**In search of optimism[[1]](#footnote-1)**

 Lawrence Grossberg

These are hard times for many people in many places, both those whose various privileged positions have largely protected them in the past, and those who have never had the luxury of complacency, and who have been and increasingly are already living the consequences of the multitude of interwoven contemporary crises: global climate change, corporate capitalism gone mad (and the radical inequalities it is producing), the renewed threats of war and nuclear destruction, the resurgence of forms of hatred and extreme forms of nationalism, the dismantling of civic, democratic and legal institutions that have, however imperfectly, protected human rights, the reduction of politics to demagoguery, populisms and affective polarization. These and other changes are having devastating consequences for many individuals, communities and nations, profoundly affecting their everyday lives. Many people struggle just to come to terms with the complex configuration of emotions that the current context calls forth: anger, rage, depression, frustration, fear, terror and despair. Sometimes, it feels like chaos reigns and we must either embrace the chaos or to accede to authoritarian structures that promise to hold back the chaos, even as they produce it. And things do not look to be getting better in the foreseeable future.

While such apocalyptic nightmares and the accompanying emotions are not new, it does feel like something has changed. Perhaps it is the sheer number of simultaneous threats (as opposed to facing just one or two): there are too many end-of-the-world scenarios—whether real or imagined, immediate or extended-- appearing on our screens. Perhaps it is our loss of faith—partly the result of real failures, and partly the result of conscious political projects--in the institutions, authorities and forms of solution that have carried us along in the past. We may well be descending into (one of several possible) dystopian futures, but what it will be and whether it will actually come about are precisely still to be determined. What I am reasonably sure of is that such apocalyptic sentiments are usually counter-productive, disempowering, often limiting our responses to explosive moments of protest followed by fatalistic retreat.

Perhaps the greatest problem we face, or at least the one we do not talk about, is the seemingly inescapable threat of hopelessness that shadows us around all the time, threatening to overwhelm us. Gramsci famously described the precondition of politics as pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. Stuart Hall used to say that intellectuals had to earn their pessimism. Too often, intellectuals assume that because they are already pessimistic about the state of the world, they do not have to do the work of digging much deeper to understand just how bad things really are. Hall would argue, only when you have reached the pits of intellectual despair can you see the cracks, the openings, that make optimism of the will earned rather than simply dreamed.

Today, we seem to confront an almost intractable pessimism of the will, a pessimism that appears to be fully justified, not only as the result of the victory of capitalist and increasingly reactionary forces but also because it emerges from the paradox that, despite sustained practices of progressive activism, despite significant moments of progressive optimism, and despite significant progressive victories, the “lefts” are “losing” (leaving open the adequacy of the old binary distribution of political positions, as well as questions of their definition and unity) are losing and the world continues to move in increasingly inhumane and unsustainable directions. Despite all the opposition and activism that has arisen and become visible in recent decades[[2]](#footnote-2), sometimes even taking the form of joyous celebration, there is too little optimism in the struggles. It can feel like our collective will has been beaten down or at least bent and disfigured. When I look at the resistances, I see more anger and desperation than any strategic plan for a different way forward, one that accepts the failures of postwar liberalism without giving up the advances it has enabled, one that recognizes that changes take time and work, both political and intellectual.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Optimism is commonly equated with hope as either a state of emotional being or punctual moments of experience. In contemporary political discourse, it is often—but not always-- articulated through and derived from the many different forms of utopian visions and desires, offering planetary visions of the ideal society. However, I admit to being skeptical about utopian politics and I believe that intellectuals must tread carefully on the terrain of utopian thinking. I think they all too often conflate temporalities and—necessarily?--assume particular—universal--values to describe where we should want to go, where we should end up. While many people may agree with particular values and visions of a desirable future, questions about their sources and logics often remain unaddressed. Too often, they are built upon normative certainties, without offering ways of arguing (democratically if not rationally) about fundamental value choices and moral infrastructures. I am not sure that it is the job of political intellectuals to tell people what they should desire; as Eve Sedgwick once suggested, we should stop telling people what they should feel. Instead, following Native American activist and poet John Trundell, as intellectuals, we are supposed to constantly question any and all certainties, to convert the certainty of belief into the processes of thinking.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Such utopian visions can be dangerous things, as Foucault and others have warned. History shows us not only that political struggles advanced in the name of utopian hopes rarely end up realizing their visions and often end up constructing new organizations of power. It is all too easy for people to believe that since their moralities are “right,” they have a right (if not an obligation) to impose them on others (for the general good), resulting in forms of moral fundamentalism and political absolutism that limit dissent or the pedagogical demands of democratic change. One might claim that previous instantiations of power in the name of utopian thought have failed because the visions and values were not up to the task of amelioration and perfection, or because people were too willing to compromise too early, as if somehow, democracies could be built without the work of negotiation, articulation and even compromise.

On the other hand, I continue to find value in utopian thought in at least three ways. First, utopian appeals can play a vital affective role, both in keeping open the possibility of imagining other ways of being and belonging together and in mobilizing people to work—now—toward such ideals, even if they are never reached or even reachable. It can fuel prefigurative politics, which serve an important function of building community and solidarity. Second, there is great value in more focused, problem-centered visions, which need not be built upon a general discourse of a perfect society but are content to imagine “ideal” solutions to the component problems defining the current conjuncture (health care, democratic participation, violence, etc.). Yet while such problem-centered visions set long-term agendas, they become problematic when they act as if the end-goal is somehow immediately attainable, erasing the long road one might have to travel to arrive there. That is, they need to be accompanied by analytics of the available openings and the constraints on our possibilities.

And that leads me to the third productive use of utopian discourses, eloquently exemplified in Paul Gilroy’s re-articulation of Fanon’s vision of a planetary humanism,[[5]](#footnote-5) built on the recognition that suffering and finitude are the “universally” shared condition of humanity and not the possession of victims. Rather than defining a politics built on the compensatory relation between the past and the present, it calls for a different consciousness of time, one in which the present calls forth (recovers) the past in the name of constituting a common future. This post-anthropological humanism does not offer utopia as a fantasy of a perfect future disconnected from all temporalities. On the contrary, it is a pragmatic utopianism of the world made otherwise—offered in part in the effort to forge better strategies in the present, strategies that challenge the conjunctural forms of racism without reproducing the very logics of capitalist raciologies. If the very existence of “race” is a product of racisms, both seen as multiplicities, Gilroy imagines a world without race as an attempt to rethink r the nature of anti-racist struggles and their relation to diasporic cultures.

These three versions of utopian discourses all avoid the common—revolutionary—time in which much of contemporary politics, and many contemporary utopian visions operate, imagining that radical political or economic or technological revolutions is just waiting around the corner to be called onto the stage of history: we want the world and we want it now. Instead I would propose that we think in terms of Raymond Williams’ “the long revolution”[[6]](#footnote-6) and Stuart Hall’s “hard road to renewal,”[[7]](#footnote-7) the arduous work that will move the current state of affairs, bit by bit, moment by moment, to something better, and then something still better, and then…

This suggests a different view of optimism as simply the willingness to go on, to take the next—tactical--step, one step at a time, “knowing” that what one does will have an effect (even if it not what one expected). But that means that optimism is inseparable from knowledge. Optimism of the intellect is the condition of possibility for agency and change. Hannah Arendt, one of the most profound theorists of totalitarianisms, once said: “Under conditions of tyranny, it is far easier to act than to think.”[[8]](#footnote-8) And that is what I want to suggest: that we need to think—more and better. Optimism belongs to the intellect. We need to recover an optimism of the intellect from our pessimism of the will, but I have to admit, given my current state of pessimism, that this is a call addressed to the future.

How can we find the inspiration to think in a world in which we are weighed down every day by political pessimism, and in which knowledge and ideas no longer seem to matter in the ways we have assumed? How are we to find our optimism of the intellect? By demanding, more passionately than we ever have, a recognition of the authority of knowledge, where the forms of such authority is fluid and contextual; but this cannot be accomplished simply by producing more knowledge (there are already too many claims to knowledge) or by proclaiming the Truth of particular knowledge, or by asserting the privilege of particular knowledge producing practices without ever specifying the nature of the privilege, or by continuing to reproduce practices that have no doubt contributed to the current state of affairs. What we need is knowledge that is inseparable from the will to change but that sees itself primarily answerable to the demands of the real in all its complexity (what I will call the conjuncture).

As political intellectuals, we need to do a better job understanding both the conditions of possibility of the varied and contradictory successes of the different, articulated alliances among capitalisms, conservatisms, militarisms, and increasingly, reactionary and authoritarian forces, but also, more controversially, the conditions of possibility that have so severely limited the successes of the varied forces and formations of progressive change. For over 25 years, I have argued that too many progressive intellectuals and oppositional activists have not sufficiently understood what was going on and how the victories of the capitalist/right were being constructed, because they were not willing to seriously question their own theoretical and/or political certainties—and that without such an understanding, there could be no effective strategy for fighting against the tide.[[9]](#footnote-9) I believe that, to a large extent, the knowledges on which progressive forces have operated have been inadequate to the “discipline of the conjuncture,” the stories they have told have failed to address people as inhabiting fractured and multiple positions, to educate people, to move them from their habituated positions; this is at least partly the result of the strategies they have enacted—both against the forces of domination and for more effective progressive agency, which continue to think politics in terms of singularities and binaries, of fixed individuals and camps, the identities and politics of which are guaranteed. We need more and better critical knowledges, more and better conversations (even in the face of continued, even growing anti-intellectualism in the media, in common sense and even in the academy), more and better efforts to forge unities-in-difference. It is not our job—as critical intellectuals--to celebrate or even, necessarily, to support existing movements; it is our job to raise questions, to challenge and even criticize them, in the effort to enhance the possibilities of significant political change. After all, change does not just happen. The ground has to be prepared, and this demands the best intellectual work possible.

I am suggesting that optimism in the present context can only come from the reaffirmation and reinvigoration of three tenets: first, that knowledge and ideas matter and that better knowledges and ideas are vital to any effort to redirect the tides of social change. Bad stories make bad politics,[[10]](#footnote-10) because knowledge informs and shapes strategies and tactics. Second, within the wide range of intellectual—knowledge producing—activities, at different sites, with different aims and conditions of possibility, the academy still remains vital because the *sine qua non* of the diverse forms of academic knowledge is that, in principle, they embrace the possibility, at every moment, that they could be wrong. Therefore, contrary to the common practice of academics (myself included), academic knowledge has to be spoken, reflexively and self-reflectively, with humility. Certainties—theoretical, political, ethical or empirical-- have no place in the academy, and neither theory nor politics (increasingly understood in ethical terms) can guarantee the “truth” of our ideas and prescriptions.

Realizing the possibilities of academic knowledges requires the courage to claim the luxury of time; the academy operates with a temporality different from that of surplus value, media deadlines, or political urgency --as hard as holding on to the difference may be. We must fight to hold onto this luxury, but instead, too often, we have contributed to our own inability to defend the privilege of the academy; we have too quickly abandoned the terms on which we have to struggle.

Third, the production of the kinds of knowledge we need, and the ability to share that knowledge, to summon people into its discursive possibilities, is not about isolated, individual careers (with whatever metrics of success, branding and celebrity one might use). Knowledge, in any of its forms and loci, is embedded in and the product of ongoing conversations across borders, both in and across various academic collectivities and between the academy and both other knowledge producing formations and various assemblages of subjects/agents. Such conversations are not “dialogic” in some prescriptive ethical sense, nor are they the measured “marketplace of ideas,” nor are they the calm exchange of ideas imagined in liberalism. Instead, such conversations are passionate arguments, debates without fixed rules, limited only by a shared respect for the ways in which the outcomes matter. Such conversations refuse to define a “proper” form of rationality, seeing it instead as a multiple and changing construct of the conversation itself. They do not seek homogeneity, unity or even consensus; rather they involve practices of convivial agonism, a constantly changing dissensus in search of temporary but useful unities-in-difference. They are democratic but not egalitarian: everyone has a right to be heard, but not every contribution is equal—ideally this is a matter of contextual necessities and “skilled labor” rather than assertions of pre-established privilege.

At the same time do not need more conversations in which everyone merely asserts and celebrates their own positions and differences, in which the cacophony of chaos is mistaken for democracy; we have come to overvalue multiplicity for its own sake, and as a result, we have forsaken the multiple possibilities and affordances of organizations. We need to be able to challenge each other’s work, to accept criticisms and advance the conversation; we need conversations that move us, that enable us to go on thinking. Such conversations will require new ways of locating and interacting with others who may have something valuable to add to the conversation. They will require us to rigorously read and argue beyond our comfort zones, to acknowledge that knowledge takes serious work, and that there are real forms of expertise. They will require us to put the things we are most certain of, and with them, ourselves, at risk. They will demand new ways of arguing and disagreeing, new practices of labor and collaboration, new affective and social imaginations, new forms and media of communication, and new infrastructures that can facilitate these conversations.

I have to admit that I do not know if or where such conversations are possible. I fear that the sorts of academic writings we are trained to perform, and the increasingly commercialized and professionalized spaces of academic publishing, are no longer very useful sites—as limited as their prior success may have been-- for either the sorts of broad interdisciplinary conversations I have in mind, nor for the sorts of intervention into public and popular spheres that are needed to re-establish the credibility of knowledge. But I have even less confidence in the forms and media that are increasingly being presented as alternatives to the elitism and expertise of the academy. I am deeply suspicious of the short, rather instantaneous and ephemeral forms that currently dominate both “traditional” and “social” media, such as op-eds and blogs, most commonly addressed to already convinced or at least sympathetic others. Once again, I confess that I do not know what the alternatives are.

While I defend the value of academic knowledge production—at least when it is practiced in ways that embrace its specificity, which may not be all that common (even in the past), I do not want simply to defend the academy. I know that it has become increasingly troubled. I know that it has rarely—and even less so today—thought of itself in terms of the sorts of conversation I have described. Yet I do not know if doing this work is any riskier today than it has been in the past, but I understand that the calculations of such risk are changing along with the political economy of knowledge production. And I am wary of the changes in the institutional and personal norms and habits of the contemporary academy and its valorized practices.[[11]](#footnote-11) I know these changes make it more difficult to do the sort of rigorous work and to participate in the sorts of contentious conversations that critical work demands. The university increasingly forces one to individualize one’s career as a “professional;” it normalizes and evaluates work according to quantitative, “universal” metrics; it enforces rigid definitions of “proper” work as defined by disciplinary objects of studies and the easy guarantees of theoretical and political certainties; it demands external funding even as it discourages creative institutional and infrastructural efforts. I have no easy solutions, especially for younger scholars, except to always think of the university as a constantly changing institution, a field of struggles in which (political) intellectuals have been fighting, for a long time, for the conditions necessary to do their work. Many of the risks entailed are not new, and if there are no guarantees that one can win, there are also no guarantees that one will lose. Many wonderful intellectuals have lost in the past, but many have won some space, and opened up possibilities for future work. We simply cannot afford to give up the space of the academy.

This means that we must not simply criticize the university and descry its “neoliberalization” or its status as the enforcer of state power and conservative-capitalist hegemony.[[12]](#footnote-12) We must also recognize that such simplifications close off the realities of struggle and undermine the possibilities of transformation. We must recognize that we often—perhaps for good reasons, perhaps out of contingent necessities, accede to the very things we criticize in our own everyday practices. We accede to the increasingly calculative metrics in our careerism and over-productivity. We accede to it when we fall back on certainties, as if one already knows what one needs to know, as if the right politics will guarantee adequate concepts, as if the right concepts will guarantee effective politics. We accede to it by substituting the marketability of theory (as if theory itself were already empirical and intrinsically political) for the hard work of theoretical wrestling, empirical engagement, and political openness; and this is true whether the theories on offer are old narratives (e.g., various forms of economic, scientific or technological determinisms, or constructions of social justice built on essentialized notions of social identity) or the emerging, all-too-seductive romances with ontological (neo-essentialist) speculation, biophysical universalism, radical deterritorialization, deconstructive ambivalence, or abstract formalisms, in which it is almost impossible to distinguish the utopian fantasies from the dystopian nightmares. We accede to it when we substitute political visions for the need to go on theorizing, to find the tools that will enable us to better engage with the complexities and contradictions of the world. Criticizing the academy as evil is useless unless we take advantage of the cracks that still exist, and prise them apart in order to both produce the knowledges we need and to work—and it will be hard work—to reinvent the university to answer the needs of the contemporary context (without taking those needs for granted, even when they are spoken by those who are marginalized and oppressed, or those struggling against marginalization and oppression).

If we need to believe knowledge makes a difference—we need to find what knowledge works in a particular context and how. We need critical knowledge—what Kant, Marx, Foucault and so many others called critique. Finding more effective forms of opposition and the possibilities of better ways of living (other worlds if you will) requires us to understand present actualities—its constraints, its openings, its determinations and contradictions, the many trajectories out of which it has arisen, and the “field of possibles” (to use Sartre’s phrase) it presents to us. It means thinking our way into and through the contemporary context, in all its complexities and contradictions, rather than thinking “beyond” or outside it. While such knowledge projects may be driven, in the first instance, by political passions, they are not simply about calling out forms of oppression, nor declaring one’s opposition to domination. Nor do they involve finding deeper, “hidden” realities to which “ordinary” people have no access—and which, in any case, are rarely actually hidden because those who “discover” them almost always already know in advance what they will find.[[13]](#footnote-13) Critical knowledge seeks to discover things one does not already know, not because they are hidden but because the relations are complex, contradictory and overdetermined; it demands that one remain constantly open to being surprised, to having one’s certainties overturned.

In particular, I would argue for the value of cultural studies at the present moment. I am aware that there are geopolitical arguments surrounding any privileging of cultural studies as a practice of critique. It is, often, somewhat resentfully, claimed that cultural studies emerged in Britain, and that it continues to be defined and dominated by Anglo-American institutions and discourses. I think it is important to critically unpack such oversimplifications for they too easily assume that origins are inevitably both singular and determining. Britain was the most visible site of cultural studies’ emergence and the various British models (including, e.g., resistance models—encoding/decoding and subcultures, circulation of culture models, and conjuncturalism—including conjunctural analyses of the ways humanity is subdivided into different and unequal groups), especially in the work and writings of Stuart Hall, have had and continue to have a profound influence in a wide range of socio-spatial contexts. Yet the criticism based in claims of origin occludes some important developments, relations and nuances. For example, British and U.S. cultural studies are, to a large extent, quite distinct formations, with their own variations. There is important cultural studies work and a few strong cultural studies programs in the U.S. Some of it involves taking up and re-articulating British models, some of it returns to more rigorously Marxist foundations, and some of it is rooted in specifically U.S. politics and traditions. It does follow what I might describe as the core commitments of cultural studies: context, complexity, culture and articulation. Still, the majority of work that claims the mantle of cultural studies is significantly more disciplinary than interdisciplinary; when it takes cognizance of the supposed British roots, it often takes up and decontextualizes models that were an important part of early conversations and practices of British cultural studies: models of ideology-critique and discourse analysis—where it is imagined that meaning and politics (or affect) can be read off of texts), and reception or fan ethnographies (often focused on subordinate or marginalized groups). Or it renders abstract and universal theorizations of the politics of difference that were always offers as interventions into particular contexts. Alternatively, and sometimes simultaneously, it is equated with media and popular culture studies.[[14]](#footnote-14) Not uncommonly, being “critical” is reduced to an explicit statement of opposition to dominant forms of power and support of marginalized populations, usually understood in terms of identity politics (either essentialist or postmodern). For me, much of this work, however valuable it may be, fails to capture and embody what Williams called the project of cultural studies.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is not a matter of denying the utility of such practices, but that such utility can only be judged –and its “findings” can only be interpreted--contextually and reflexively, within a larger effort to grasp the complexities of a specific problem space or conjuncture.

Against the mythic claims of origin and its power, It is important to acknowledge that cultural studies emerged in other contexts as well, out of the specificity of their problematics and intellectual traditions; this does not obviate the fact that, on the one hand, some found the British discourses both foundational and enabling of their own work, and on the other hand, that it has, to some extent, provided a *lingua franca* for cultural studies across locations. Further, as the multiple origins and dispersions of cultural studies have become increasingly visible, in my opinion, much of the most interesting and important work is no longer Anglo-American Personally, I find myself turning increasingly to the rich histories and current practices of work in Asia and Latin America, in Europe (including the Nordic and Germanic countries as well as Italy), and the more recent emergence of cultural studies in other places, from France to various Arabian and African regions.

These issues can be, in fact have to be, separated from a broader and truly disturbing set of developments, one result of which is that the academic institutions and logics of the U.S. (and to some extent, British) academy increasingly define the demands placed on scholars and academic institutions around the world. As the metrics of the U.S. academy are imposed upon scholars in other regions, they are required to publish in “prestigious English-language journals, and “encouraged” to cite U.S. work and its remediations of European theories. At the same time, too often, U.S. scholars remain surprisingly parochial, often failing to cite important work and empirical realities from other intellectual and academic formations, including those of cultural studies.

Cultural studies pushes us to always seek contextuality against the temptations of universality and generality, to seek contingency within the apparent necessities, to seek complexity in lieu of simplicity, and to embrace humility against the seductions of certainty. I do not claim that cultural studies is, universally, once and for all time, the only or the best practice of (political) intellectual work, but I do think it is one of the practices that answers to the demands of the present. Cultural studies embraces complexity against any and all forms of simplification and reduction. Not only is everything not about the same thing, but nothing is all about one thing. Cultural studies assumes that the realities we live in—identities, social positions, social structures, political and economic relations, inequalities and hardships, maps of meaning, ideologies, commonsense, experiences and feelings, institutions, political possibilities and positions, etc.--are constantly being made through struggles (or their absence), undertaken by multiple agents (who are always themselves multiple, fragmented, syncretic) and practices (including inaction) to organize the multiplicities, to actualize a specific reality out of the multiple possibilities and within the constraints of realities that already—and in some cases, unavoidably—exist. Just as importantly, cultural studies demands that one problematize one’s categories, concepts, and starting points, not simply by denaturalizing or deconstructing them but by concretizing—historicizing, contextualizing--them. It attempts to explore their conditions of possibilities, to see how they articulate and are articulated by struggles across different temporalities, reconstituting the balance between the old and the new—thus taking history seriously, and by struggles that change the balance of the forces of power and contestation, thus taking seriously the contradictions among relatively autonomous regimes of power.

The notion of the conjuncture is crucial to my understanding of cultural studies:[[16]](#footnote-16) while it inevitably requires some spatio-temporal definition—often assumed (including in my own work) to be that of a periodization of the nation-state, the conjuncture is more precisely defined by the accumulation, condensation, or articulation of heterogeneous tendencies, forces, determinations, contingencies, antagonisms and contradictions, each with its own complicated temporalities and rhythms, and spatialities. This means that every conjuncture is characterized by: first, a war of positions struggling to change the balance in the field of forces; second, a set of crises or problematics that pose their own questions and demands (creating what David Scott calls a problem space); and finally, a struggle to articulate these crises into what Gramsci called an “organic crisis.” An organic crisis constructs the conjuncture as a new reality, demanding a “new project;” each competing effort over such a crisis offers different settlements which propose and new balance of forces and new understandings of the problem space.

My work has assumed that, in the U.S., we have been living in a conjuncture defined by an organic crisis of modernity, which emerged out of and was configured by: the defeat of fascisms and the subsequent contestation between liberalism and state communism and the struggles, successes and failures of the various post-war models: the attacks, in the 50s, 60s and 70s, on emergent forms of corporate, global capitalism, the growing influence of capitalist (largely U.S.) forms of mediated entertainment, the hegemony of social-political liberalism (and its subsequent transformation into forms of “neo-liberalism”); the exuberant desperation of anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles in the face of the continuation of such moral and material evils; the collapse of the non-aligned (Bandung) option; and the degeneration of state communism into forms of authoritarianism. This broad description outlines the conditions of possibility of different conjunctures over the past half-century, including that of the U.S.--as different time-spaces and as different expressions and responses to these changes, moving through shifting balances, and multiple attempted settlements, each constituting various political cultures and contestations, with their own possibilities and constraints.

Actually, I think that the current times pose two significant challenges to cultural studies: First, do we continue to live in the same conjuncture, within the same crises and condensations? Have the terms in which the struggle to construct and configure an organic crisis changed so radically that we are in a new conjuncture, called into existence by the disappearance of communism as a vital political appeal and the “failures” of capitalist social democracies? If fascism and its defeat was the first condition of possibility of the post-war conjunctures, then maybe the rise of new and different (perhaps even competing) fascisms may point to a new organic crisis: on the one hand, a fascism defined by new forms of reactionary anti-statism and anti-democracy, illiberalism and authoritarianism, and new supremacist modes of belonging and exclusion; and on the other hand, new forms of capitalism and corporatism[[17]](#footnote-17) (and their relations to both political apparatuses and everyday life, mediated not only through wealth but also through new technologies of surveillance and attention and new cultural logics all affecting and re-organizing structures of feelings and desire as well as concepts of subjectivity.[[18]](#footnote-18) Or perhaps the developments of the past decade points to the failure as yet to construct an organic crisis, leaving societies in what is better characterized as a transitional moment. How does it change our politics if we see the present era in terms of what Gramsci called “the morbid symptoms” resulting from being caught in the “interregnum” between, as scholars from Hegel to Hall and James Carey have described it, the old that is dying, which we can neither fully occupy or fully leave, and the new, which cannot yet be born and of which we are largely ignorant? What if the struggle is defined by competing realities none of which has yet to cohere? Whichever description proves most salient, it seems that the reactionary rights are doing a better job than progressive forces of reconstructing the organic crisis around an almost pre-modern project.

Second, there are important questions about the changing spatiality of the conjuncture; for the most part, the concept of the conjuncture has been treated in relation to nation-states. But in the face of growing appeals to extreme forms of nationalism, perhaps we need to revisit the question: while it may have been and even continue to be useful for certain contexts, it too often ignores the ways places (including the bounded geographies of nation-states) are constituted by multiple spatial relations and vectors. Even more importantly, whether such identifications of conjunctures were still useful, they are increasingly undermined by the emerging forms of spatiality (“globalization”) defining the contemporary world. Perhaps we need to re-think the very concept of a conjuncture in relation to the many and changing “nomoi” (laws or logics) that organize planetary politics.[[19]](#footnote-19)

However one responds to these challenges, cultural studies aims to produce better maps of where we are and better stories of how we got here and how we might get somewhere else, where “better” denies both relativism and perspectivism,[[20]](#footnote-20) but accepts the necessary partiality of any single (even if collectively produced ) effort to understand what’s going on by locating it within an ongoing conversation about a constantly changing reality. It denies as well, any assumption of a necessary, guaranteed relation between knowledge and politics—as if knowledge were always already contaminated by power. Knowledges—including critique--do not—should not--have their politics written into their fabric (although sometimes politics overrides the commitment to empirical complexity and theoretical pragmatism, or at least, the political intention may make the relation to politics appear to be necessary; but such efforts undermine the very authority of intellectual work). The relation between knowledge and power has always to be articulated. Consequently, the production of knowledge is not politics, or even politics by other means, but it is a condition of possibility of effective political struggle and social change (without being able to assume the results in advance). Thus, unlike some contemporary notions of the scholar-activist, which tend to place intellect at the service of already defined movements, struggles and strategies, critique remains relatively autonomous, without either closing off the desire to make the articulations to political struggles, or denying the necessity for political action.

Cultural studies does not take for granted that what one knew then and there can be seamlessly transported to here and now. Knowledge is always a response to the demands of the realities in which we find ourselves. One can never know the answer in the beginning because one cannot know the question at the start. Without figuring out what the question is (or what the questions are, and how they are connected), we cannot know what we need to know, or what resources will enable us to find better answers. This is why cultural studies has so many faces and why it always has to remake itself in the face of new challenges and struggles, to address new questions, closures and possibilities.

The real questions, then, are not only about what is, but about what is becoming, about change and transitions, about the old becoming not completely new but different. History is never just the simple story of the same thing happening again and again. Trumpism is not the same old conservatism, nor is it just capitalism with a new face, nor is it fascism renamed. The old stories are never sufficient. On the other hand, history does not work by absolute ruptures that instantaneously rip across the entire social field: that was yesterday’s reality, today everything has changed and begun anew. “Trumpism” did not emerge ex nihilo; it is not a radical break with everything that came before; it is too easy to assume it is simply the beginning of a new—admittedly--terrifying story.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is the temporary end—a propose settlement-- of a longer story, which brings new elements and new relations into play, and in the process, transforms some of the older elements we thought we understood. But it is also the temporary beginning of another story which is as yet unwritten. And the story will continue.

Let me return to the question of what makes “better” knowledge, “better” maps, “better” analyses, “better” stories? Cultural studies demands a reconceptualization or better, a reimagination of empiricism, making analysis answerable to the demands—the questions and the complexities—of the conjuncture (although the conjuncture is itself partly constructed by the very effort to take account of it). Many diverse critical scholars have embraced such a commitment: Stuart Hall calls upon us to answer to the discipline of the conjuncture; Eve Sedgwick talked about the necessary accountability to the real; Dipesh Chakrabarty demands that we develop the capacity to hear that which one does not already understand; Isabel Stengers argues that one is always responsible to the third parties, the witnesses, that must be allowed to speak back to us (presumably to say no to our claims to know); and Michel Foucault called for an “extreme attention to what is real,” and argued that the aim of critique was to “know on what field of real forces we need to get our bearings in order to make a tactically effective analysis.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Cultural studies at its best goes beyond what is already see-able, sayable and even knowable and attempts to discover the complexities we do not yet know how to see or hear or even question, and the practices by which they are inaugurated, maintained, and extended, the contradictions that make their apparent taken-for-grantedness always contingent, and the ways people are recruited into supporting, accepting or contesting them, often without full self-awareness (but without assuming that they are dupes, dopes or irrevocably reprehensible). It has to ask how this complicated conjuncture has been and is being constructed, how different people, lives and things are made and placed in it, and how the many structures of power are maintained, even in the face of multiple, sustained challenges. And it has to do this without knowing in advance what questions to ask, or what theories will be useful. Cultural studies demands this difficult, interdisciplinary work of contextual analysis.

But the best knowledge must do more: it must open up unrecognized or unrealized possibilities for change—for struggle, rearticulation, and the imagination of being otherwise. It attempts to identify the contradictions that might be prised apart, to offer up strategic possibilities for engaging and transforming the conjunctural relations of power. This is the site of optimism, not of the will, but of the intellect. Raymond Williams described this as making hope practical rather than despair convincing. Cultural studies attempts to offer ways for getting from here to somewhere else, somewhere better, always recognizing the constraints on what is possible.[[23]](#footnote-23) This means refusing both the path of domination, which endeavors to create necessity out of possibility, to produce a world in which everything seems to be guaranteed, sewn up, in advance, and the path of what the feminist Jo Freeman called the “tyranny of structurelessness.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Again, change does not just happen: new relations—including changing political allegiances-- do not just appear and old ones disappear. Understanding what’s going on and opening up the cracks through which the light can come in, is not enough. The ground has to be prepared, the work has to be done to reshape the old and give shape to the new, to redefine social categories and their political resonances. A democratic politics requires addressing and moving people, winning them to new positions and possibilities, by endeavoring to re-articulate their common senses, experiences, investments, feelings, perceptions, and subjectivities. The starting point has to be recognizing the complexities, ambiguities, uncertainties, fractures, and differences that infuse a particular way of living and the subjects living within it. Specific relations, contradictions and differences are always being made livable while others are not. And new articulations are always being set in place, made to seem “reasonable” in terms that make sense, that “feel” right.

How is this accomplished? Not surprisingly, cultural studies thinks that the answer involves culture, that culture matters: what meanings are assigned to symbols, what symbols are taken as truth, what values are legitimated, what counts of valid knowledge, what feelings are allowed or even encouraged, how all these elements are organized and connected, and articulated to the myriad of political positions. These are the contestations of knowledge and ideology but also of the deeply contradictory terrain of common sense and affective landscapes; together, they organize and construct our experience of ourselves, others and the world; they configure how and where we belong.

Political possibility lies somewhere in the space between understanding where people are and where we hope they might be, but that means engaging them, doing the work to understand their common sense, and the logics that they use to calculate their decisions. How can one hope to move people, however slowly, if we don't start engaging them where they are, and if we are not willing to put our own certainties at risk? Rather than speaking truth to power, we have to find ways to speak to people’s lived realities and to struggle to re-articulate their sense of possibilities and political commitment. You can’t start by assuming you already understand people or that you can judge them by measuring the distance between where you are and where they are. Do we even know where they are, and how they got there?

This is the question that Marxism raises: why do people “consent” to their own subordination and subjugation? Why do people occupy the political positions they do?[[25]](#footnote-25) Do we know how to explain or even understand the gap between expressions of popular will and constructions of political consent (if not consensus)?[[26]](#footnote-26) But do we know what people are consenting to? Do we know how they are consenting, for there are many ways of consenting (angrily, exuberantly, hopelessly, cynically, disaffectedly, etc.)? Do we know how such consent is produced? Consent, after all, is the result of complex and contradictory articulations: part ideological, commonsensical and moral, part pragmatic (appreciating the aims and/or benefits of particular policies), and—increasingly, I think, largely affective. Do we know how people feel? Do we think that telling people how they should feel is actually productive? Do we know what matters to people? What they feel, what they care about, and what they are willing to fight for? Can we not understand that—in the face of people’s declining quality of life and of their assumption that their children’s lives will continue on the downward slope--they may resent the demand that they care about others? They may even want some kind of revenge, refusing to go down alone. Do we understand their rage, fears, uncertainties, anxieties, disappointments, hopes, desires? Do we assume that all the people who stand against us, or even all those who stand with us, are operating with the same affect, assumptions, values and meanings? Do we know how people hear and interpret what we immediately condemn as necessarily horrible–e.g., racist statements--celebrate as intrinsically and obviously moral?

Both capitalisms and conservatisms—and more recently, reactionary formations--have understood that culture matters. They have understood that a systematically engaged culture war is the foundation of and precondition—but not a substitute—for political struggle. Ironically, progressive analyses and struggles have not taken the centrality and complexities of culture in contemporary contestations of power as seriously; the irony is that culture played a powerful role in the emergence of many of the new social movements. All too often, much of progressive thinking and tactics reduce culture to discourses and identities whose meanings and affects are fixed, and often, individuated, and reduce politics to matters of personal feelings, voice and visibility.[[27]](#footnote-27) The politics of culture becomes a matter of visibility and accessibility, without consideration of how such representations are received or even by whom, with little consideration of the necessary pedagogical struggles involved in the very politics of representation itself.[[28]](#footnote-28) Instead, progressive movements often mobilize for legislative or judicial mandates as if that were sufficient, and rarely follow whatever victories they achieve with the cultural/pedagogical work of winning over those who oppose them or who are uncertain of the cause. The result is, all too frequently, that the victory is taken away, whether through subsequent legislative or judicial action or through the eruption of “popular sentiment” (e.g., the re-legitimation of public racisms and misogynies, or the attacks on labor/unions).

For this reason, cultural studies foregrounds the pedagogical and communicative dimensions of political knowledge and struggle, and it itself (ideally) engages in both institutional and public pedagogy, while refusing the common tactics of a moral pedagogy. Cultural studies embraces the possibility of knowledge being spoken in different ways, into other conversations, including the various forms of popular discourses; this is particularly hard partly because the popular is an extraordinarily complicated, contradictory and messy terrain. It is filled with all sort of fragments and memories, and all of the feelings that have been and can be attached to them, and all of the competing ways they have left traces without an inventory. It is hard because, especially today, there are overwhelming multiplicities at every scale (events, genres, media, platforms) as well as competing and changing organizations. It is hard because affect cannot simply be read off texts, or symbolic grains of sand, or commonsense genres.

Any democratic politics has to be pedagogical and as such, it cannot operate at the temporality of the revolution; rather, it operates with a temporality closer to that of the academy. It is a process that moves people—and opens oneself up to being moved--more slowly than we would like—to challenge one’s assumptions and certainties, to become aware of the ways common sense and the micro-habits of everyday life are shaped by and articulated to the broader patterns of cultural and political power. But it is not all about culture, nor does culture operate autonomously. We must understand the complex terrain—determined by the articulations among material, institutional, discursive and experiential forces—of people’s lives, and of the field of the popular on which they negotiate their positions, identifications, choices and commitments. This too is hard work, work for which the traditional practices of the academy are distinctly ill-suited.

In the final analysis, I believe the project of critique, especially in the forms of cultural studies, matters now more than ever. I am optimistic (an optimism of the intellect) about its ability to respond to the present conjuncture not only because it is dedicated to analyzing the ever-changing configurations of lived contexts, but also because it is not driven by the search for political correctness or theoretical certainty. Cultural studies presents itself as a task, a responsibility and a gift dedicated to the project of producing the best knowledge we can so that people can choose to remake the world, can choose to take some control over their own future, and the future of the planet.

We need to find ways to go on thinking, ways that enable us to live with difference, ways of organizing the chaos of multiplicities, without succumbing to new forms of political absolutism, fundamentalism and authoritarianism. Until we can tell better stories, stories that take culture seriously and that imagine better ways of intervening into culture, I fear progressive movements will continue to lose, under the shadow of what Nestor Canclini called the “sham of democracy.” Optimism of the intellect indeed!

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1. This paper continues the arguments I have made in and in some cases, reproduces small sections of Grossberg, 2010, 2018a, b and c, and forthcoming a and b. As always, I am grateful to John Clarke, for his insight and generosity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Actually, such resistance has been there consistently since the 1970s, although it has not always been visible, nor has it successfully organized itself in productive ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. When I think back to the 1960s, I recall that there was a profound pessimism of the intellect but also, a somewhat inconsistent optimism of the will. That optimism was fueled, for some, by utopian fantasies, for others by a continued faith in progress, but most importantly, and more generally, by the affective power of shared music (and specific drugs) and the forms of community and agency that they called into existence. However, that optimism became increasingly scarce through the 70s and 80s. Without meaning to sound nostalgic (although nostalgia can be politically useful sometimes), I think it is important to consider why expressive popular cultures today seem incapable of challenging the dominant affective landscape and intellectual pessimism. The easy explanations blame it on the fragmentation of popular musics/cultures; others have observed the changing place of music—its increasingly absorption into the ordinary backgrounds of everyday life. I think we need to explore the forms of collectivity and agency that contemporary musics produce in context. The work of Paul Gilroy (1992, 2010) is important here. See also Grossberg, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Trudell, “I’m crazy?” U.S. Social Forum 6-24-2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctUecTdPEO0> I am grateful to Heather Menefee for introducing me to Trudell’s writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gilroy (2000, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Williams, 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hall, 1988b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Arendt, 1958. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Grossberg, 1992, 2005, 2018b. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I know that “stories” here is a rather easy term in need of elaboration and deconstruction. I use it to combine Gramsci’s two intellectuals missions: to know more than the other side and to share that knowledge with people struggling to change the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Grossberg 2018a [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I am deeply suspicious of the actual utility of the notion—I do not think it rises to the level of a concept—of neoliberalism. See Hardin, Wood. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Nevertheless, these are its common mis-representations, often reducing critique to paranoia; they often use the most oversimplified examples, ones that are highly contestable as examples of critique. This is shameful (talk about bad faith!) when this is done by those who want to champion the absolute originality and singularity of their own, often postmodern, forms of intellectual work. The question of what tools will prove most useful is an important one—but the answers are never given in advance, through purely theoretical arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. While in some contexts, cultural studies appropriately takes up media and popular culture as primary trajectories into larger contexts, partly because such “disciplinary” foci are simply not on anyone’s academic agenda, that necessity does not magically carry across all contexts nor justify the “disciplinization” of cultural studies. Hall’s famous 1981 essay has to be understood not as a theory of the popular but as an intervention into the Thatcherist conjuncture. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Williams 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Grossberg, 2018b, forthcoming a [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. especially when corporations are seen as persons. See Wood [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Davis 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Such nomoi may include those of the land and sea—including coloniality and empire (“the West and the rest”), the nation-state, and the Black Atlantic, as well as forms of regionalism, from the Three-World model, or more recent and even emergent models such as the European Union, EurAsia, The Chinese re-occupation of the China Sea and the revival of the silk road, etc. I have to admit that I am just beginning to think about this—and I owe a great deal to my friend and colleague John Pickles. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. By perspectivism, I mean theories that assume a specific perspective defined by one’s identity or politics and that how one sees or understand something is concretely determined by such positions. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Just revisit the discourses, both intellectual and popular (e.g., the music)—of past decades, from the 1960s and 70s, to the ways people represented Reaganism and later, the second George Bush. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Foucault 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Notice that I am not taking up the question of vision—of values, of where we want to go. This is obviously a vital question, an ethico-political question, but it seems to demand a different conversation, with different logics and practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Freeman, See also Landry et al. d [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Within the limits of “the truth” of opinion polls, especially given the contradictions they make visible, there is conflicting evidence about just how polarized the U.S. publics are: while some assert an almost total and absolute split, others a variety of more dispersed distributions, with only small minorities holding so-called “extreme” positions and identifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Within the limits of “the truth” of opinion polls, especially given the contradictions they make visible, it seems that the popular will supports many progressive values and programs, but this is often not embodied in such political markers as voting behavior, [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. While the personal may be political, it does not follow that the political is personal. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hall 1988a. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)