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Notes on reconstructing “the popular”

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Stuart Hall’s influential “Notes on deconstructing ‘the popular’” [Hall, S. (1981). In R. Samuel (Eds.), *People’s history and socialist theory* (pp. 227–240). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.], this essay maps out some of the major shifts in cultural studies’ relationship to popular culture over the past several decades. It concludes with a call for cultural studies to find ways to work from the terrain of the popular, rather than merely studying that terrain, or trying to “translate” its scholarly analyses for popular audiences. This is a necessary path to fulfilling its mission as a political project.

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This essay began as a much shorter paper that I gave at the “Cultural Studies and the Popular” conference at the American University of Paris in 2011, and it retains much of the semi-informal tone of that oral presentation. This approach to writing—i.e. composing for the ear, even when the finished text will be consumed by the eye—is one of the many valuable lessons I learned from reading Stuart Hall. Many of Hall’s most influential “essays” are actually transcripts of talks, lectures, and interviews that he gave (e.g. 1984, 1986, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 2013a, 2013b). And, arguably, much of the rhetorical power of those pieces lies not just in the force of Hall’s considerable intellect (though that’s not to be minimized), but in the way that the affective charge of his speaking voice comes through, even in print. More crucially, the oral character of much of Hall’s writing embodies what he saw as one of the major responsibilities of cultural studies: to communicate the knowledge that we have (or that we produce) to people “who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class” (1992a, p. 281). I do not pretend to have Hall’s gift for oratory (that’s a very high bar to clear), but the implicit lesson set by his example has guided my own work over the years.

My title is intended to suggest two things. The *second* of these is that this essay is structured more as a series of notes and fragments than as a conventional journal article. This is in keeping with an unavoidable characteristic of studying “the popular”: i.e. the inevitable incompleteness of any given research project. There is no definitive popular culture canon, no easily delimited set of textual artifacts, no final point at which an analysis has accounted for everything that needs to be considered. There is always a new episode, another album, a surprising twist to a star’s career, or some other fresh development that expands the scale of one’s chosen research object. The most exhaustive effort to wrap one’s arms around the

“full” body of work will inevitably fail (Allor, 1988; Grossberg, 1988; Radway, 1988; Rodman, 1996, pp. 23–25; Rodman, 2006, pp. 116–119; Rodman, 2013). We always work with nothing but notes and fragments—always. The essay at hand simply foregrounds that reality.

The *first* thing my title is intended to suggest, however, is that I’m revisiting Hall’s influential 1981 essay, “Notes on deconstructing ‘the popular,’” in what I hope are productive ways. This is an agenda that would have been obvious to the audience at the Paris conference, where the room was filled with long-time cultural studies practitioners who would have picked up on my allusion on their own, and where the conference Call for Papers had invoked “Notes” with an explicit request for presenters to consider its relevance to the current moment.

My agenda in this essay is not quite the same as Hall’s. He was interested in mapping out a particular history of “the popular”—what the term encompassed, how it had been (mis)used, what it meant to whom, etc.—as part of an argument for how and why it was something that the left needed to take seriously as a major site of political struggle. I, too, am interested in the history of “the popular”—and its relevance to contemporary political struggles—but, unlike Hall, I’m not writing in a context where “the popular” is widely assumed to be unworthy of serious intellectual or political attention. Thirty-five years later, it almost goes without saying that “the popular” is a site where “the political” happens—and that ‘the political,’ even in the most narrow sense of the term (i.e. governmental and electoral politics), is deeply invested in “the popular.” As such, I’m interested in the question of how shifts in the relationship between “the popular” and “the political” in the decades since “Notes” have reshaped cultural studies as a project—or, more precisely, how those shifts should have (but, sadly, haven’t always) led cultural studies to reshape itself.

Note #1: One of the few constants for academic publishing over the past 30 years or so has been the notion that theory sells and travels much better than grounded analysis or empirical research. In part, this truism is a function of the relatively small size of most disciplinary markets. Given the constrained economics of academic publishing (which seem to grow more precarious with every passing year), many scholarly presses see theory-centric books as safer bets to generate big sales than most discipline-specific research monographs. A smart book on, say, African American newspapers during World War II may be one that a publisher can sell to journalism historians and media scholars, but probably not to too many other folks. On the other hand, a smart—or even not-so-smart—book on Foucauldian or Deleuzian theory is a title that same publisher can comfortably flog all over the humanities (and even across a respectable chunk of the social sciences) with some success.

The notion that theory travels well is also driven, in part, by publishers’ desires to reach international markets and the difficulties that research-centered projects often have crossing (some) international borders. That parenthetical “some” is shorthand for the fact that US-centric research can (and does) flow profitably and more easily to the rest of the English-speaking world, while comparable traffic in the reverse direction is a much rarer phenomenon. Between its oversized market and its extensive economic and political power, the US manages to bend the global market in academic publishing in unusual and problematic ways (Rodman, 2015, pp. 94–96).

On the surface, then, theory *looks* like it travels incredibly well—the “big names” who are likely to be recognized by humanities scholars around the world, after all, are more likely to be theorists than empirical researchers—but most theory actually travels very poorly indeed. What makes any particular chunk of theory good, after all, is its ability to provide a helpful map of real world phenomena: i.e. it functions as a sort of magical decoder ring that renders a complex reality more understandable, navigable, and/or malleable. As such, the contexts in which theory has the potential to travel well—i.e. where it can sell well, even if it doesn’t always work well—are those where the relevant real world phenomena at each end of that journey *seem* to be the same. Those apparent similarities, however, often mask crucial cultural and contextual differences that undermine those theories’ usefulness as maps of their new locations. An ethnomusicologist studying Peruvian panpipe players, for instance, is likely to recognize that she needs to provide her non-Peruvian readers with relevant cultural, historical, and political backstories. A cultural theorist, on the other hand, can easily overlook the fact that many of his supposedly “universal” concepts—culture, media, power, etc.—can (and do) actually differ quite significantly from one context to another.

The fact that theory travels poorly should be—but regrettably isn’t—one of the core tenets of cultural studies. Theory is *not* a worthy end unto itself. In a 1986 interview, Stuart Hall made precisely this point when he claimed, “I am not interested in Theory [with a capital T], I am interested in going on theorizing” (1986, p. 60). What makes any particular theory valuable, at least in the context of cultural studies, is its ability to get us somewhere better than we currently are with respect to the specific sociopolitical struggles we happen to be facing. In other words, to what extent does a theory offer a *useful* map of whatever terrain we’re covering? And, as Bob Dylan almost sang, you don’t use a weather map to know which way the road goes. In this vein, I would put a slight twist on Hall’s oft-quoted conclusion to “Notes” and claim that the real significance of theory lies in its use value in specific real world political struggles. *That* is why theory matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it.

Note #2: The year is 1977. I’m 11 years old. Like most US children of my generation, I’ve been exposed to a steady diet of popular culture ever since I was old enough to make sense of the sights and sounds emanating from the fancy electronic boxes in the living room. As such, popular culture is not new to me, but this is when I have my earliest cultural-studies-like insight about “the popular.” The person responsible for this epiphany is my junior high school music teacher, though I’m sure that she hopes to teach a very different lesson than the one I actually learn.

Presumably, she wants to teach a gaggle of unruly adolescents how to care about music, not as a source of mindless entertainment, but as a serious artform. To this end, for one week—and one week only—she breaks from her traditional lesson plan and asks us to bring music *we* like to class (i.e. rock, pop, and soul) so that she can help us consider these “simple” texts as aesthetic compositions. And so we spend a week paying attention to the Ellington-inspired horn riffs in Stevie Wonder’s “Sir Duke,” examining how the chord changes in the Beatles’ “Help” reinforce the meaning of the lyrics, mapping out the intricacies of the Beach Boys’ vocal harmonies in ‘Good Vibrations,’ and so on.

To be clear, my teacher is not engaged in some sort of independent reproduction of the Birmingham School’s early work, since she’s definitely not borrowing the critical tools traditionally used to analyze high culture in order for us to take popular culture seriously in

its own right. After a week with our music, she returns to teaching us about *her* music—i.e. “real” music, classical music—in ways that make it clear that what we were supposed to have learned the previous week was a mode of critical listening that would open our eyes (and our ears) to the indisputable “fact” that Bach and Stravinsky and Wagner are aesthetically superior to the Beatles and the Stones and the Who. In this endeavor, she fails miserably with all of us.

What makes this my first cultural-studies-like moment is that this is when I become aware that the distinction between “high culture” and “popular culture” has significant sociopolitical ramifications. The school in question is a very tiny private school in Washington, DC, and though I did not come from a family steeped in wealth and privilege and power—not by Washington’s standards anyway—this was still the kind of school where those families sent their children. In 1977, such institutions were still trying desperately to keep Culture-with-a-capital-C alive and well and at the center of the world. They failed, of course. Badly. By this late date, the pop culture barbarians had already cleared the gates and were busy redecorating the hallowed halls of the university, and so my school’s attempts to hold on to some sense of the old hierarchy were very much a rearguard effort. But this didn’t prevent them from trying anyway.

At the tender age of 11, I understand none of this in any detail. Nonetheless, despite—or perhaps because of—the legitimizing frame provided by our teacher, my classmates and I still recognize that this particular encounter between “the popular” (i.e. our music) and “the dominant” (i.e. the forms of culture embodied and sanctioned by our school) is a major transgression of some sort: that we have gotten away with Something Big because we were allowed (even briefly) to play rock ‘n’ roll on school grounds.

Note #3: Jump ahead a few decades to any of various classrooms where I currently teach undergraduate courses on popular culture and media studies. By now, I’ve been doing this long enough to have developed a reliable sense of which concepts will confound my students, and which will go down relatively easily. They’ll think they understand the political economy of the media, but they’ll embrace the notion that “profits matter” far too reductively and uncritically. They’ll gradually get the mechanics of semiotics, though many of them still think that we’re “reading too much into” the media texts in question. They’ll claim to believe all the critiques of technological determinism that I make them read, but then still write papers claiming that mobile phones have singlehandedly rendered an entire nation incapable of having face-to-face conversations. And so on. I know where all these pedagogical stumbling blocks are, and I’ve developed a range of techniques for helping my students get past them.

Or so I think. Over the past several years, one basic concept that used to be second nature to my students has started to baffle them—and the concept in question is one of the last that I thought would cause such problems. Surprise! The term “popular culture” now routinely confuses them. Moreover, contrary to Raymond Williams’s famous claim that culture “is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1983, p. 87), the difficult bit for them is not “culture”: it’s “popular.” It’s not that they somehow think the word carries no meaning whatsoever, or that they think that everything counts as “popular.” Quite the contrary: their “common sense” understanding of the term is that it refers *exclusively* to contemporary blockbuster-level success. So chart-topping mega-star Taylor Swift is popular culture (at least for now). Madonna, with a new album out in 2015, might once again be popular culture—except

that that album flopped so, at best, she's only sort of popular. Meanwhile, Britney Spears, whose last (also poor selling) album dates all the way back to 2013, isn't popular culture at all anymore. Not to my undergraduates anyway.

Where my students have a *really* hard time, however, even after we work through more nuanced senses of what "popular culture" might be, is seeing how the distinction between "the popular" and anything else actually matters. They recognize that opera and hip-hop (for example) are different kinds of music, rooted in and speaking to different communities, and with different aesthetic codes and traditions. But the sociopolitical weight of that difference—i.e. the once-dominant notion that classical music is something that one is supposed to value and appreciate, while pop music is just disposable fluff—simply isn't strong enough in the US anymore to be a common, ordinary part of my students' worldview.

Perhaps the best evidence for this shift are those students—and there's still at least one in every class—who want to defend the old high/low hierarchy. As little as fifteen years ago, when these Adorno wannabes appeared in my classroom, they still came across as mouthpieces for the "common sense" values that we all knew were prevalent in the broader culture around us (even if not all of us accepted those values ourselves). In resisting my pedagogical efforts to treat "the popular" as a worthy cultural sphere in its own right, they weren't "speaking truth to power" so much as they were echoing the unassailable "truths" that power had already taught them.

Today, on the other hand, those same students are an endangered species, and when they appear, they come across as awkward anachronisms: people who are badly out of step with the world around them, rather than people who know that their tastes and values are already aligned with those of the political and economic elites who have *real* power in this world. More significantly, in many ways they know this. Once upon a time, such students felt fully entitled to speak up in class to defend Art and Literature as the culture that we should all enjoy and respect. Today, however, those students are more likely to hide the light of their cultural elitism under a bushel. They'll reveal themselves in conversations they have with me during office hours, or in the context of papers they know only I will see, but they'll often feel too shy—or too intimidated—to voice their opinions out loud in class because they worry that they'll be roundly criticized (or laughed at) by their peers. To the extent that the bulk of my students have "culture clash" stories to tell that come anywhere near my experiences in that junior high school music class, their tales are not about distinctions between "the high" and "the low" (opera vs. hip-hop): they're about distinctions *within* the realm of the popular (e.g. my students listen to Daft Punk or Kendrick Lamar, while their parents and teachers listen to Lyle Lovett or U2).

Note #4: The stories I've just told illustrate some of the ways that many of the claims about "the popular" from "Notes" don't necessarily travel well, across space or time. For example, Hall asserts that there is an obvious (if complicated) relationship between "popular culture" and "the working classes."

We speak of particular forms of working-class culture, but we use the more inclusive term, "popular culture" to refer to the general field of enquiry. It's perfectly clear that what I have been saying would make little sense without reference to a class perspective and to class struggle. But it is also clear that there is no one-to-one relationship between a class and a particular cultural form or practice. (1981, p. 238)

What is “perfectly clear” to Hall in Britain in 1981, however, has never been obvious in the US. For that matter, it’s never been *true* in the US: not even in the complicated, non-reductive fashion that Hall outlines for the British case, and not even at prior moments in US history when one might have been able to make a case that there was a distinct form of culture that the working classes could recognize and embrace as their own. As close as it ever came (maybe) was the over-romanticized fetishization of folk culture: i.e. the (supposedly) authentic, noncommercial art-with-a-small-a that (supposedly) flowed naturally from Appalachian storytellers and rural blues singers. That sort of naive celebration of “the folk,” however, largely disappeared about the same time that “high” culture lost its stranglehold on the hegemonic center of US culture. Whatever class-based politics were on display in that folk-ist discourse—and there were certainly plenty of those—they were still a far cry from the proto-socialist working-class culture of Hall’s essay.

If what gets lost when “Notes” crossed the Atlantic is the class-based nature of “the popular,” what gets lost—or at least muddled—with the passage of time is Hall’s definition of “the popular” as the form of culture that lies outside of, and is actively opposed to, “the culture of the power-bloc” (1981, p. 238). This sense of “the popular” would have survived the transatlantic crossing to the US in 1981 with minimal difficulty. Ronald Reagan’s B-movie pedigree notwithstanding, the major political and economic power-brokers of the era lived and moved in circles that lay far from the center of popular culture. When it was somehow a scandalous revelation—and it was—that a US presidential candidate enjoyed listening to Bob Dylan (as was the case for Jimmy Carter in 1976), it’s clear that “the culture of the power-bloc” did not (or at least should not, by what were then the prevailing standards of what we might call “cultural correctness”) intersect with “popular culture” in any comfortable fashion.

And yet, today, this oppositional sense of “the popular” makes no sense at all in the US, where “the power-bloc” is hard to imagine as something removed from the sprawling, ubiquitous terrain of “the popular.” At different moments, and in different contexts, the contemporary power-bloc might set itself in opposition to particular strands of “the popular”—e.g. gangsta rap, video games, pornography—but it will rarely (if ever) do so from a position that is visibly *outside of* “the popular.” In sharp contrast to the political landscape Hall describes with respect to 1980s Britain, the last thing that “the power-bloc” wants to do in the US today is to openly lay claim to the values and/or practices of “the elite.” In this sense, Hall is precisely right to claim that “the popular” is not only an important site *of* struggle: it’s also a vital site *for* struggle. Rather than being the enemy to be defeated and/or exiled, it is the prize to be won. Or one of them, anyway.

One example of this struggle over and for “the popular” comes from Mike Huckabee (former Arkansas governor, former Fox News talk show host, and wannabe Republican presidential candidate), who appeared on *The Daily Show* in January 2015 (*The Daily Show*, 2015) to promote his book, *Gods, Guns, Grits, and Gravy* (2015). That interview devolved into a surreal argument with host Jon Stewart about the cultural values represented by Beyoncé. In short, Huckabee’s book claims that the US is divided into two cultures—the “bubbles” of the urban coastal elites and the “Bubbas” of the small-town heartland—and that the real problem with the US today is that the people of the “bubbles” simply don’t understand (or care about, or respect) the “Bubbas.” Stewart challenges this characterization as simplistic and inaccurate, and presses Huckabee particularly

hard on his claim that Beyoncé is an example of the overly permissive, quasi-pornographic values of “bubble” culture.

Huckabee doubles down on his argument, simultaneously suggesting that Beyoncé’s fans are children who want their very own stripper poles *and* that this sort of licentious permissiveness is somehow facilitated and promoted by (of all people) “the Harvard faculty.” It’s a bundle of incredibly audacious and problematic articulations—and Stewart swiftly (and correctly) calls him out on it. But Huckabee works very hard to take the specific fraction of “the people” who are his political base and make them into the *only* people who deserve to be recognized as the core of the national vision of “the people” as a whole. Huckabee’s use of “Harvard faculty” as a slur is his way of trying to distance himself from the cultural elite (despite his own positions of prominence in both politics and media), while his diss of Beyoncé allows him to place feminists and people of color somewhere outside “the people” in one easy step. Huckabee’s version of “the people” simply has no room in it for folks who “fail” to embrace the gun-toting, God-fearing, grits-and-gravy, conservative masculinity that he sees as the very heart of the nation.

Note #5: Over the past decade or so, in his efforts to articulate a new vision for cultural studies, Larry Grossberg has taken up Hall’s arguments from “Notes” in important ways. As is usually the case with Grossberg, his argument has a lot to recommend it. But as is sometimes the case with Grossberg, I also want to resist key pieces of his argument. In his keynote speech at the 2004 “Crossroads in Cultural Studies” conference, Grossberg claimed that “the popular,” “culture,” and “the media”—i.e. phenomena that cultural studies has long recognized as pivotal sites of (and for) political struggle—have shifted enough that cultural studies must rethink its investment in them (Grossberg, 2006). Grossberg’s argument is rooted in one of cultural studies’ most distinctive features: what he refers to as its “radical contextualism” (1995, pp. 12–20). Put too simply, radical contextualism implies (among other things) that cultural studies can’t take anything—its research objects, its political positions, its theoretical commitments—for granted, since all these things shift over space and time in significant ways. And so Grossberg argues (correctly) that the role “culture” plays within cultural studies can’t—or at least shouldn’t—be understood to be the same in the US today as it was in Britain in 1981. Grossberg even goes so far as to suggest that our collective failure to respond adequately to these changes has made cultural studies “fucking boring” (2006, p. 8).

So far, so good. “Culture” *isn’t* what it used to be. Nor is “the popular.” Or “the media.” Grossberg is also right to claim that, taken as a whole, cultural studies has lost much of its mojo over the past decade or so (Rodman, 2010, 2015). Where Grossberg takes a wrong turn, however, is in his suggestion for how cultural studies should work its way out of its current malaise. He claims that because culture is no longer a particularly effective site of (or for) political struggle, that cultural studies needs to refocus its energies on those disciplinary corners of the university where the proverbial “cultural turn” has never really taken hold. In particular, he suggests that we need to turn our attention to economics and (to a slightly lesser extent) political science (2006, pp. 19–22). Again, he’s right that cultural studies could profit from expanding its disciplinary orbit, and economics and political science are strong choices for such a move. But there are two parts of his argument that still don’t quite work.

First, he sells short the degree to which culture still matters. He's certainly right that its role in broader political struggles has changed, but he's wrong to suggest that cultural studies' continuing efforts to see culture as a crucial site of political struggle in the US are necessarily ineffective. Representational politics (for example) may not matter in quite the same way today that they did (or seemed to) in, say, the 1970s, and it's true that the likes of the Tea Party and Fox News are working overtime to reshape the economy for the benefit of their billionaire sponsors and owners. But the terrain on which they're waging much of that war remains largely a cultural one. Donald Trump, for instance, did not become the Republican nominee for the 2016 presidential election on the strength of his legislative triumphs (he has none), his insightful public policy proposals (ditto), or his economic genius (double ditto). He has, however, successfully tapped into the xenophobic, homophobic, logic-phobic *cultural* values of the US far right.

Second, even if Grossberg is right to argue that cultural studies needs to get over its single-minded focus on "culture," it's not clear that the most effective route out of this dead end involves repositioning cultural studies' disciplinary boundaries. To be clear, making cultural studies into a richer academic practice is a fine thing to do. But it's also not enough. This can—and should—be a "both-and" issue, rather than an "either-or" one. Because unless we want to pull a page from the Ronald Reagan playbook and promote a sort of "trickle down" model of the relationship between intellectual and political work—i.e. where some brilliant reworking of a theoretical concept eventually finds its way from *The Dusty Journal of Arcane Thinking* and into the "real" world—simply transforming cultural studies as an *academic* project isn't going to do very much to help us succeed in the *political* struggles that ostensibly motivate our work.

Note #6: As I've already suggested, contemporary mainstream critiques of "the popular" aren't so much about defining and defending culture (high vs. low, elite vs. common, etc.) as they are about (re)defining the people: i.e. who does—and doesn't—get to count as a person, as a citizen, as someone who belongs, as someone whose life matters, as someone worthy of the state's protection and of society's favor. This is where a different oft-quoted passage of Hall's is worth citing at length. Speaking at the "Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future" conference at the University of Illinois in 1990, Hall asked:

Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies? What is the point of the study of representations, if there is no response to the question of what you say to someone who wants to know if they should take a drug and if that means they'll die two days later or a few months earlier? At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don't feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook. (1992a, pp. 284–285)

When people quote this passage, this is often where they stop (e.g. Sardar & Van Loon, 1997, p. 38) in ways that make it seem as if Hall has given up entirely on both cultural studies and the politics of representation—even though his next few sentences make it quite clear that the exact opposite is true:

On the other hand, in the end, I don't agree with the way in which this dilemma is often posed for us, for it is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just people dying out there. The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are

many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not? (1992a, p. 285)

Swap out the stuff about AIDS and medicines, replace it with language about police brutality and racial profiling, and Hall's 25-year-old comments could just as easily describe both the current sociopolitical crisis in the US (or one of them anyway) and cultural studies' ideal response to that crisis.

Hall's main question—"who gets represented and who does not?"—points directly to the struggle over who gets to count as "the people" and who does not. When folks on the political right talk about the need to "take our country back," they're invoking a vision of the nation as the home of (and as belonging to) a tiny fraction of the actual population. According to Mike Huckabee, the "bubble" people on the coasts don't know the heartland "Bubbas" who constitute the "real" America, and they don't want to.

None of which makes any sense when one looks at, say, Ferguson, Missouri—which is definitely in the heartland, but completely erased from Huckabee's simplistic vision of two cultures. The Black Lives Matter movement that has blossomed in the wake of Ferguson (and Staten Island, and Cleveland, and North Charleston, and Baltimore, and Chicago, and Minneapolis, and the depressingly ever-expanding list of places where police have killed unarmed African Americans) has been quite explicit about the connections it sees between black people dying in the streets and the larger culture's systemic failure to represent and/or see black folks as legitimate examples of "the people." This is perhaps the most obvious—but far from the only—example of why "the popular" remains a matter of life-and-death importance today, and why we still need to give a very large damn about it.

Note #7: So what now? If "culture" and "the popular" and "politics" and "cultural studies" (and so on) have all changed in significant ways since "Notes" was written, and if it's not enough for us to simply graft another disciplinary branch or two onto cultural studies' family tree, what do we do next? It's a big question, of course, and I'm not going to pretend to have all the answers—or even necessarily the best one—but let me offer one tentative suggestion for where we might start.

In spite of all those bits of "Notes" that don't travel so well anymore, one of the lessons that I still take from it is Hall's insistence, as someone who knows his structuralism, that our definition of "the popular" at any given point in space and time depends less on a "fixed inventory" of what's inside the category, and more on understanding what's outside of and opposed to the category. When I sat down to write the first version of this essay for that Paris conference, I tried to offer a few speculative thoughts about what the popular's new "significant Other" might be, given that the old answers—"high culture" and "the culture of the power-bloc"—no longer seem to fit the bill. What I quickly realized, though, is that I was asking the wrong question.

The real question here isn't how we might reconstruct the popular to fit within cultural studies: it's how we need to reconstruct cultural studies to fit within the popular. After all, it's the popular—not cultural studies—that still serves as a crucial site for social and political struggle. The nature and shape of that struggle, of course, is not the same today as it was in 1981, but if our efforts are limited to trying to reconstruct our theoretical models of "the popular" for the purposes of scholarly analysis, then we're not being sufficiently self-reflexive about our own practices as critics, as intellectuals, and as potential agents of social and political change.

Put simply, cultural studies is not—or at least it should not be—an exclusively intellectual enterprise, and it needs to start imagining itself not as a new quasi- inter- multi- anti- (pick your favorite prefix) disciplinary entity such as sociology or communication or history, but as something more akin to feminism or Marxism: i.e. a broad, heterogeneous *range* of projects that operates both inside *and* outside of the university. Both Marxism and feminism have long managed to encompass a variety of different spheres of activity within their normal scope of operations: critical theory, scholarly research, “popular” criticism and commentary, classroom-based pedagogy, community activism, grassroots organizing, public policy work, etc. Cultural studies can and should do the same.

More pointedly, cultural studies needs to start working *from* the terrain of the popular, rather than simply writing/theorizing/teaching about the popular from within the university, or trying to “translate” its scholarly analyses for popular audiences. It needs to find ways to inhabit and operate within popular culture, rather than continuing to position itself as one of the popular’s Others. This isn’t an entirely new argument, of course—Bérubé (1994) and Penley (1996), among others, offered important versions of it more than two decades ago—but it’s still an agenda that most cultural studies practitioners haven’t embraced with any real enthusiasm.

No doubt, much of that resistance derives from the fear that a popularized cultural studies would inevitably be intellectually and politically weaker than academic cultural studies has been. Instead of serving as a critical force in opposition to the Disneys and Foxes and Googles of the world, cultural studies would try to play their game on their turf—and presumably lose. Its rigorous, nuanced analyses of the intertwined cultural/social/economic/political spheres would be reduced to simplistic, media-friendly sound-bites. The force of its political critiques would be blunted by its need to appeal to popular audiences. It would become the servant of rapacious global capitalism, rather than its righteous foe.

Or so the argument goes. I don’t want to pretend that such dangers aren’t real, but I also don’t accept that cultural studies’ job is to play things safe. Speaking in 1990 about the very real risks he saw with what was then cultural studies’ institutionalization within the university, Hall noted that “dangers are not places you run from but places you go towards” (1992a, p. 285). Popularizing cultural studies *is* a dangerous proposition. But the political benefits of doing so in the current conjuncture outweigh the risks involved—especially since *not* taking those risks leaves cultural studies firmly entrenched in the university. And the university is no longer the politically oppositional space it once was (or at least that it was often imagined to be).

Put a slightly different way, those of us in cultural studies frequently try to distinguish our work from more traditional disciplinary endeavors by claiming that what we do is necessarily *both* an intellectual *and* a political project—and yet, too often, we talk the talk much better than we walk the walk. Not because, as individuals, many of us don’t already engage in all sorts of work—activism, organizing, community-building, public pedagogy, etc.—that is unmistakably political in nature. We do. But we also too frequently reserve the “cultural studies” label *just* for the theory and research (and, slightly less often, the teaching) that we do when we’re being professional academics. While we may still value all that activism and organizing, we too frequently assign it to some categorical box that lies outside of what we take to be the “proper” orbit of cultural studies. At which point, our occasional pretty words to the contrary notwithstanding, the actual

practice of cultural studies makes it into nothing more than an intellectual project that merely imagines itself to be political. And *that*, my friends, is “fucking boring.”

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