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A Different Crossroads

Meeting the Devil in Cultural Studies

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The 2012 Crossroads Cultural studies conference in Paris (2–6 July 2012) can be described as a massive celebration of the institutional internationalisation of the field. Set against the European financial crisis (with 50 per cent youth unemployment in Spain and 25 per cent in France) the agenda for the conference could have been one of crisis, as images of underdevelopment played out in the media where the news narrative suggested Parisian streets bereft of vehicles, empty Metro stations and carriages, wire-thin citizens dragging themselves across the destitute horizons of hopeless avenues: but no. Among the conference goers as privileged or soon to be privileged (PhD students) echelons of Enlightenment cultural knowledge production, Paris was normalised. For the most part the conference mirrored the established normality that is now cultural studies.

Imagine my surprise, then, a day after the conference finished to discover cultural studies during the Nazi era.

Nothing is normal. This despite the relatively established function of cultural studies within institutions of higher education and the recent books and articles rehearsing the history of the project, its past and future—Larry Grossberg's *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Paul Smith's edited collection *The Renewal of Cultural Studies* (in which I have a chapter) and Graeme Turner's *What's Become of Cultural*

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Studies.[1] Within the posturing, policing and positioning there are the inevitable falls and failures, tenured or not, coups, disarticulations, rearticulations, reconfigurations, repositionings, administrative bungling that accompanies academic life. But these may be less about cultural studies and more about the quotidian pressures of everyday life in the academy. But Nazi cultural studies? Surely this requires a rethink of the history of cultural studies and the kind of crossroads this startling knowledge may present?

As Crossroads suggested, there is a consolidated global enterprise within many universities that claim associations with cultural studies, in what Paul Smith described as 'a kind of libertarian approach'.[2] In some places this is real actual cultural studies—in other places it approaches a fiction in which nomenclature has been significant, but substance minimal. Sometimes it is as if cultural studies is a series of reiterations of the English male beacons of truth at the entrance to the academy, holding torches for defeated English welfare statism. Indeed, at its cruellest, a critique of recent British cultural studies could be that it invokes nostalgia for pre-Thatcherite welfare liberalism, rather than emancipation from Thatcherite neoliberalism.

In this context, the apparent ease with which cultural studies navigates its way within the confines of neo-liberal institutional discipline goes without comment for the most part, as neoliberalism itself is normalised within the everyday expectations of the academy. The challenge of cultural studies as an academic enterprise can be observed in what might be described as the soft shell and hard shell versions of its achievements.

For example, Larry Grossberg's claim for cultural studies is that it is 'about the contemporary struggle over thought, imagination, and the possibilities for action as a part of the larger contextual struggles over modernity itself'.[3] In contrast, Paul Smith's suggestion is that cultural studies in the United States 'did not really become the radical intellectual movement that upset disciplines and reformulated knowledge, nor did it eventually open out onto some thriving area of politics and the public sphere beyond the academy'.[4]

Meeting Nazi cultural studies in Heidelberg was neither normal nor expected, hard nor soft by current standards; rather, it was an example of unconscionable struggles that brought politics into the academy and the public sphere. It was

troubling in the way it emerged from another disturbing context—National Socialism in economic crisis—to instantiate some of the claims that are perhaps too easily made for it today. It was also, to paraphrase George Orwell in *The Road the Wigan Pier*, a case of taking cultural studies for granted in its Anglo-American-Birmingham formations until such time as 'we were told about it'.[5] Given the context, the history of cultural studies is repositioned through this new knowledge.

This story is about Nazi cultural studies and how its presence insists on a response from the contingencies of my own life and consciousness. Looking closely at the display in front of me in the Heidelberg University museum on a quiet Sunday afternoon, I was stunned by the images. My composure was shattered. This no-holds barred history of the university offered a series of static displays that included original documents, artefacts and photographs. It was sending me in another direction at the crossroad.

Perhaps my sensibilities were on edge in Heidelberg after five days at the Crossroads conference in Paris where cultural studies was front and centre and personal conjunctures played out. Perhaps it was that I had visited the Shoah Museum in Paris, prompted by a poster in the Paris Metro advertising a special exhibition about Jewish children in Paris and their treatment by the Nazis during World War II. As a sideline, at the Shoah Museum I had continued investigating the French Resistance, especially how its politics operated—where life and death conjunctures played out.

Then there's the literary conjuncture prompted with revelations that the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett was an active member of the French resistance. He would not address this topic in detail during his life in Paris after the war. However, his involvement in the resistance deeply inflected the innovations within his writing, aspects like the modes of silence, the loss and shame of survival, the despair arising from too much knowledge of human nature. ('End of another day.')

Furthermore, in Paris I was staying at Place Leon Blum, named after a Jewish activist who coordinated the movement for a popular front after the defeat of the Nazis. (I said thank you to his statue near the Voltaire Metro station.)

And then there was *All That I Am.* During Crossroads and in Heidelberg I was reading, Melbourne-born novelist Anne Funder's retelling of the German-Jewish left in exile in London during the rise of Hitlerism.[6] Funder's novel does not mess

around. It describes what happened to members of the German left in the face of political activism by the National Socialists. It enacts the banality of annihilation during the 1930s in Berlin and London. Everybody dies. Everything is lost except the exceptionalism of the honesty of lives well lived yet pathetically extinguished. (Walter Benjamin's suicide can be very nearly understood through the novel's exploration of despair and betrayal.) Using Kafkaesque devices, *All That I Am* claims the importance of the retelling in the loss, which is at one and the same time everything. The story came to Anna Funder in Sydney where she met one of the ageing survivors of German Jewry from the London exile, many years after the events.

Then this lens. The narrative of my much older cousin who married Marianne Levy. She left Berlin with her Jewish family in 1933, aged three. Her father Rudi was a general practitioner on the Gold Coast near Brisbane, Australia, where I now live. There is a plaque in a public park memorialising Rudi, and when I drive past Rudi Levy Park I always say hello, as I told Marianne when I saw her at an aunt's funeral recently. She put her arm around my shoulder. The Australian Irish and the Australian Semite after a long journey and Samuel Beckett's silence.

But not here. German cultural studies on a display board behind a Perspex sheet in the Heidelberg University Museum. The description reads:

> **Eugen Fehrle** (1880–1957), from 1919 Professor of Classical Philology, in 1934 Professor of German Anthropology at the 'German House'. In 1931 joined the NSDAP, in 1938 joined the SS, in 1944 made battalion leader (Sturmbannführer); 'Chief ideologue' of NS cultural studies. In 1934 Rector, in 1945 dismissed as a 'representative of extreme Nazism', in 1950 formally rehabilitated and made a professor emeritus.

I can imagine people not seeing the reference to cultural studies, or making any connection between Nazism, National Socialists and institutional structures. In keeping with history displays, it was not as if the museum on this particular Sunday afternoon in July was busy and certainly there was no reason for anyone to gravitate towards the photograph of Fehrle, whose image shows a small balding man in his fifties with what appears to be a doll made of wool and wood, in front of what could be a Native American dream catcher. Anthropology indeed!

The question is whether Fehrle was actively promoting cultural studies as the study of Aryan supremacist life in the lead up to, during and after World War II? Or was cultural studies added by the curator of the Heidelberg University Museum as a convenient way to describe the project of making a national ideology? I cannot answer the questions. Those and similar questions and associated answers remain for researchers who can undertake research in German.

Whatever the case, it's a dirty story. What is its relevance to contemporary cultural studies? Can we even discuss cultural studies in the service of National Socialism in the contemporary context? If so, what context could that be? How could this conversation begin? One answer is for cultural studies to consciously make alliances at the crossroad that lead in the direction of what Michael Denning suggested would be cultural radicalism within the New Left.[7] Or would that approach turn our backs on knowing this history, thereby failing to recognise the pitfalls and false consciousness of the study of culture in the wrong hands?

Answers to his question could at least absolve us of any uncertainty about the pact with the devil Robert Johnson was supposed to have made at the crossroads. The Heidelberg display is a reminder that the devil itself is part of the formation of cultural studies and every articulation, contingency and relationship incorporates forces at work that must be explored, revealed, described, critiqued and resisted. It cannot be assumed that cultural studies will continue as a critical exercise within the liberal institution, countering the narrowing of ideas in the shrinking neoliberal imagination.

We need to be reminded that institutions can be captured by the likes of Fehrle, parading as fellow travellers, only to turn into their true selves given the opportunity. The subtleties (and not so subtleties) of neoliberal life are such that cultural studies can appear as a narrowing local or national form, allowing liberalism and its assumptions to be subsumed under direct order to more limiting priorities. In this context, there is a risk that the silence of investigation about human nature and a better set of options for civilisation is replaced by the noise of economy with its growth-and-consumption-as-salvation advocacy. Nothing is normal.

Postscript: Across the room on another panel at the Heidelberg University Museum is a note telling readers that the liberal philosopher Karl Jaspers resigned from Heidelberg University after the end of the war because of the institution's poor commitment to de-Nazification of the faculty. Another crossroad.

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[1] Larry Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010; Paul Smith, *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2011; Graeme Turner, *What's Become of Cultural Studies?*, Sage, Los Angeles, 2012.

[2] Smith, p. 1.

[3] Grossberg, p. 3.

[4] Smith, p. 1.

[5] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1937, p. 57.

[6] Anna Funder, *All That I Am*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2011.

[7] Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, Verso, London, 2004, p. 4.