

CHARLES McPHEDRAN

cultural studies in the  
**age of disciplinary**  
democracy

GARY HALL AND CLARE BIRCHELL (EDS)

*New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory*

Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh,  
2007

ISBN 9780748622092

RRP \$52.95

It came as something of a surprise to me when two former friends of mine were recently declared 'enemies of the people', to cite the title of a play by Ibsen. I knew Paddy Gibson and Dan Jones from my undergraduate time at the University of Sydney. Gibson and Jones were active participants in protests: political organisers. They certainly weren't outside the general milieu at the university. Nor were their political causes particularly radical. I recall participating with Gibson in protests against HECS tuition increases a few years ago. Last time I spoke to either one of them was over a year ago, at a time when Sydney's Abercrombie pub still smelled *feucht* and ungentrified, smoke stench oozing from its retro sixties-era couches.

Now, however, Jones and Gibson were banned from flying in and out of Sydney Airport for the duration of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.<sup>1</sup> Along with dozens of others, they were disallowed from protesting in Sydney's central business district for the duration of the summit.<sup>2</sup> They were later grabbed by a riot police snatch squad in Sydney's Hyde Park while drinking coffee after an anti-Bush demonstration.<sup>3</sup> As the New South Wales Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione put it two days later, when queried about allegations that police used excessive force during APEC, 'that's the way we do business now in NSW'.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps both Jones and Gibson were guilty of intending to stage violent protests. I don't really know. And based on all the information I could glean, they *did* have intent. They had after all, been pre-judged and proclaimed guilty

by a people's tribunal in the Australian tabloid media. Political leaders and police had spent the past few days before the summit convincing the public that these few represented terror and a threat to public order. Blog-respondents on *The Daily Telegraph* website certainly held them and other protestors in low esteem:

I have a great idea for these so-called protesters. Treat them like terrorists and have a shoot to kill policy. I would be more than happy to go in and give the police a hand. All I need is a baton and a shield. I would have a ball.<sup>5</sup>

And to quote Ibsen's ironic formulation in *An Enemy of the People*, 'the majority always has right on its side'.<sup>6</sup> Viewed from afar, the political mood in Australia seems grim, terror-alert and trigger-fixated. As the German photo-artist Boris Eldagsen put it recently, Australian politics now involves the ritual invocation of themes of safety and security. This is all to be achieved through the construction of a security state:

Firstly, the government makes people scared, and then calms them down with these words: you let us be, and we'll look after everything for you. As people give up more and more personal responsibility, they get used to the role of being helpless, and always want to be protected more.<sup>7</sup>

Eldagsen titled his Berlin exhibition, about the 'ubiquity' of security warnings in Australia, both in daily life and in politics, 'Safety in Numbers'.

All this talk of numbers, majorities and the politics of a contemporary security state is perhaps a fitting segue into Gary Hall and Clare Birchall's new collection of essays. *New Cultural Studies* aims to provide an emerging generation of cultural studies academics a more prominent voice. Many of the essays in the volume begin to engage with the immense task of remaking the academic Left after 9/11 and two decades of neo-liberal governance. Happily, there's no sense of a project in crisis (that *leit-motif* of Marxist theorising). Rather, the contributors provide readers with an introduction to different modalities of contemporary cultural theorising. Contributors draw on philosophy, social movement theory and media studies in an analysis of the present cultural/political conjuncture. In what follows I will be necessarily selective in reviewing chapters of the volume that seemed both pertinent to my areas of interest (and to the field more broadly, both on political and theoretical grounds).

There are four sections in the volume, corresponding to several different visions for the future of the cultural studies project. The first section offers a broad historical-contextual introduction into current disciplinary approaches or methodologies. Gary Hall's chapter on deconstruction insists on the utility of the tradition as a methodology for cultural theorists. Paradoxically, however, Hall is not focused on the ethico-political program set out in Derrida's late projects. Rather, he reads Derrida's deconstructive method as philosophy of history. In brief, his analysis is that Derrida's philosophy of history involves a partial negation of the universal in favour of the particular. So, for example,

Hardt and Negri are critiqued for their reliance on 'old, modern, grand narratives' in a new era of Empire. (40) Read in these terms, Derrida appears to be a structuralist philosopher, positing epistemic breaks as a condition for theorising each conjuncture. This to me seems to neglect the particular diachronic dimension of Derrida's thought: his emphasis on futurity and the arrival (as well as his writings on spectrality, ruins and so forth). As Mark Mason has put it recently, this means a re-imaging of historical time, which rather than 'culminating' in the present, is dually structured around remembrance of the other dead, and the arrival of events and other generations.<sup>8</sup> Mason quotes John Caputo's reading of Derrida's philosophy of history: 'The moment ceases to be a monotonous now-point because it is the moment of the gift, of the expenditure without return, of the in-coming (*invenire*) of the *tout autre*'. (511) Clearly, there is still further interpretive work to be done before Derrida can be regarded as providing a methodology for cultural studies.

Jeremy Valentine's essay on cultural studies and post-Marxism returns to a more familiar terrain for the (inter)discipline. Valentine's historical survey of cultural studies and post-Marxism largely centres on an analysis of Laclau and Mouffe's writings on hegemony, articulation and political identity. Valentine's engagement with Laclau and Mouffe here is possibly *too* sustained—he rightly critiques them for the reduction of political expression to hegemonic cultural contest. This critique is warranted if it has had a restrictive effect on political practice on the Left. Yet both Laclau and Mouffe (and Stuart Hall's associated writings on Thatcherism)

can also be read in terms of historico-political pragmatics. In other words they can be read as a historical attempt to recreate or rethink mass leftist political struggle, after the sixties New Left-led turn to cultural politics.

However, Valentine's broad conclusion, which argues for a re-theorisation of identity in relation to a revitalised conception of society as a complex totality, is warranted. His essay suggests that subcultural or cultural movement studies have occasionally lapsed into a lamentable positivism: 'What I am is what I think I am'. (66) And in doing so, they have undertheorised the interrelationship between the political economy and the overdetermination of post-new social (movement) identities.

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young's chapter on German media theory provides an interesting introduction into a largely unknown field (at least for Anglophones). Winthrop-Young's account suggests further discussion of Sloterdijk, Luhmann and Kittler is useful for cultural theorists. His account is more area studies primer than a sustained critical engagement. But given the brevity of the space accorded to each writer in the collection, this can hardly be regarded as a criticism on my part. Instead, his essay beckons towards a cultural studies more engaged in questions of technological materialism, engaging in an analysis of the history of technological reason.

A second strand of essays in the collection continues cultural studies' emphasis on developing a rhetorical and cultural strategy for the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary Left. Joanne Zylinska's essay draws heavily on Wendy Brown's vital analyses of the politics of

the War on Terror to suggest that the Cold War may have staged an uncanny political return. Zylinska is correct on this point on a discursive level. However, at the sociological level of practices—as she goes on to note—the prosecution of the ‘war’ has also involved the deployment of a new emphasis on sovereign power coupled with bureaucratic extra-legal rationality.<sup>9</sup> Zylinska’s reading of Emmanuel Levinas’s utility for cultural studies (and the Left more broadly) is less convincing. Here, she posits an openness to the unknown, to the stranger, as a crucial moment in the cultural studies project and Levinas. This seems to me to lack a broader reading of Levinas. It concentrates on his meta-ethical formulation of ethics *qua* ontology, while neglecting more recent philosophical work on Levinas’s specific formulation of the ethical in relation to the political.<sup>10</sup> Yet, if we are to bracket these political writings, the danger of uncritically drawing on Levinas neo-Platonic rereading of the ‘Good’ remains. Here, it might be argued that Levinas’s ethics involves a mere inversion of War on Terror rationales, centring as it does on a substitutional sacrificial ethics.

Jeremy Gilbert’s essay on anti-capitalism and cultural studies offers a careful history of the imbrication of the cultural studies tradition with the radical democratic voice within the British labour movement, and the later shift towards Left libertarianism by cultural theorists after 1968. Notably, Gilbert points to the emphasis on creativity and social authorship in both anti-capitalist movements (192) and the post-*Operaista* critique provided by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. This could arguably

be supplemented in future work with a more the cultural critique–centric account offered by libertarian *soixante-huitards*, which itself was informed by a synthesis of situationism, Frankfurt School critical theory and the young Marx.<sup>11</sup> Although Gilbert does not draw on this genealogy in his exploration of anti-capitalism and cultural studies, further exploration of this lineage would seem crucial if the conversation between cultural studies and anti-capitalist movements is to deepen.

Carolyn Bassett’s essay on cultural studies and new media both engages with the history of structural analysis of the deployment of technology by classical cultural studies and introduces a series of objections to the uncritical celebration of tactical cyber-technologies by online movements. Here, she suggests, the focus on tactical software overemphasises its political valency. Thus, we have once more an over-emphasis on political resistance online, to the detriment of a more general diagnostic account of internet user experience. (234) Again, we can read into this a conflict between a general positivist sociological methodology and the lack of the theorising of cyberspace as a totality. In other words, Bassett recommends that cyber-cultural studies should begin to consider forms of usage that are ‘not explicitly political’ or ‘requiring expertise’ (234), to provide an account of the everyday internet.

A third strand of essays draws on sustained engagements with particular theorists who are deemed especially useful to theorising the contemporary ‘limits of [historical] experience’, to use a Foucauldian/ Kantian expression. Brett Neilson continues with his rigorous advocacy

of Giorgio Agamben as a cultural theorist worth engaging, in studying the political present of the disciplinary democracies (or else Anglophone security states) after 9/11. Nielson's chapter foreshadows a project that reaches beyond the limits of the pragmatic, action oriented tradition of cultural studies. Indeed, Nielson's introductory exploration of Agamben's reading of Schmitt, Heidegger and Benjamin itself provides further paths for theorists aiming to explore various social ontologies of post-9/11 modernity. As Nielson correctly argues, Agamben's work suggests possibilities for a variety of political theorising within cultural studies that examines closely the limits of politics and life.

Paul Bowman's reading of Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic Marxism focuses on the latter's critique of cultural studies. Bowman's reading of Žižek argues that cultural studies is being positioned as a 'bad antithesis', alongside the naive realism of scientific cognitivism, as a form of 'wishy washy relativism'. (163) This seems to be a broadly fair reading of Žižek's reading of cultural studies. However, rather than being 'problematic', we can also see this move as a necessary component of Žižek's Hegelianism, as Bowman partially acknowledges later in his article. (166) Yet, Bowman continues, to completely disregard Žižek would be to miss the importance of his *Zeitdiagnose*. Žižek here is correct in pointing out the historical correlation between neo-liberal capitalism's emphasis on cultural rebellion and resistance, and cultural studies' emphasis on the same.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, cultural studies functions as a psychoanalytic symptom, more than a project, methodology or

particular politics. This is Žižek's most powerful charge. It suggests that much of cultural studies remains all too immanent to neo-liberal discourses, even mimicking many of the ontological assumptions of autonomy and self-determination made by neo-liberal ideologues in relation to everyday life *after social democracy and Fordism*. In other words, elements of cultural studies have been complicit in the neo-liberal restructure of everyday life that have seen the extension of instrumental reason into previously partially insulated domains.

I have already suggested that a further engagement with critical theory may be necessary to give cultural studies a better purchase on everyday life under neo-liberalism (and in the age of disciplinary democracy). Here, the recent work of Axel Honneth seems to me to be exemplary. In his exchange with Nancy Fraser, Honneth suggests that a 'phenomenology of social injury', of social misrecognition, is at the locus of the contemporary critical theory tradition.<sup>13</sup> He glosses Bourdieu's *Weight of the World* on this point:

Here, we find a multitude of reports and interviews that make it clear that the overwhelming share of cases of everyday misery are still to be found beyond the perceptual threshold of the public sphere. A few remarks suffice to sketch in broad outline ... these phenomena of social deprivation: [...] the feminization of poverty ... long term unemployment ... the immiseration of the rural economy ... the everyday privations of large families ... Each of these social crisis situations—and

the list could easily be expanded—goes along with a series of exhausting, embittered activities, for which the concept of ‘social struggle’ would be entirely appropriate.<sup>14</sup>

Honneth is celebrating here a different set of practices of resistance (in a different ‘everyday’) than that of the overwhelming bulk of cultural studies during the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps, rather than aiming to celebrate or investigate the popular, or ordinary, cultural studies needs to investigate the unpopular, the unseen, the passive resistance of those subjected to restructure, retraining, coercion, in both the market and the fragments of the social that remain non-marketised. Equally, this would involve a mainstream Australian cultural studies practice that would interrogate the increasing popular conformity evinced in Mr T.’s murderous fantasies on the *Daily Telegraph*’s blog. Here would be a cultural studies shorn of many of the optimistic ontological assumptions of the eighties and nineties—surely, the point of a historicist practice is not to argue that audiences, or publics, or consumers, are active semiotic readers *at all times and under all political or economic conditions*. If, as many contributors to *New Cultural Studies* insist, we are to preserve some of the Birmingham legacy, it would seem to me to be crucial to start with the forms of social conflict which ‘aren’t considered political’,<sup>15</sup> and politicise *those* areas of the everyday. Here would be a cultural studies populism more akin to that of the 1890s American populists or the Russian *Narodniks*, than the right-libertarian

cultural populism of *Reason Magazine* or the Electronic Freedom Foundation.

---

CHARLES MCPHEDRAN is currently completing a masters in political theory at the New School for Social Research in New York City. His research interests include Left Hegelian critical theory; Foucauldian biopolitics and the Birmingham Cultural Studies tradition; all political ‘ontologies of the present’. <phedranmcphebran@gmail.com>

---

1. D. Mills, ‘Murdoch Press Violates ‘Excluded Persons’ Privacy’, *Green Left Weekly*, 1 September 2007, <<http://www.greenleft.org.au/2007/723/37535>>.
2. S. Elks and D. Box, ‘Excluded People to Flout City Ban’, *Australian*, 4 September 2007, <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22358420-21703,00.html>>.
3. Australian Associated Press, ‘We Were Drinking Lattes, Say Blacklisters’, *Herald Sun*, 9 September 2007, <<http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,22388433-5005961,00.html>>.
4. J. Baker, ‘Identity Parade of the Secret Police’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 September 2007, <<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/09/09/1189276546303.html>>.
5. Mr T., weblog comment in response to J. Hilderbrand, ‘Radicals Issue APEC Riot Manual’, *Daily Telegraph*, 3 September 2007, <<http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,22049,22350173-5001021,00.html>>.
6. H. Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, Dover, Mineola NY, 1999, p. 59.
7. *Zeit Online*, ‘Erst Angst machen, dann beruhigen’, *Zeit*, 7 September 2007. <<http://www.zeit.de/online/2007/28/sicherheit-eldagsen-interview?page=all>>.
8. M. Mason, ‘Exploring ‘the Impossible’: Jacques Derrida, John Caputo and the Philosophy of History’, *Rethinking History*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2006, p. 511.
9. See J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London, 2004; G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999.
10. See, for example, W.P. Simons, ‘The Third: Levinas’ Theoretical Move from An-archical Ethics to the Realm of Justice and Politics’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 25, no. 6, 1999, pp. 83–104.

11. See J. Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 2004.
12. See also T. Franks, *New Consensus for Old: Cultural Studies from Left to Right*, Prickly Paradigm, Chicago, 2002.
13. A. Honneth, 'On the Phenomenology of Experiences of Social Injustice', in N. Fraser, and A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Verso, London, 2003, p. 198.
14. Honneth, p. 199.
15. Honneth, p. 119.