

Cultural Studies – A UK Perspective

In the UK it is clear that Cultural Studies – like Sociology, Womens' Studies and other critical disciplines that developed from the social changes and intellectual radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s – is in something of a crisis. In recent years, a number of Cultural Studies departments have been closed down (including Birmingham, the most celebrated of all), with many universities shifting their institutional resources towards more 'relevant', 'vocational' and 'work-related' social sciences – such as psychology, criminology and more 'applied' forms of study (such as tourism and marketing). For many students and members of the public at large, the term 'Cultural Studies' not only retains some long-held (and, as we know, inaccurate) connotations of being 'frivolous', 'generalist' or 'superficial' – it now also carries the stigma of rendering you unemployable. With the UK Labour Government constantly beating the drum of vocationality, there has been a distinct lurch towards a more utilitarian higher education, where degree courses are now more clearly designed with the (largely imagined) needs of employers in mind, and this has made many students think twice about applying for those 'luxury' courses (such as dear old Cultural Studies) where no obvious job waits after graduation. Such is the picture for those academics wishing to seek out or sustain a career in a specifically 'Cultural Studies' department.

Yet, while Cultural Studies departments may be disappearing, this comes at a time when more and more scholars are studying culture or attempting to incorporate a cultural analysis into their intellectual projects. Indeed, perhaps a further reason for the apparent decline of 'Cultural Studies' is the fact that its own growing diffuseness and variety has finally rendered it incoherent as a stand-alone discipline. It seems that cultural *study* is now in fact practised everywhere – in social sciences, arts, humanities, business and management – and can no longer be defended (if indeed it ever could) as a unified field of inquiry of singular status. In some sense, then, 'Cultural Studies' is actually alive and well – but its appearance has changed and transformed as it has become more widely-practised in English, Social Science, Art, Philosophy, Geography and beyond. The picture then, is perhaps not so bleak.

What is more certain is that – like other disciplines and areas of study – cultural research must pay its way. Obtaining external sources of income through research grants is now considered a major priority for virtually all UK higher education institutions. For scholars who wish to attract funding for cultural research, the now broad-based intellectual foundations of cultural study provide some positive opportunities to access a variety of different funding streams. In the UK cultural studies scholars may conventionally attempt to secure research funding from government research councils such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) or the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) both of which offer significant (but increasingly prescribed and highly competitive) sources of grant income. Many other organizations offer support to aspects of culturally-focussed research (such as the Leverhulme Foundation, or the British Council) and of course sources of EC funding remain important. However, despite these ongoing opportunities, the perception amongst UK academics is that the resources available for funding cultural research are dwindling or in serious decline. Scholars must now become entrepreneurs, financial wizards and creative jugglers of budgets if they are to secure funding for their projects.

Furthermore, while its diversity is advantageous, the diffuseness and apparent ‘subjective’ or ‘intangible’ nature of much cultural research often places it at a disadvantage in the eyes of funding organizations. As concern shifts towards tangible, measurable outputs, such as providing hard data on ‘impacts’, or demonstrating measurable ‘benefits’ for end-users, it can be hard for cultural research to meet these often (more quantitatively-derived) criteria. The main research councils now place great emphasis on getting value for money and ensuring that researchers provide a suite of research ‘deliverables’ – often difficult to specify or measure in the context of cultural analysis (not that this stops people trying).

In the UK the latest national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has recently seen cultural researchers striving to register their four national and internationally-recognised publications, tally up their research income and assess their contributions to scholarly activity – to then have this evaluated by their peers, and for government research monies to be subsequently allocated by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council) to universities and their departments and research groups according to various indicators of quality. It is a stressful time – and not without its controversies. For many, the RAE has precipitated a shift towards a funding model where the rich get richer and the poor are left without – and since a large part of cultural studies research has traditionally been undertaken in so-called ‘new’ or ‘post-1992’ universities (former polytechnics and technical colleges) which have conventionally received a smaller share of the RAE cake, there is a genuine concern that some cultural research may disappear once the new round of funding is announced in 2008/9. Others argue that the RAE rewards ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’ – and so cultural research in the top universities may well receive some funding boost in the years to come. At present the HEFCE system of evaluating research quality is being reviewed – with some significant shift to various bibliometric indicators anticipated (such as counting the number of scholarly citations of authors’ work, a practice amenable more to the natural science disciplines). How this will affect cultural research specifically is unclear – though whether it will benefit those researchers who work in those fields of culture, arts and media that produce practice-led work is difficult to envisage. As the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MECCSA) has argued in response to these recommendations, objective indicators for assessing the impacts of cultural research are almost impossible to establish.

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