajectories, essentially open-ended. What does bricolage mean? It encompasses textual analysis, semiotics, deconstruction, ethnography, interviews, phonemic analysis, psychoanalysis, rhizomatics, content analysis, survey research, etc. While claiming that there is no single narrative or definition of CS, Grossberg and his colleagues cite the double articulation of CS: cultural practice and production as the ground on which analysis takes place simultaneously with political critique and intervention. Investigating the grounded practices, representations, languages and customs of specific historical formations, CS also studies “the contradictory forms of “common sense” or commonplace understandings which presumably provide resources to fight the constraints of the social order. Grossberg and colleagues write: “It is nevertheless true that from the outset cultural studies’ efforts to recover working-class culture and history and to synthesize progressive traditions in Western intellectual history had had both overt and implicit political aims” (5).

In an interview by *Radical Philosophy* in 1997, Stuart Hall reminded us of the core problematic of CS at its foundational moment: culture (meaning, symbolic forms, practices, discourses) situated in the context of social relations and the organization of power. The analysis of signifying practices—the linkages between language/literature and political economy/mode of production—includes with it the position of groups, collective subjects, in history, generating a critique of those practices. Hall comments on a later development: “A formal deconstructionism which isn’t asking questions about the insertion of symbolic processes into societal contexts and their imbrication with power is not interested in the cultural studies problematic” (1999: 390). CS then is distinguished by its examination of how cultural practices are connected with relations of power. But is it enough to postulate as a desideratum of legitimacy for this new approach the linkage of discourse and society and power? What does “power” signify here? Isn’t this by itself a formula for a simple juxtaposition since there is no indication of purpose or historical direction? Isn’t this a rehashing of the rudimentary empiricist demand that ideas be inscribed in social and political contexts?

All commentators agree that a version of Marxist reductionism, otherwise known as economism, triggered the revolt against the left.

What happened in the reaction to a caricatured Marxism? Despite claims that the rebels were reinstating agency and freedom to the subject, a swing to metaphysics and idealism resulted. I believe the correction offered, namely, the over-emphasis on a formalist methodology conflated with organicist (Leavis) or nihilistic metaphysical assumptions (post-structuralism), produced a neutralizing if not unwitting cooptation of CS. CS has become an Establishment organon, or an academic “ideological state apparatus” which prevents even the old style of *kulturkritik* to function.

One of the most astute diagnosis of this decay is by Francis Mulhern. In utilizing Gramsci’s complex notion of hegemony to ascribe more freedom to the subject, postmodernist CS overexaggerated the possibility of liberation over the established fact of domination. Both subordination and resistance are found in popular culture, the impulses of resistance embedded in relations of domination and imperatives of commodification. Rejecting totality, it has ignored elite or high cultural forms and elevated popular culture, thus overlooking “the overwhelming historical realities of inequality and subordination” that condition both (34). In privileging commodified recreation or aestheticized subsistence activity found in marketed “life-styles,” Mulhern argues that the “spontaneous bent of cultural studies is actually *conformist*—at its worst, the theoretical self-consciousness of satellite television and shopping malls” (35). If the culture of everyday life is politicized and all difference regarded as emancipatory, this dissolves the “possibility of culture as a field of political struggle.” Why? Because politics is a deliberative and injunctive practice that seeks to determine the character of social relations while culture, whose major function is to produce meanings, do not have for its chief purpose the determination of social relations by deliberation, injunction and coercion. The two realms should not be collapsed nor conflated. Political judgement and cultural judgement are distinct and do not coincide, as Gramsci points out. Mulhern concludes that cultural practices treat all differences as absolute, whereas politics aims for solidarities, united fronts, in pursuit of specific ends. By eliding that distinction, dissolving politics into culture, CS abandons the search for political solidarities and freezes “the particularisms of cultural difference,” of differing cultural practices as political in themselves. Mulhern perceives CS accepting the inescapable bondage of the masses to consumer capitalism—the ironical end-result of their will to resist all determinisms: “There is no space, and in fact no need, for struggle if all popular culture, abstracted from “high” culture and from the historical realities of inequality and domination, is

already active and critical, if television and shopping are already teachers of subversion” (40).

Apart from the historical vicissitudes of the radical left in Britain (where the Birmingham experiment was first launched), the post-structuralist “exorbitation” of language and semiotics contributed to what I would call a “metaphysical turn” in CS. The evolution from cultural empiricism to Althusserian structuralism ended in a peculiar reading of Gramsci (Bocock). Entirely overlooking the distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself already found in Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* and other works, Laclau interpreted the Gramscian concept of hegemony hinging on working-class moral/intellectual leadership as equivalent to the “historic bloc.” This bloc constructs political subjects (working class, women, environmentalists, etc.)—politics as “articulation.” While Laclau and Mouffe grant that the collective will of such a bloc is forged by organic intellectuals, a will expressed in the hegemonic ideology uniting the bloc, they argue further that there is not just one hegemonic center in society but many. A field of “articulation” is posited in which society is no longer a totality sutured together, but an open field; “the openness of the social as the constitutive ground or ‘negative essence’ of the existing, and the diverse ‘social orders’ as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences” (95-96). Rejecting the Marxist notions of “mode of production,” “social formation,” “overdetermination,” and the like, Laclau and Mouffe claim that all social and economic reality is constructed by articulatory practices that establish identities of elements through relation. Thus, “All identity is relational...There is no essence, no structure, which underlies the signifier, social identity is symbolic and relational, not fixed independently of any articulation,” although temporary nodal points in the symbolic field for fixing meanings are conceded (113). But what rationale or purpose lies behind articulation? Unaffected by the elements it articulates, what is the direction of articulatory practice? Why articulate at all?

Translated into the discourse of CS, the theory of articulation becomes almost a methodological doctrine. Hall states: “An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions... The ‘unity’ which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse [composed of elements without any necessary ‘belongingness’] and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected” (141). Hall stresses the contingency and adhoc transitoriness distinguishing the practice of articulation.

Beginning as a reaction against determinism, the reduction of ideology to politics to economics, this theory of articulation strikes me as a pragmatic epistemology of explaining social change as arbitrary, spontaneous, open to the dictates of who possesses the most power. When Hall illustrates this articulation practice by using the Rastafarian movement as an inflection of disparate ideological elements along certain historical tendencies, he gestures to the need to take into account “the grain of historical formations” but only to return to his primary thesis that religion, like any cultural or ideological complex, operates like a language or discursive formation open to a wide range of experimental play. So ideology, which constitutes political subjects, is not given necessarily in socio-economic structure or in objective reality; “the popular force of an organic ideology” is “the result of an articulation” (145).

Can all cultural practices then be reduced “upward” as discourse or language, and all subjectivities or subject positionalities be conceived as discursively constituted? Hall registers a limit to the theoretical reductionism of Laclau/Mouffe and Lacanian psychoanalysis. He reminds us to locate cultural/discursive practices “within the determining lines of force of material relations, and the expropriation of nature... Material conditions are the necessary but not sufficient condition of all historical practice,” but such condition need to be thought of “in their determinate discursive form” (147). Hall is cognizant of the abuses of a theoretical *bricolage* influenced by *Realpolitik* pragmatism, as found in some applications of Foucault and American deconstructionists. Unfortunately, such abuses are fostered by the inadequacy of articulation theory: it cannot comprehend the internal relation of parts within a dynamic whole since its level of abstraction refuses to grasp the internal impulses and potential within the elements being articulated, the unity and contradiction distinguishing them, as the force that shapes the way the whole nexus of forces is organized. While Hall acknowledges that Rastafarianism centers on the “determinations of economic life in Jamaican society,” its status as a product of discursive articulation, as a unified force with a non-unitary collective subject, originates somewhere else. Rastafarianism as the unifying ideology that subsumes economic determinations and constitutes its bloc of social/political forces in a non-holistic way, but exactly how that ideology comes about, remains mysterious.

The imperative of contingency and indeterminacy becomes almost fetishized in the work of Lawrence Grossberg, a disciple of Hall and editor of the chief institutional organ of CS. In surveying current

theories of identity, Grossberg refuses what he calls the logics of modernity founded on difference, individuality, and temporality. He proposes an alternative logic of otherness, production and spatiality for a theory of human agency and historical change. Agency, for Grossberg, is defined by “the articulations of subject positions and identities into specific places and spaces...on socially constructed territories” (102). Amidst triumphalist rhetoric, Grossberg upholds a notion of singularity underlying a community envisioned by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. It is somewhat of a puzzle that Grossberg endorses Agamben’s view that the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstration in China instances the singularity of belonging without identity; ultimately, it’s the place, the exteriority or exposure, that constitutes the singular community. What is strikingly obvious is the emphasis on spontaneous and unplanned action that supposedly characterized the Chinese event, a false premise based on ignorance of the facts of the case. Ignoring the actual circumstances, the tautology Grossberg indulges in to convey what he thinks is profound—“it was the fact of belonging that constituted their belonging together”—serves as proof that anomie, ephemeral experience, an anarchistic valorization of the accidental, happenstance, and contingent acquire foundational import that becomes a warrant for novelty in CS.

Perhaps this style of adhoc pragmatism may not be as trivializing as the prodigious dissertations on Madonna, *Stars Wars*, parades and beauty pageants as counterhegemonic ruses to overthrow the system. Or, more soberly, what harm can a treatise on Dali among the dolphins in Disneyland do? Nothing except that they legitimize the way things are: cash registers ring merrily while service workers in hotels, restaurants, and Disney grounds sweat it out for corporate capital and power to reproduce themselves and, with it, the unequal division of labor and distribution of social wealth.

Now, surely, CS from the outset aspired to displace the centrality of victimization with the praxis of resistance, opposition, empowerment. From object to subject—this underlines the trajectory of the critique of determinism and the search for new forms of subjectivity. But on the way to utopian pleasure and empowerment of the decentered subject, something went wrong.

At this point, I want to call your attention to the more insidious irony at work in CS when poststructuralist ideas of resistance become a framework of describing ordinary practices of exploited people. Sheer heterogeneity reflecting the fragmentation of commodity culture infects the subject to the point where everything

becomes relative. Nietzschean perspectivism prohibits the critic of Cartesian rationality from appealing to a normative framework for criticizing that rationality and its power. It is through the social conditions of fragmentation and dispersal that power, discursive and otherwise, prevails (Dunn). Can a positivist description of epistemic structures be conjoined with “modalities of moral self-constitution” (Dews 234) to offset the preponderance of institutional power? Can ethnographic particularism discover the “weak links” in the social structures that repress the human potential?

There are more than 100,000 Filipino domestics (also known as “Overseas Contract Workers”) in Hong Kong today, employed under terrible conditions. News reports of brutal and inhumane treatment, slavery, rape, suicide and murder abound. The reason for why thousands of college-educated women continue to travel to Hong Kong even as the coffins of their sisters greet them at the ports of embarkation, is not a mystery. Suffice it here to cite the context of this labor diaspora: the accelerated impoverishment of millions of Filipino citizens, the unequal and unjust system that fosters emigration to relieve unemployment and defuse mass unrest, and the political adjustments in Hong Kong and other Newly Industrializing Countries, comprise the parameters for this transnational phenomenon. The convergence of complex factors, including the internal conditions in the Philippines, has been carefully delineated by Saskia Sassen in her new book, *Globalization and Its Discontents*. She refers in particular to the devalorization of women’s labor in global cities, the shrinking status of sovereignty for peripheral nation-states, and the new saliency of human rights in a feminist analytic of the “New World Order.”

Notwithstanding this massive research into the structural and historical background for the plight of these “new heroes” (as President Corazon Aquino once called them), a recent ethnographic account of the lives of these Filipina maids celebrates their newfound subjectivity within various disciplinary regimes. Deploying Foucault’s notion of “localized power,” Nicole Constable seeks “to situate Filipina domestic workers *within* the field of power, not as equal players but as participants”(11). Ambivalence characterizes the narratives of these women: they resist oppression at the same time as they “participate in their own subordination.” And how is agency manifested? How else but in their consuming power. During their Sundays off, these maids gather in certain places like the food restaurants of the Central District and demand prompt service or complain to the managers if they are not attended to properly. They

can also exercise agency at McDonald's if they ask extra condiments or napkins. Apart from these anecdotal examples, the fact that these maids were able to negotiate their way through a bewildering array of institutions in order to secure their jobs is testimony to what Constable, a professor of anthropology, calls "the subtler and more complex forms of power, discipline and resistance in their everyday lives" (202). According to Anne Lacsamana, this attempt to ferret out signs of tension or conflict in the routine of their lives obscures the larger context that defines the subordination of these women and the instrumentalities that reproduce their subjugation. Functionalism has given way to neopositivism. Constable shares Foucault's dilemma of ascribing resistance to subjects while devaluing history as "meaningless kaleidoscopic changes of shape in discourse totalities" (Habermas 277). Nor is Constable alone in this quite trendy occupation. Donna Haraway has earlier urged CS to abandon the politics of representation which allegedly objectifies and disempowers whatever it represents, and choose instead local struggles for strategic articulations that are always impermanent, vulnerable, and contingent.

The most flagrant erasure in Constable's postmodernist anthology of stories is the asymmetrical relation between the Philippines and a peripheral capitalist city like Hong Kong, a relation enabled by the continuing neocolonial domination of Filipinos by Western corporate interests led by the United States. But this micro-resistance of Filipino maids cannot exonerate the ethnographer from complicity with this strategy of displacing causality (a technique of inversion also found in mainstream historians of the Philippines such as Glenn May and Stanley Karnow) and apologizing for the victims by patronage. Lacsamana pronounces a felicitous verdict on this specimen of CS: "To dismiss the broader history of Filipino OCWs in favor of more trivial pursuits (such as watching them eat at a fast food restaurant) reenacts a Western superiority that has already created (and is responsible for) many of the social, economic, and political woes that continue to plague the country" (42).

It is not just a matter of shifting the focus from the now disreputable metanarratives of modernity to the quotidian *habitus* of postmodern consumers. The decay of CS's radical challenge to the reign of capital stems chiefly from the nominalist subjectivism and discursivism adopted from poststructuralist doctrines. Critique is abandoned for a rhetorical assertion that certain practices, which turn out to be simply survival techniques, are inherently emancipatory or liberating. The reduction of history to a series of conjunctural

moments, of identity to temporary positionalities, and positionalities to symbolic chains of equivalence, has eliminated not just history or temporality but also the determinants of location and the geopolitics of place. While postmodernist simulacra, pastiche, and extra-territoriality have compelled us to pay more attention to surfaces and spatial dispositions, this has not translated into a serious engagement with the geopolitics of the “global assembly line,” NAFTA and MASSTRICHT, the internationalization of migrant labor comprised primarily of women of color.

One would have expected that this new sensorium of spatiality would compensate for the damage wrought by temporal distancing on colonized indigenous peoples. Johannes Fabian has demonstrated how the denial of coevalness legitimized Europe’s civilizing mission over the barbaric natives. The ideal of progress served to apologize for the genocide of “peoples without history,” justifying even the globalizing evangelism of CS itself and its postcolonial hubris. One example of this is James Clifford’s oft-cited essay “Traveling Cultures.”

Clifford is engaged in exploring and purportedly displacing “exoticist anthropological forms” inhabiting the domain of comparative cultural studies: the diverse, interconnected histories of travel and displacement, exile, diaspora, etc. While preoccupied with the theme of intercultural interpretation, “how cultural analysis constitutes its objects—societies, traditions, communities, identities—in spatial terms and through specific spatial practices of research” (97), Clifford is really intent on rehabilitating traditional anthropology or ethnography. The strategy is to redefine “fieldwork” as less a concrete place of research than a methodological ideal, a communicative competence. The issue of representation is, for Clifford, concerned with “the portrayal and understanding of local/global historical encounters, co-productions, dominations, and resistances, then one needs to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted native ones” Clifford expands this topic:

In tipping the balance toward traveling as I am doing here, the “chronotope” of culture (a setting or scene organizing time and space in representable whole form) comes to resemble as much a site of travel encounters as of residence, less a tent in a village or a controlled laboratory or a site of initiation and inhabitation, and more like a hotel lobby, ship, or bus. If we rethink culture and its science, anthropology, in terms of travel, then the organic, naturalizing bias of the term culture—seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, dies, etc.—is questioned. Constructed and disputed *historicitities*, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction, come more sharply into view (101)

Not a believer in nomadology or by any means a relativist/nominalist, Clifford is earnest in proving that he can discriminate between the privileged and the disadvantaged, between colonizing West and subjugated natives, between oppressor and oppressed. He disavows linear history and its telos of progress. But he is passionately driven to do comparisons and analogies. He states that “while there is no ground of equivalence between Alexander von Humboldt travelling through South America as a scientist and the Asian indentured laborer in California, “there is at least a basis for comparison and (problematic) translation” (107). He believes that a comparative cultural studies would be interested in knowledge of the Asian laborer’s view of “The New World” as a potential complement or critique of Von Humboldt’s. But what is the basis for such comparisons?

Clifford favors itineraries, returns and detours, “a history of locations and a location of histories.” He is obsessed with migration, exile, transitions, diasporas, movements here and there. Borderlands fascinate him, cities where artists pass through. But the cities he concentrates on are European ones, Paris in particular, “a site of cultural creation,” where Alejo Carpentier, Aimé Césaire, and a host of African and Latin American intellectuals sojourned and displayed a “post-colonial habitus,” a “discrepant cosmopolitanism.” His broad agenda is “to rethink cultures as sites of dwelling *and* travel” (105). In a time when transnational capital, with its new modalities of “flexible accumulation” and niche marketing, is uprooting millions of “third world” peoples and converting them into “transnational” workers, Clifford has the leisure to craft a sophisticated strategy of aestheticizing this disciplined mobility for a refurbished ethnography of travel.

An obvious symptom of this aestheticizing of migration is his agreement with CS practitioners who believe in the extinction of the nation-state. He agrees with the sociologist Orland Patterson’s idea of a postnational environment in the United States, a country now possessing “borderland culture areas, populated by strong, diasporic ethnicities unevenly assimilated” into the dominant culture. No mention here of the role of “buffer races,” labor-market segmentation, pauperization of gendered labor, and so on. Instead, Clifford emphasizes that “travel,” encompassing the historical resonance of other terms like migration, pilgrimage, displacement, tourism, and so on, is a “translation term” to be used “for comparison in a strategic and contingent way” (110). Dense with connotations of gender, class, and race, “travel” harbors a “certain literariness” which allows semiotic free-play. While Clifford urges self-critical awareness that we are using “compromised, historically encumbered tools,” he him-

self (like his fellow anthropologist Constable) does not reflect on his own spatial politics that levels contradictions of class, nationality, race, and gender into a blanket phenomenon whose utility as ethnographic material for knowledge is its most indispensable virtue. Significantly he treats tourism as something marginal, when in fact tourism, a form of travel, reveals the function of travel as an allegory or ethnography of modernity not as socioeconomic institutions but as a form of experience or consciousness. Clifford's "travel" as a pedagogical technique of cultural studies requires the acquisition and deployment of cultural capital. Travel becomes a means of exchanging knowledge, ostensibly for enriching knowledge of one's self, but ultimately for reaffirming mastery of the few able to engage in self-reflection. Travel seeks to domesticate otherness (personified here by migrants, exotic cultures, diasporic artists and intellectuals). John Frow points out the dangers entailed by the ideology of travel when he comments on the touristic role of the Other:

The commodification of reciprocal bonds, of the environment, and of culture are moments of that logic of contemporary capital which extends private appropriation and ownership from material to immaterial resources, and whose paradigm case is the commodification of information....The logic of tourism [as of travel as a form of aestheticized knowledge] is that of a relentless extension of commodity relations and the consequent inequalities of power between centre and periphery, First and Third Worlds, developed and underdeveloped regions, metropolis and countryside. Promising an explosion of modernity, it brings about structural underdevelopment (100-101).

The seeming equalization of societies implied by Clifford's spatial politics of translation via travel may impress those who are already believers in liberal pluralism. But it is one-sided or superficial, trying to remedy the chaotic fragmentation of life in late capitalism by detaching culture from its contradiction-filled matrix. Its project of breaking down national boundaries, like the aim of technocratic modernization theory, is premised on that same reality of unequal development that connects and reproduces center and periphery under the aegis of universalized capital accumulation.

This impasse has been acknowledged by mainstream CS scholars and attributed to the postmodernist dogma on the "celebration of a radically relativized Difference," the "effectivity of surfaces" predicated on "unity in difference." To remedy this predicament, Slack and Whitt have proposed an "ecocultural alternative" which tries to mediate between holistic ecosystem and the integrity of constituent individuals that are supposed to overdetermine the whole. But this alternative still clings to a dualistic metaphysics, assuming that "life

is conducted in discursive conditions not of our own making” (585). The CS program centering on biotic interdependence, with an eclectic bricolage of various pragmatic strategies for survival, is charged with abundant moral messages. But unfortunately it lacks a history in which subject and object dialectically interact. Echoing Frankfurt Critical Theory’s attack on instrumentalism, it downplays or dismisses the complicity of the systemic accumulation of capital by a moralistic attack on fascism. Its communal utopianism renders the whole program a panacea for the neoliberal’s guilt-stricken conscience.

Before concluding, I would like to allude briefly here to one rather obscure counter-example to Constable and Clifford’s style of doing CS that is mindful of the internal contradictions that define any historical moment. This example takes into account the political economy of cultural practice and production, apprehending culture as an ensemble of agencies that produce and reproduce the totality of social relations with its specific hegemonic articulation. What Fredric Jameson suggested as a cognitive mapping based on the imperative “simultaneously to grasp culture in and for itself, but also in relationship to its outside, its content, its context, and its space of intervention and of effectivity” (47) has been pursued with militant eloquence by Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle in their little book, *Angkor: An Essay on Art and Imperialism*.

It is a mode of CS that proceeds from the materiality of signification to the political constitution of subjectivities, sublating rhetoric and textuality into a field of conflicting forces where control/access to knowledge and resources are at stake. Employing a dialectical method of analyzing the unity of opposites, these cultural critics succeed in describing the determinate conditions of possibility of cultural artifacts and practices (in this case, Angkor Wat and the ecological space that historically surrounds it) without reducing that network of objects and events to a logic of signifiers and its infinite semiosis. Moreover, they link the phenomenology of culture to the current historical circumstances (U.S. imperialist aggression in IndoChina) that endow objects, actions, and personalities with meaning and value. Such performance is of course controversial since political and moral issues are involved. Nonetheless, that is what cultural studies should be: a foregrounding of the complex imbrication of power and culture. That is not only its foundational rationale, it is also a prospectus for “doing” cultural studies that continue, in a genuinely radical and transformative way, the humane ideals of the Enlightenment project that was distorted and perverted by its instrumentalization by capital.

It might be useful to allude to the self-reflection of current CS practitioners. Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler earlier stressed the uniqueness of CS in bridging theory and material culture, contextualizing intellectual work with real social and political problems, with cultural and political power and struggle. The question of AIDS, for example, is the testing ground or terrain for struggle and contestation: "What cultural studies must do, and has the capacity to do, is to articulate insights about 'the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death' (7). Is that all the strategic intervention CS can do? Conjunctural analysis and the theory of articulation are privileged because it is "embedded, descriptive, and historically and contextually specific" (8).

Notwithstanding all the talk about intervention, CS in its institutional form reveals its own compromised situation when Grossberg and colleagues pontificate: "Cultural studies does not require us to repudiate elite cultural forms—or simply to acknowledge, with Bourdieu (1984), that distinctions between elite and popular cultural forms are themselves the products of relations of power. Rather, cultural studies requires us to identify the operation of specific practices, of how they continuously reinscribe the line between legitimate and popular culture, and of what they accomplish in specific contexts" (13). Because of its current fixation on articulation, contingency, indeterminacy, and local power resistance, CS will continue to perform a polite and loyal-opposition role, reinforcing that affirmative culture which Marcuse analyzed as relegating essence to a supranatural sphere and allowing, in a laissez-faire mode, alienation and exploitation to continue in the "New World Order" of globalized transnational business. The alternative, of course, is there for us to seize if we dare to not only interpret but also change the world.

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