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## The future of cultural studies

*Raymond Williams*

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I wish here to address the issue of the *future* of Cultural Studies, though not as a way of underestimating its very real current strengths and development – a development which would have been quite impossible, I think, to predict thirty or so years ago when the term was first beginning to get around. Indeed, we should remind ourselves of that unpredictability, as a condition likely to apply also to any projections we might ourselves make, some of which will certainly be as blind. Yet we need to be robust rather than hesitant about this question of the future because our own input into it, our own sense of the directions in which it should go, will constitute a significant part of whatever is made. And moreover the clearing of our minds which might lead to some definition of the considerations that would apply in deciding a direction is both hard and necessary to achieve, precisely because of that uncertainty.

I want to begin with a quite central theoretical point which to me is at the heart of Cultural Studies but which has not always been remembered in it. And this is – to use contemporary terms instead of the rather more informal terms in which it was originally defined – that you cannot understand an intellectual or artistic project without also understanding its formation: that the relation between a project and a formation is always decisive; and that the emphasis of Cultural Studies is precisely that it engages with *both*, rather than specializing itself to one or the other. Indeed it is not concerned with a formation of which some project is an illustrative example, nor with a project which could be related to a formation understood as its context or its background. Project and formation in this sense are different ways of materializing – different ways, then, of describing – what is in fact a *common* disposition of energy and direction. This was, I think, the crucial theoretical invention that was made: the refusal to give priority to either the project or the formation – or, in older terms, the art or the society. The novelty was seeing precisely that there were more basic relations between these otherwise separated areas. There had been plenty of precedents for kinds of study which, having looked at a particular body of intellectual or artistic work related it to what was called its society; just as there was a whole body of work – for example, in history – which described societies

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and then illustrated them from their characteristic forms of thought and art. What we were then trying to say, and it remains a difficult but, I do believe, central thing to say, is that these concepts – what we would now define as ‘project’ and ‘formation’ – are addressing not the relations between two separate entities, ‘art’ and ‘society’, but processes which take these different material forms in social formations of a creative or a critical kind, or on the other hand the actual forms of artistic and intellectual work. The importance of this is that if we are serious, we have to apply it to *our own* project, including the project of Cultural Studies. We have to look at what kind of formation it was from which the project of Cultural Studies developed, and then at the changes of formation that produced different definitions of that project. We may then be in a position to understand existing and possible formations which would in themselves be a way of defining certain projects towards the future.

Now that is, in a summary way, a theoretical point; and I’d like to give one or two examples of it. First, not in Cultural Studies but in one of the contributors to it; namely English or Literary Studies. It is very remarkable that in every case the innovations in literary studies occurred outside the formal educational institutions. In the late nineteenth century, when there was in fact no organized teaching of English literature at all, the demand came in two neglected and in a sense repressed areas of the culture of this society. First, in adult education, where people who had been deprived of any continuing educational opportunity were nevertheless readers, and wanted to discuss what they were reading; and, even more specifically, among women who, blocked from the process of higher education, educated themselves repeatedly through reading, and especially through the reading of ‘imaginative literature’ as the phrase usually has it. Both groups wanted to discuss what they’d read, and to discuss it in a context to which they brought their own situation, their own experience – a demand which was not to be satisfied, it was very soon clear, by what the universities (if they had been doing anything, and some informally were) were prepared to offer, which would have been a certain kind of history or a set of dates, a certain description of periods and forms. The demand, then, was for a discussion of this literature in relation to these life-situations which people were stressing outside the established educational systems, in adult education and in the frustrated further education of women. Hence some of the most remarkable early definitions of what a modern English course might be arose from Oxford Extension lecturers who’d gone out and formed their ideas in relation to this quite new demand. And when this new kind of study of literature – outside traditional philology and mere cataloguing history – finally got into the university, its syllabus was written, for example at Cambridge, almost precisely on the lines which that early phase in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had defined. It was said by one of the founders of Cambridge English that the textbook of that period was virtually a definition of their syllabus.

But then look what happened: having got into the university, English studies had within 20 years converted itself into a fairly normal academic course, marginalizing those members of itself who were sustaining the original project. Because by this time what it was doing within the

institution was largely reproducing itself, which all academic institutions tend to do: it was reproducing the instructors and the examiners who were reproducing people like themselves. Given the absence of that pressure and that demand from groups who were outside the established educational system, this new discipline turned very much in on itself. It became, with some notable advantages, as always happens, a professional discipline; it moved to higher standards of critical rigour and scholarship; but at the same time the people who understood the original project, like Leavis for example, were marginalized. The curious fact is that they then tried to move outside the university, to set going again this more general project. But because of the formation they were – largely, if one wants to be strict in the usual terms, a group of people from petty-bourgeois families, almost equally resentful of the established polite upper middle class which thought it possessed literature, and of the majority who they felt were not only indifferent to it but hostile and even threatening – they chose a very precise route. They went out, and sent their students out, to the grammar schools to find the exceptional individuals who could then come back to the university and forward this process. What had been taken as their project into the university was not any longer the same project, so they went outside. But because they conceived themselves as this minority institution, seeking to educate a critical minority, it was now a different project and not the general project of the first definition. And so all the people who first read what you could now quite fairly call 'Cultural Studies' from that tendency – from Richards, from Leavis, from *Scrutiny* – who were studying popular culture, popular fiction, advertising, newspapers, and making fruitful analyses of it, found in time that the affiliation of this study to the reproduction of a specific minority within deliberately minority institutions created a problem of belief for them, and also a problem for defining what the project was.

If you then look at the site in which there was a further process of change and in which a different project was defined, it was again in adult education. Indeed, it can hardly be stressed too strongly that Cultural Studies in the sense we now understand it, for all its debts to its Cambridge predecessors, occurred in adult education: in the WEA, in the extramural Extension classes. I've sometimes read accounts of the development of Cultural Studies which characteristically date its various developments from *texts*. We all know the accounts which will line up and date *The Uses of Literacy*, *The Making of the English Working Class*, *Culture and Society*, and so on. But, as a matter of fact, already in the late forties, and with notable precedents in army education during the war, and with some precedents – though they were mainly in economics and foreign affairs – even in the thirties, Cultural Studies was extremely active in adult education. It only got into print and gained some kind of general intellectual recognition with these later books. I often feel sad about the many people who were active in that field at that time who didn't publish, but who did as much as any of us did to establish this work. In the late forties people were doing courses in the visual arts, in music, in town planning and the nature of community, the nature of settlement, in film, in press, in advertising, in radio; courses which if they had not taken place in that notably

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unprivileged sector of education would have been acknowledged much earlier. Only when it reached either the national publishing level or was adopted – with some recoil – in the university, was this work, in the typical ways of this culture, perceived as existing at all. There were people I could tell you about who did as much as any of us in my generation, whose names the people now teaching Cultural Studies would simply not know, and they were doing it in a site which was precisely a chosen alternative to the Leavis group. And it should be stressed that it was a *choice*: it was distinctly as a vocation rather than a profession that people went into adult education – Edward Thompson, Hoggart, myself and many others whose names are not known. It was a renewal of that attempt at a majority democratic education which had been there all through the project, but which kept being sidetracked as elements of it got into institutions which then changed it. Thus there was an initial continuity from the Leavis position of certain analytic procedures which eventually were thoroughly changed, because these people wanted precisely a democratic culture, and did not believe that it could be achieved by the constitution of a Leavisite ‘minority’ alone. They were nevertheless aware, because this was a very practical and pressed kind of work, that the simplicities of renouncing mass-popular education and democratic culture, when you have to go out and negotiate them on the ground, would not be easily resolved.

I give this example because so often the history of each phase of Cultural Studies has been tracked through *texts*. Such accounts talk about this individual having done this work; this tendency; this school; this movement labelled in this or that way; which looks very tidy as this type of idealist history – a very academicized kind of literary or intellectual history – always is. Yet that is in a sense only the surface of the real development, and is moreover misleading because what is happening each time is that a formation in a given general relationship to its society is taking what you could otherwise trace as a project with certain continuities, and in fact altering it, not necessarily for the better. There have been as many reversions as there have been advances; and one of the reversions comes, I think, in the next phase. Because as some of this work began to be recognized intellectually, as it was both in discussion and in periodicals and to some extent in the universities, it was thought to be a much newer thing than it was. If you take my book *Communications* which was commissioned because the National Union of Teachers called a conference on ‘Popular Culture and Personal Responsibility’ which in fact came out of the 1950s concern about horror comics – the root is as odd as that – I actually made the book, which didn’t take long to write, out of the material I had been using in adult classes for fifteen years. Thus the sense of novelty which is easily conveyed by tracing the texts is in fact misleading, since the real formation of the project was already there. But when this began to happen it made a certain significant intellectual difference in the university, though never one which could shift its most central institutions and assumptions.

But then a period of expansion in education occurred which created new sites for precisely this kind of work, and a new kind of formation – one perhaps continuous until today – came into existence. I can still remember my own students getting their first jobs and coming back and saying ‘I

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went to meet the principal as the newly appointed lecturer in Liberal Studies, and I asked him what Liberal Studies was and he said, 'I don't know; I only know I've got to have it'. They were, then, in that unprecedented situation, for most people starting their first job, of being able to write a syllabus, which otherwise you labour and drag yourself for a lifetime to climb towards, and then probably fail to do. They had the option to put down certain ideas, and what they put down, in the majority, in new universities, in polytechnics, in colleges of further education, in some schools even, as this new phase got around, was precisely this area of work which the university was rather warily looking at but keeping well outside its really central and decisive areas. And they were able to do this because the option for Liberal Studies had been so vague; it had been based on nothing much more than the sense - itself based, perhaps, in the lingering cultural distrust of science and technology as too worldly - that people should discover certain of the finer things of life.

In this way, and without any well-established body of work to base itself on, a new formation in these new institutions began to develop, but with certain consequences. First, that precisely as you move into the institutions - as you pass that magic moment when you are writing the syllabus and have to operate it, to examine it; as you are joined by colleagues; as you become a department and as the relations between departments have to be negotiated, as the relative time and resources are given to them - what then takes place is precisely the process which emasculated English at Cambridge. At the very moment when that adventurous syllabus became a syllabus that had to be examined, it ceased to be exciting. And just at the moment when this new work flooded into what were, for all the welcome elements of expansion, still minority institutions - still, moreover, formed with certain academic precedents around departments, about the names of disciplines and so on - then certain key shifts in the project occurred.

Yet there is one other kind of institution which I'd first like to mention which also occurred in just this period - I'm talking of the sixties - and that's the Open University. On this, two crucial points need to be made, as it were, simultaneously. First, that this was an extraordinary attempt in the tradition of that movement towards an open-access democratic culture of an educational kind - not the bureaucratically centralized imposition of a cultural programme which would enlighten the masses but one of a genuinely open and educational kind. At the same time, however, it was a deliberate break with the traditions of its own society in adult education and the Co-operative Guild, in all the local self-educating organizations of working people and others, which had been based precisely on a principle which it could not realize: that intellectual questions arose when you drew up intellectual disciplines that form bodies of knowledge in contact with people's life-situations and life-experiences. Because of course that is exactly what had happened in adult education. Academics took out from their institutions university economics, or university English or university philosophy, and the people wanted to know what it was. This exchange didn't collapse into some simple populism: that these were all silly intellectual questions. Yet these new students insisted (1) that the relation of this to their own situation and experience had to be discussed, and (2) that there

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were areas in which the discipline itself might be unsatisfactory, and therefore they retained as a crucial principle the right to decide their own syllabus. This process of constant interchange between the discipline and the students, which was there institutionalized, was *deliberately* interrupted by the Open University, a very Wilsonian project in two senses. It was on the one hand this popular access; on the other hand it was inserting a technology over and above the movement of the culture. This project would bring enormous advantage but it lacks to this day that crucial process of interchange and encounter between the people offering the intellectual disciplines and those using them, who have far more than a right to be tested to see if they are following them or if they are being put in a form which is convenient – when in fact they have this more basic right to define the questions. These people were, after all, in a practical position to say ‘well, if you tell me that question goes outside your discipline, then bring me someone whose discipline *will* cover it, or bloody well get outside of the discipline and answer it yourself’. It was from this entirely rebellious and untidy situation that the extraordinarily complicated and often muddled convergences of what became Cultural Studies occurred; precisely because people wouldn’t accept those boundaries. Yet the Open University, as a major example of a breakthrough beyond a minority institution, had this element in it of a technology inserted over and above the social process of education: it had this characteristic double dimension.

I now come to my controversial point. At just this moment, a body of theory came through which rationalized the situation of this formation on its way to becoming bureaucratized and the home of specialist intellectuals. That is to say, the theories which came – the revival of formalism, the simpler kinds (including Marxist kinds) of structuralism – tended to regard the practical encounters of people in society as having relatively little effect on its general progress, since the main inherent forces of that society were deep in its structures, and – in the simplest forms – the people who operated them were mere ‘agents’. This was precisely the encouragement for people not to look at their own formation, not to look at this new and at once encouraging and problematic situation they were in; at the fact that this kind of education was getting through to new kinds of people, and yet that it was still inside minority institutions, or that the institutions exercised the confining bureaucratic pressures of syllabus and examination, which continually pulled these raw questions back to something manageable within their terms. At just that moment – which I hope is still a moment of fruitful tension – there was for a time a quite uncritical acceptance of a set of theories which in a sense rationalized that situation, which said that this was the way the cultural order worked, this was the way in which the ideology distributed its roles and functions. The whole project was then radically diverted by these new forms of idealist theory. Even the quite different work of Gramsci and Benjamin was subsumed within them; and of the powerful early challenge to such Modernist idealisms launched by Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medvedev, little or nothing was heard. Even (and it was not often) when formations *were* theorized, the main lesson of formational analysis, concerning one’s own and other

contemporary formations, was less emphasized than more safely distanced academic studies.

In its most general bearings, this work remained a kind of intellectual analysis which wanted to change the actual developments of society, but then locally, within the institution, there were all the time those pressures that had changed so much in earlier phases: from other disciplines, from other competitive departments, the need to define your discipline, justify its importance, demonstrate its rigour; and these pressures were precisely the opposite of those of the original project. Now there was indeed a very great gain in this period, as anybody who compares the earlier and later work will see. When I wrote *Communications* we were analyzing newspapers and television programmes, with material strewn over the kitchen floor and ourselves adding up on backs of envelopes, and when I look now at Media Studies departments and see the equipment they have to do the job properly I of course recognize the advances as being marked. Similarly with film studies, we never knew whether the film would (a) arrive, (b) work with that projector, (c) whether in an adult class people wouldn't be so dazed after watching the film that when you asked for discussion you never got a word; now film courses operate in a proper institution, and I've never doubted the advantages of this; just as nobody in the centre of the English Faculty at Cambridge now could believe for a moment that what they do isn't infinitely superior to Leavis's work. I mean, in certain new ways it is always more professional, more organized, and properly resourced. On the other hand, there remains the problem of forgetting the real project. As you separate these disciplines out, and say 'Well, it's a vague and baggy monster, Cultural Studies, but we can define it more closely - as media studies, community sociology, popular fiction or popular music', so you create defensible disciplines, and there are people in other departments who can see that these are defensible disciplines, that here is properly referenced and presented work. But the question of what is then happening to the project remains. And in a sense the crisis of these last years should remind us of the continuing relation between the project and the formation: the assumption that we were witnessing the unfolding of some structure which was, so to say, inherent - a continuation of some simple line, as in those accounts of the history of Cultural Studies which had shown people gradually, although always with difficulty, overcoming their residual errors and moving on a bit - has been brutally interrupted by the very conscious counter-revolution of these last years.

This is where I come to the question of the future. For what we now have is a situation in which the popular cultural institutions have changed so profoundly through the period in which Cultural Studies has been developed, with relative alterations of importance - for example between broadcasting and print - of a kind that no one would have believed possible in the fifties. We've got new sets of problems both inside the different kinds of study we do, as to which of them really bear on the project, and also the question of considering our own formation in this now very changed situation. I'll take a couple of examples first from the internal process of the subjects themselves, illustrating the contradictory effects of this welcome development but simultaneous institutionalization of Cultural Stu-

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dies. If you take the question of popular culture, or popular fiction, it has been clearly quite transformed in the 1980s from its situation in the 1950s, not only because people have been more prepared, because of general social and formational changes, to relate directly to popular culture, putting themselves at a very conscious distance from Richards and Leavis in the 1920s and 1930s who saw it only as a menace to literacy – an element which survives, perhaps, although always as uncertainly and ambiguously as ever, in Richard Hoggart's book. But at the same time that earlier tension between two very different traditions and kinds of work can as easily be collapsed as explored. It is necessary and wholly intellectually defensible to analyse serials and soap operas. Yet I do wonder about the courses where at least the teachers – and I would say also the students – have not themselves encountered the problems of the whole development of naturalist and realist drama, of social-problem drama, or of certain kinds of serial form in the nineteenth century; which are elements in the constitution of these precise contemporary forms, so that the tension between that social history of forms and these forms in a contemporary situation, with their partly new and partly old content, partly new and partly old techniques, can be explored with weight on both sides. This can very easily not happen if one is defining the simpler kind of syllabus because the teacher can say 'well, for that you'd have to go to drama', or literature or fiction, 'we're doing popular fiction'. Yet how could you carry through the very important work now being done on detective stories, for instance, without being able to track back to the crime stories of the nineteenth century and grasp the precise social and cultural milieu out of which that form came, so that you are then able to add an extra dimension of analysis to what we now say about the form of the detective story? Or, in the sociological dimension of Cultural Studies, there is the whole problem of the relation between very close-up contemporary work which is crucially necessary to history, and the very complicated interpretations of history which are not to be diminished, in my view, simply to labour history or popular history, because otherwise one isolates a class precisely from the relations which, in a sense, constitute that class. I give these cases as examples of how in the very effort to define a clearer subject, to establish a discipline, to bring order into the work – all of which are laudable ambitions – the real problem of the project as a whole, which is that people's questions are not answered by the existing distribution of the educational curriculum, can be forgotten. And people, when they are free to choose – though they are often not, because of quite natural pressures and determinations and a reasonable ambition to qualify – again and again refuse to limit their questions to the boundaries of the set course. So that the interrelations between disciplines, which are the whole point of the project, have this inherent problem in what is otherwise a valuable process of defining and modelling the subject.

But the more crucial question now is this: that even after the expansion we've had, which was first halted and then turned back by a succession from Callaghan to Thatcher and Joseph, we are facing a situation which is quite different in kind but just as challenging as that which faced any of those people who developed the project in particular circumstances in earlier periods. What we have got now, and what was not available

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when the studies were getting into the new institutions, is the effective disappearance of those kinds of teenage work which were profound anti-educational pressures at just the time that some of these developments were happening. There were then understandable pressures of money and work against the problems of staying on with that kind of school, that kind of education. We've now got the extraordinary institution of courses which in a sense are deliberately placed beyond the reach of education. We have the effective education of the majority in the age-group of 16 to 18 being removed as far as possible from what are conceived as the old damaging educators. We now encounter a definition of industrial training which would have sounded crude in the 1860s when something very like it was proposed – and we might be glad if it *had* then happened: at least it would have solved one set of problems. It is again being said that people must gain work experience within the forms of the economy to which they must adapt, and as *that* syllabus is written, as that programme of work experience is written, no place at all is envisaged for people like us. I don't mean that individual initiatives don't happen, but rather that a whole substitute educational provision is being made with certain very powerful material incentives, including the possibility of employment. And while the labour movements say of such work experience that it's merely 'cheap labour' or whatever, I say what educators must say – and this is, as a matter of fact, where I see the future of Cultural Studies. Here is a group which – if it is given only what is called 'work experience', but which is actually its introduction to the routines of the foreseen formations of this new industrial capitalism – will be without that dimension of human and social knowledge and critical possibility which again and again has been one of the elements of our project. And if it seems hopeless that people in their own hard-pressed institutions, which of course we have to defend, should be asked to look towards this area which has very consciously, as a matter of political policy, been removed as far as possible from professional educators, I would say this: that there is the prospect, after all, within two, three, four years, of another kind of government; there is the possibility of the renewal of the existing institutions or at least the easing of some of their resource and staffing problems. When that comes, shall we simply cheer that the budgetary crisis is over, the establishment crisis relieved a bit? If we do, then those cheers should only be uttered out of one side of the mouth because if we allow an absolutely crucial area of formative human development to remain deliberately isolated from educators – moreover an area in which what Cultural Studies has to contribute is particularly relevant – then we shall have missed a historic opportunity; just as related opportunities were nearly missed or only partly realized, or to a large extent incorporated and neutralized, in earlier phases. We shall have missed that historic opportunity because we had become, in our very success, institutionalized.

✓ I have deliberately not summarized the whole development of Cultural Studies in terms of the convergence of intellectual disciplines, which is another way of writing this history; an internal and illuminating way, but nevertheless insufficient unless you relate it all the time to the very precise formations and social institutions in which these convergences

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happened and *had* to happen. For that approach in terms of intellectual history may obscure from us what is, as we enter the coming period, a historic opportunity for a new Cultural Studies formation. And the time to prepare this new initiative, which would indeed be much resisted by many vested and political interests, is precisely *now*. Because it is only when a persuasive, reasoned and practical proposal is put forward to a favourable local authority or government, which would then have you sort through the ways in which you would teach it, that this new work will become more than a resented interruption from what is otherwise taught. If this is thought through now, if we fight for it, even if we fail we shall have done something to justify ourselves before the future. But I don't think we need fail at all; I think that the results will be uneven and scattered, but this is where the challenge now is. If you accept my definition that this is really what Cultural Studies has been about, of taking the best we can in intellectual work and going with it in this very open way to confront people for whom it is not a way of life, for whom it is not in any probability a job, but for whom it is a matter of their own intellectual interest, their own understanding of the pressures on them, pressures of every kind, from the most personal to the most broadly political – if we are prepared to take that kind of work and to revise the syllabus and discipline as best we can, on this site which allows that kind of interchange, then Cultural Studies has a very remarkable future indeed.

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