

an exchange on
theory & cultural studies

The following exchange grew out of a series of posts to the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia discussion list.¹ As a talking point leading into a regular meeting for early career cultural studies researchers in Brisbane, Melissa Gregg, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green quoted a passage from Simon During's recent *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2005) in the hope of provoking a wider debate about the current state of Australian cultural studies. Various members of the list were duly provoked, and the ensuing discussion was later picked up in a paper by John Frow and continued in private correspondence and then in invited responses to the developing exchange.

— SIMON DURING, *CULTURAL STUDIES: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION* (2005), p. 26, QUOTED IN MELISSA GREGG, JEAN BURGESS AND JOSHUA GREEN, POST TO CSAA LIST, 26 AUGUST 2005

Nowadays Australian cultural studies is increasingly normalised, concentrating on cultural policy studies and, often uncritically, on popular culture and the media. Indeed it is in Australia that the celebration of popular culture as a liberating force ... first took off through Fiske and Hartley's contributions. The young populists of the seventies now hold senior posts and what was pathbreaking is becoming a norm. The readiness of a succession of Australian governments to encourage enterprise universities has empowered the old tertiary technical training departments in such areas as communications, allowing them to have an impact on more abstract and theorised cultural studies in ways that appear to have deprived the latter of critical force. Furthermore, the structure of research funding, which asks even young academics to apply for grants, has had a conformist effect. Perhaps Australian cultural

studies offers us a glimpse of what the discipline would be like were it to become relatively hegemonic in the humanities.

— SIMON DURING, POST TO CSAA LIST, 29 AUGUST 2005

... What I meant is that (for what it's worth) none of the original movers and shakers in the field in Australia, who still mainly work in cultural studies and still practice in Australia today, are working in quite the same academic genres or styles as, say, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Andrew Ross, Lauren Berlant, David Halperin, Tricia Rose or Brian Massumi, or indeed are doing the kind of work that John Frow and Meaghan Morris, say, were doing at the time. Where's Marxism? Feminism? French theory? ... More specifically, I hope that Graeme [Turner] doesn't mind me saying that I don't regard his work ... as Marxist or as feminist or, if it comes to that, as poststructuralist, or as queer theory, or as Foucauldian, or as much influenced by the more philosophical kinds of postcolonial theory. Which, to say it again, is not at all a complaint directed at him personally. It would be strange if it were intended as one: I don't do that kind of work myself. But I want to work in an environment where lots of other people do do such work, and where some of those people have real institutional clout ... I personally think it would be good if more ambitious theory and more radical position-taking were associated more routinely with Australian cultural studies these days.

— STEPHEN MUECKE, POST TO CSAA LIST, 29 AUGUST 2005

I've only just rejoined this list, so forgive me if I have failed to grasp the full pathos. So it seems that Simon, from the heart of the razor-wire Empire, is telling us we are not political enough, which means doing old theory or having Spivak in the office next door. Graeme [Turner] and John [Hartley] are at least fortunate to have been recognised from Olympus as visible enough to attract the During scorn ... As for the rest of us from that original list he cited, well, we may as well be retired or dead. As if that was it for Oz cultural studies! During would see what a terrific bunch of earlier career people we have if he dropped in on the CSAA conference in Sydney in November. I am not going to be indignant and tell him how some of our scholarship or theory might have made efforts to go beyond the familiar northern hemisphere theoretical canon; he can find out for himself if he is interested.

— JOHN FROW, UNPUBLISHED PAPER ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL STUDIES

... What Muecke points to is something distinctly old-fashioned in the version of 'Theory' that During posits here: Theory with a capital 'T' as a set of distinct, labelled boxes, each corresponding to a well-defined disciplinary formation. This is a version of theory that, it seems to me, has never sat comfortably with the way cultural studies has been done in this country. As Meaghan Morris and I wrote in 1993:

It is not that Australian cultural studies (as we see it) is in any way hostile to 'theory'; theoretical work can also be considered a form of cultural practice. It is merely that the doctrinal disputes which have marked and perhaps enabled the emergence of cultural studies elsewhere—disputes between humanism and formalism, formalism and Marxism, Frankfurt School Marxism and post-structuralism, deconstruction and new historicism, 'textualism' and ethnography—have not long remained the *focus* of debate in Australia, where they are often resolved in practice by a kind of rigorous *mixing*.²

If we are 'after Theory', as has become the common wisdom of recent years, it is only that of the kind that During invokes. We have not gone beyond that other 'mixed' and inventive kind, the theory that grows productively out of its object as it seeks to conceptualise celebrity or virtual personality or media affect or the Asian cinema industries or the place of indigenous people in the polity. Nor could we be: there is no 'positive' space of productivity beyond theory; there is only theory that's aware of the way its categories construct a disciplinary world, and theory that is not.

— SIMON DURING, LETTER TO JOHN FROW, 28 SEPTEMBER 2005

... I do think that cultural studies emerges in complex contestation with certain modes of theory and indeed at various times and places with theory as such. My own experience at Cambridge University in the second half of the 1970s was that there was a choice between the Birmingham school and poststructuralist literary theory, and with one exception (Allon White) all the postgrads who were cathectable by these movements chose poststructuralism. Raymond Williams, who was still very much around, was respected but his work had no relevance to us at that time. Stephen Heath / *Screen* theory, Paul de Man, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Barthes / *Tel Quel* and Kristeva / French feminism were set against the kind of work being pursued at the Open University, at Birmingham, in media studies programs and so on. It was only in the late 1980s that sophisticated theorised analyses of contemporary cultural forms began to be widely circulated (and here Australia played an important role, of course, largely through Meaghan Morris's work). Similarly, within cultural studies, populist approaches were, I believe, elaborated in part against high-theory approaches and have to be understood in that context. People have complained that in my post to the csaa listing I reified theory and you make the same point yourself here. Maybe you're right. But at the moment I'd still rather say that theory can be more or less philosophised, more or less applied, more or less innovative and so on, and it has, especially in Australia, been weakening (less innovative, less philosophised, more emulative, more simply applied) across a number of these registers over the past decade, and has also been increasingly displaced from the centre in Australia, relative to the rest of the world, in part because of the

research funding situation, which encourages people to do the kind of work that the government can sign off on ... Which leads to another point on contestation and critique. It seems to me that contestation is needed more now than ever in one particular form. My disquiet with current Australian cultural studies is in part fuelled by my sense that cultural studies has not sufficiently protested against the totalitarian tendencies of the current government, in tertiary education policy as elsewhere. Do people understand how outrageous it is that the minister [Brendan Nelson, Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training] can personally decide whether or not to fund intellectual work, on political grounds? I understand why people don't protest (there's money and careers at stake, I myself find it hard even to say this since I want to return to Australia!) but that only makes it worse. So a model which underplays the formative force of contestation seems to me finally complicit in that self-censorship. This sounds harder than I mean it, but I think you will understand my point.

— MEAGHAN MORRIS, LETTER TO SIMON DURING, 29 SEPTEMBER 2005

You know, I think 'rest of the world' should primarily read 'USA' and 'France'. Rest of the world including places like Switzerland, Austria and Germany as well as most of Asia is much more like Australia in various ways. The irritability people had on csaa with your list of [American] names ... had two sources, it seems to me.

One is that only in America or France now can you feel serious in associating that sort of work *prima facie* with politics, mainly because after thirty years it seems so overwhelmingly to have failed the challenge of neo-liberalism, or rather, since that is too heroic, just plain failed to take up that challenge in any remotely effective way (except for the work of Andrew Ross, whose name doesn't really seem to belong on your list). That makes it seem intellectually very stale, which is the second reason. Not to do with reifying theory so much, but with not recognising why 'rest of the world' might have moved on for now.

Another reason is that most such Americans no longer make any pretence of making an effort to keep up with all the exciting stuff happening in rest of the world. (Only a few dead French and German philosophers.) As it happens I just read for my introduction to my book newish short texts by three American women I've always admired ... Fell asleep often and had to skip pages. Why? Totally insular mental world, elegant prose and argument-trimming as always (these books are 'lovely hats') but with zilch engagement with the real intellectual geography of the early twentieth century. Of course this has always been an American tendency, but it is starting to take a creative toll to a serious degree, I think.

... On the other hand ... I can't not agree with you about the collapse of opposition in Australia to the most appalling erosions of basic academic freedoms and rights. Which is why I feel strongly that the theory thing is a red herring, and drawing attention to the luxury

conditions of North American research universities an unwise move, not because of the resentment it unleashes but because that very exceptionality is in part a source of the ‘angels on the head of a pin’ quality of the work such Americans now mostly produce. To talk seriously about the USA you’d want to take into account conditions in good or perhaps especially in shitty state universities and colleges, the whole overwhelming mass of the American education system.

I have a melodramatic perception from outside the country—I don’t know how John [Frow] sees this, coming back from Scotland—that academics in Australia are now finding out something of what it was like in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Germany, when things just drifted ... and people can see no feasible or possible way to oppose and survive. Only the violence exerted against Australian academics is economic and industrial, not window smashing. But I would want to think more about how to say that sensibly, before saying it!

— JOHN FROW, LETTER TO SIMON DURING, 4 OCTOBER 2005

... But there’s a bigger political point here, Simon. We all share, of course, a sense of grief at the Benthamite turn in the governance of higher education, as well as the way this government has been (somewhat contradictorily) so politically hands-on. But the problem isn’t the quality control mechanisms in themselves, and indeed I’d want to say that, at least initially, there was some real point to the imposition of quality controls on an academia that was often complacent and unproductive and just not internationally competitive. And of course the censorship of research projects is pretty evil, but this government has done much more evil things. I’ve never felt that I had to keep quiet in order to protect myself; only that there was no place where my voice could make a difference, given the cynicism of this government and its predecessors, and the absence of higher education from the political agenda. I do feel that I lack a voice—but letters to the editor or taking part in phony debates in the *Australian* won’t give me one.

The problems seem to me not to be of the chiliastic dimensions you imply: it’s a matter of irritation at administrative loads and at having to play by the rules of somewhat arbitrary games—but I don’t believe these things necessarily distort the intellectual work we do, and I’ve never felt that my own work has been warped by the ARC [Australian Research Council] system. It’s a matter, too, of some despair at the lack of hold our values have in the current neo-conservative climate and in relation to a government entirely without principle. But this is, of course, at least as bad in the USA or the UK, and it’s part of a more general loss of purchase that we left intellectuals have on the public order; a rhetoric of radical resistance won’t help much with that. Nor do I draw the sort of stark opposition you do between Australian universities and the elite US academy; the divide is much the same as that between the US state schools and the elite schools, and it’s never been an unbridgeable gulf.

One of your central arguments concerns the lack of a focus on contradiction in my paper, and you cite the division when you were at Cambridge in the 1970s between a poststructuralist path and 'the kind of work being pursued at the Open University, at Birmingham, in media studies programs and so on'. You'll forgive me if I point out that this is not merely an intellectual tension: it has everything to do with the relative prestige accruing to Cambridge on the one hand and red-brick universities and polytechnics on the other; just as, in Australia, the sandstone universities were disdainful of cultural studies until well into the 1980s (and Sydney English still hasn't discovered it). It's that distribution of cultural capital, I think, that has kept cultural studies out of the elite US universities (or rather that keeps genuinely interesting work that I would call cultural studies from being named as such). Yes, of course cultural studies is established in tension with 'theory'; it's also structured, from time to time, by tensions between humanities and social science methodologies, between the 'social' and the 'textual'. But as you point out, the strength of cultural studies has been in its ability to get beyond those dichotomies, to develop forms of theory through and for its readings of popular or everyday culture (or indeed, I'd argue, for its readings of high culture in terms of its social and discursive relations).

That's the core of our disagreement, I think: that you continue to reserve 'theory' for traditional applications, or to conceptualise it in its traditional forms; whereas for me, and I think for Meaghan, the strength of cultural studies has been its ability to develop new conceptual models, hybrid forms, ways of thinking that can't readily be characterised as 'Marxist' or 'feminist' or whatever. I don't want to romanticise Australian cultural studies, because after all it's a small field and some of its key players have moved away; but it's had strengths that are still lacking in the USA, for reasons that Meaghan explains concisely. And I must say I'm a little surprised at your insistence on these categories of traditional theory, since, as you say, you yourself don't do this stuff, and you yourself use the exploratory kinds of theory, closely tied to their object, that I value. What are you nostalgic for?

— GRAEME TURNER, RESPONSE TO SIMON DURING, 14 OCTOBER 2005

... I should admit that what slightly puzzles me about Simon's line in this conversation is not only what he says, but that he thinks it is useful to say it. Much of what he offers as a diagnosis of the current situation in Australia is implicitly licensed by not being part of that situation—something which is graphically demonstrated when he starts to make claims about what that situation might consist of. More importantly, though, I don't think that pining for the loss of some earlier version of theory or the university is of much help in addressing what I agree is actually a seriously difficult period. The humanities in particular need to be extremely politically astute in how they participate in discussions about the character

of the institutional formations on the horizon, while remaining resolute in defending their own value and, where agreed, their values.

So, my comments are aimed at presenting a more complicated view of the state of the Australian humanities in the current environment than Simon's list comments and his piece in the *Australian* can provide. For a start, I regard the account Simon offers of the state of humanities in the Australian university as a typically expatriate intervention—in the genre of Clive James or Germaine Greer—which assumes that the processes through which the politics of our culture works have remained entirely transparent to them despite their physical absence from Australia. With Simon, just as with Clive and Germaine, they clearly haven't. Let me give some examples of what I mean here.

For a start, it is simply irresponsible to claim, as Simon does, that the ARC will only fund research that the government is prepared to sign off on. The peer review system, while bruised by the political interventions of the last two years, is still managed with integrity and I defy anyone to go through the successful applications in recent years and find *any* evidence to support such a claim. I'll get back to the two recommendations that were refused in 2004, but I want to point to some other details, which might encourage at least a more nuanced view of the level of support the humanities researcher is currently receiving from government. In 2004 the Humanities and Creative Arts panel of the ARC received an extra \$3 million in research funds (this came on top of an \$8 million budget, so the scale of the increase is massive). Our success rate actually went above thirty per cent for the first time and members of the panel found themselves in the rare position of wondering if we had funded too many! Cultural studies' ARC success rates have grown dramatically in recent years; having read every one of them over the last three years, I find it hard to imagine that any of the projects funded in this field would have pleased the government. In 2005 the humanities secured four of the twenty-five Federation Fellows, two of them ([Geremie] Barme and [Hilary] Charlesworth) working on projects that are directly critical of government policy; the ARC was explicitly committed to prosecuting the claims of these candidates to their awards. Until this year the humanities had only secured six Federation Fellows in total over the previous three rounds, so this was a major success. We also secured, for the first time, a Centre of Excellence in the humanities. In more arcane areas, where it is not surprising that Simon (or anyone else, for that matter) is unaware of developments, we are finally getting some traction in debates about how government might inject funds into the required research infrastructure for the humanities (digitising large research resources, for instance), and this has the capacity to transform the cost and practice of humanities research dramatically. The battle here is not won, but it is joined and we are getting somewhere. My point in enumerating these details is that it is precisely through such local and specific victories

that we not only practically renovate the sector but also earn a more general recognition of our claims on government and policy makers.

I also want to reject Simon's account of the sector's response to [Brendan] Nelson's intervention in 2004 and again in 2005. Representing this as supine is just plain wrong. Just because Simon appears not to be aware of the many protests made doesn't mean that they didn't happen. There were indeed vigorous and repeated public and private representations on this issue from many sources, from the VCs on down; the CEO of the ARC fought it tooth and nail, and there were a number of op-eds and many letters to the editor (including from me). The problem is, and this is what someone outside Australia could not be expected to understand, a vigorous public reaction is precisely what Nelson wanted—as a means of demonstrating to his colleagues and to Andrew Bolt that he had the ticker to rein in the silliness of the humanities. A lot of indignant huffing and puffing from the sector was really just grist to the mill. More important to the long-term goal of calling him off were the direct personal representations to Nelson—again, from the universities, from the academy, from CHASS [Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences] and so on. I have taken it up with him directly myself, as has Iain McCalman at PMSIEC [Prime Minister's Science, Innovation and Engineering Committee] (at some risk to his personal safety, I believe!). To represent our response as inaction is both naive (in terms of how one actually does go about attempting to change the government's mind) and ill-informed.

All of that said, however, I think it is symptomatic of Simon's version of 'theory' and 'politics' that it might remain blissfully unaware of whatever direct political action is being taken in the sector while still feeling entitled to proclaim the decline of a 'theory' that might describe itself as intrinsically political. Far from denying that there is an urgent need for the sector's direct engagement in the politics that determine the conditions under which we are now working, my view is that this 1980s version of theory is a consoling fiction that didn't much help us produce political change back then and is now being invoked as a means of denigrating the efforts of those who are trying to produce it—under much more worrying conditions—now.

— MELISSA GREGG, 20 OCTOBER 2005

I've said in a previous response to Simon's description of Australian cultural studies that I agree with what I assume he means by 'hegemonic'—that it has secured a position of some considerable institutional strength when compared with the USA and perhaps the UK. What I remain troubled by, particularly when it appears in a book intended for classrooms in North America, is its implication that cultural studies lacks any sense of tension with the present government. Even if we were in a situation of state censorship, and I'm in a limited a position

to know this for sure, when has simply railing against such intervention ever been the most effective form of action? I find it irritating that the forms of political work that are considered worthwhile in the theory versus politics debate so often fail to recognise contributions of the kind Graeme outlines and epitomises: high-level consultation and dialogue; institution building; or simply long-term professional service. This is not just politics 'by other means'. It is acknowledging the theoretical principle that working on a number of levels of practice is just as crucial as letting the brilliance of one's research stand as sole testimony of one's politics.

However, I am simply confused by Simon's subsequent questions, 'Where's Marxism? Feminism? French theory?' From my experience it would be more fitting to ask in which cultural studies program is this *not* the stock fare? I am much more concerned about the number of original thinkers that cultural studies has lost in the past decade because they *haven't* sufficiently positioned their work within these theoretical touchstones. Or because they have suffered the arch, über-urban subcultural shame which comes with *not* being heavily invested in Theory. Or because they *haven't* been sufficiently convinced by the influence of charismatic supervisors who insist that a personally treasured theoretical legacy should be maintained at the expense of exercises in imagination, innovation and risk.

When I also noted that I was tired of younger cultural studies practitioners having to 'mime in the shadows of senior colleagues' it was from a genuine concern that this field seems caught in wider generational trends—that the sheer number of established working academics currently occupying endangered tenured positions may be affecting much capacity to contemplate whether cultural studies is preparing itself for its own reproduction. This is why I sympathise with the description of the field's hegemony in this country. But it isn't an irony that senior academics have been the ones to take issue with the outdatedness of Simon's initial description, just that the picture wasn't accurate enough for younger academics to be sufficiently invested in it to feel compelled to respond. A sense of sceptical trepidation amongst increasingly professionally-minded graduates and junior researchers seems very different from conservatism, but it also seems symptomatic of the limited number of avenues for their experiences and voices to be *counted*, as opposed to being heard.

— BRETT NEILSON, 24 OCTOBER 2005

It is not without significance that this discussion circles around theory, varieties of theory and the travelling of theory, as a means of responding to present institutional conditions and assessing their impact upon wider political life. I have never been interested in theory. Nor is the question of theory (how much or how little of it, how recycled, mixed or applied) necessarily the most strategic one to pose when confronting the current institutional

transformations. After all, what is at stake in these changes is not simply this or that vetoed grant, this or that proposed audit, or this or that program closure. What is at stake is the control of thought as such.

Theory is difficult and, in a complex sense, ordered. It has particular historical trajectories and comes into being at certain times and places. Thought wanders and jumps. It is impossible to constrain it to a certain place or time. Thus the control of thought cannot have recourse to methods based on the unity of time, place and action. It seeks not to censor or deprive individuals of a voice but rather to establish power over mind and the collaboration of minds, to create mentalities and mental boundaries. And thus it operates through moods and sentiments, through the creation of shared beliefs and common opinions. Its point of application is not on the level of acts or products but rather on the level of possibilities.

To go on theorising, to do this or that theorising, is thus not the issue. Cultural studies has always agonised over theorising, no less than institutionalisation. In the current conjuncture, this agonising goes nowhere. Too often we have heard the refrain that cultural studies cannot be (or cannot afford to be) about theorising alone, that (while rigour is necessary) theory must be engaged and subordinated to concrete political questions. What needs to be questioned in this overfamiliar (and by now almost lazy) proposition is not the positioning of theory but the positioning of politics.

This kind of statement sets up the political as a limit beyond which cultural studies cannot pass at the same time as it avoids asking *what this politics might be*. There is a certain reduction of the political here to the concrete and the pragmatic. Politics becomes a matter of action, engagement and outcomes. Rather than thinking through the constitution of the political, the indefiniteness and indeterminacy of every politics, there is a retreat to the temporality of cause and effect, means and ends. And, as a consequence, there is a certain paralysis and contraction of *political creativity*.

Politics becomes a choice between the grandstanding of the 'public intellectual' and the deftness of the operator who acts (for the good of us all) behind the closed doors of the existing institutions. Both of these are profoundly apolitical options. They are symptoms of what might be called the political atheism of our times: the great victory of economics over politics that culminated in 1989. Let me be clear. What is at stake is not the addition or subtraction of theory, not the mix or the cut, its relative distribution across national or institutional sites (the USA/France and the rest, sandstones and new universities, Ivy or state), or the ritual (and unselfconsciously nationalistic) castigation of those who leave and then dare to criticise. Rather, there is a need to interrogate the inability of a 'politics' predicated on engagement and ends to respond to a situation in which power seeks to control the very potentiality of thought.

To be sure, this is a mode of power that comes into operation as the production of knowledge moves to the centre of the economy. Under present conditions, the university is some-

thing more than just another institution in which political alliances and ethical dilemmas are shaped by sovereign and governmental forces. Rather, it is an exemplary laboratory of power—a site of intersection where multiple forces are at work and larger social struggles are won and lost. Even as many who work in these institutions are aware of this, universities have become sites of paralysis and submission, opportunism and fear. The institution requires us to internalise its values and seeks to control not only our work time but the entire time of life and space of action.

But this is not a situation to bemoan or to spark nostalgia. It is rather a vista of possibility, since it is precisely the fact that power seeks to control the generic potentiality of human thought that makes us strong. We should not submit just as our most valuable weapons are returned to us. We must find openings to experiment with new institutional forms, create alternative sources of funding, and build alternative networks of political and intellectual association. Cultural studies cannot afford to look backward or content itself, even in its most difficult moments, with government lobbying and the criticism of policy. As necessary as these practices are, it is just as unlikely that they will produce new directions as it is that something new will emerge from the endless rehearsal of theoretical arguments.

Perhaps what cultural studies needs is not a reassessment of its engagement with theory but a reassessment of its very conception of the political (and I realise this has never been unitary or uncontested). One possible source of political disruption is cultural studies' excess labour—the minds and bodies that have passed through its degree mills but, despite their passions and talents, have no hope of earning a livelihood within its academic settings. In Australia, as in other countries, these precarious researchers are beginning to meet, organise, network across national borders, contest the uncertain terms of their employment, and create new contexts for critical intellectual work. It is in these environments that vital mutations may be spawned, giving rise to new ways of thinking and being political. What remains to be seen is whether these mutations, if they ever did occur, would accept the name of cultural studies.

— JEAN BURGESS, 1 NOVEMBER 2005

As an 'early career' researcher who explicitly identifies as a cultural studies practitioner, trained at UQ [University of Queensland] and now working within the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT [Queensland University of Technology], I find that there are some characterisations of cultural studies in this exchange that I recognise, and some that I don't. For me, the performance of theoretical virtuosity simply isn't the main game of what I have been trained to do, and what I do now, under the banner of cultural studies. Cultural studies as a research practice, at least in the British and Australian traditions that I identify with most, has traditionally integrated (and built) cultural and critical theory in symbiosis with various

kinds of empirical work, with both 'theory' and 'praxis' emphasised to a greater or lesser extent. As others have pointed out here, Australian cultural studies has been eclectic, and, I would argue, admirably pragmatic in its appropriation of both theory and methodology from various disciplinary territories.

But what is most at stake for me when I claim to 'do cultural studies' is a core ethics—which I might articulate variously as popular empathy, 'critical' engagement, and a commitment to building agency. The ethics of cultural studies has practical implications that I try to take seriously, both for how theory is integrated, used and communicated, and much more importantly, for methodology—for how research 'subjects' are imagined, approached and engaged. It seems to me that the space for practical, engaged research of this kind is now expanding, not shrinking, in Australia, and this brings with it welcome challenges for the continued vigour of Australian cultural studies.

— SIMON DURING, 8 NOVEMBER 2005

Two issues arising from these exchanges interest me most. First: the question of whether a critical reflection on the history of Australian cultural studies would indeed reveal that certain forms of theorising and political desire have been marginalised, and if so, how might we account for, and assess, this shift. And second: the status of the expatriate: to what degree and in what way is the expatriate humanities academic *other* to Australia?

Actually, what interests me is the possibility of linkages between these two questions.

As I turned my mind to this, I found myself rereading some of the earliest work in Australian cultural studies. Take *Language, Sexuality and Subversion* (1978), edited by Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris, which begins with a rich essay by George Alexander and is followed by a wonderful piece by Meaghan herself. Both are about revolution and are written from a position of revolutionary desire, that is, from within the aftermath of May 1968. George's contribution, which leans on the work of J-P Faye and *Tel Quel*, recognises that its own revolutionary will is utopian but attempts to overcome utopianism by spelling out a theory of language as 'ideological action'. What gives the piece oomph is its strong sense of the limits imposed by its own context and setting. Recent French theory becomes, as it were, a tool in George's effort to locate himself and to judge the possibilities for social action from where he is writing, with the essay unfurling itself as the working through of that effort.

Meaghan's essay, 'Eurocommunism versus Semiotic Delinquency', mixing reportage, sociology and semiotics, describes in detail the situation in which, in 1977, Francesco Lo Russo, a 'far-left militant' was shot by police in Bologna with the connivance of the local communist party. It's a critique of the normalisation of communism as 'eurocommunism' and mounts a case, once again, that in order to avoid the disaggregation of Marxism, radical-left thought needs to reconfigure the relation between theory and practice, a task which Meaghan

recognises as particularly urgent because ‘in countries like Australia ... Marxist theory is at last energetically installing itself as a recognised minority stream in university courses and where communist parties are virtually insignificant’.

Indeed, spelling out a relation to revolutionary practice and desire—and accounting for the utopianism of one’s own position—seems to have been almost *de rigueur* in early Australian cultural studies. Let me offer another example. In 1984 in the more purely academic *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, John Fiske, Graeme Turner and Bob Hodge, still working within the framework of the new left, discuss the then-new form of the rock video in terms of whether ‘capitalism has finally provided an anti-capitalist mode’ (Fiske) or whether or not the form ‘signals some kind of revolution’ (Hodge). The answer, all three agree, is ‘no, not quite’.

Graeme provides one reason why: ‘Like rock ’n’ roll, video clips’ radical potential is bound up in the familiar and paradoxical relation between the form and the industry’. That is: videos *are* revolutionary formally, but the industry is continually able to appropriate their revolutionary potential for commercial purposes.

But this kind of work was a beginning of a break with theory inside one influential strand of Australian cultural studies. Just compare the way that theory was being used by Fiske and his colleagues (with the lightest of touches) with roughly contemporaneous work by Tony Bennett on James Bond, Laura Mulvey on Hollywood film, or Dick Hebdige on reggae, all of which retained a commitment to formulating innovative theory by moving beyond semiotics as it was then constituted. When the *AJCS*’s populism entered into alliances and exchanges with the neo-Foucauldianism pioneered at Griffith, then, driven by the Dawkins and post-Dawkins university-sector reforms, a central plank of contemporary Australian cultural studies, namely creative industries / cultural policy work, which was more or less implicitly positioned against philosophically engaged analysis, was in place.

Today May 1968, and all it seemed to signal, belong to history. We don’t express a desire for revolution, our hermeneutic is not aimed at discovering revolutionary possibilities in the texts we read; we don’t believe that semiosis, or ‘ideological practice’ has any power to de-utopianise our revolutionary desires. There has been a transformation—which I also want to read complexly as a loss—in Australian cultural studies.

Or has there been? The last—and excellent—issue of this journal, *Cultural Studies Review*, was, like *Language, Sexuality and Subversion* back in 1978, largely dedicated to Italian politics and theory. On the face of it, this seems a good example of Australian cultural studies’ continuing engagement with import theory and critique in their traditional forms. And so it is, even if many of the articles belong more to the emerging genres of ‘history of theory’ and ‘history of 1960s/post-1960s radicalism’ than to theory and radicalism themselves.

Not so, however, an essay by two young academics, Melissa Greg and Glen Fuller, an account of the global conservative articulation of, and response to, 'terror'. The piece draws heavily on Paul Virilio and Giorgio Agamben to critique the emergency/crisis rhetoric which has allowed normal legal safeguards and rights to be ignored in the war against terror. The argument itself shares much with thousands of left opinion pieces in newspapers and magazines around the world. What marks it as academic is its recycling (and gentle chiding in the name of the everyday) of Agamben and, once again, if belatedly, its embrace of revolutionary desire. 'We hope', Mel and Glen write, 'to encourage a revolutionary diversity of hymns, anthems, riffs and rhymes to unsettle the refrain so comforting for the Right-eous'.

What's new? Isn't this, all over again, the old late-new-left politics of semiotics spelled out routinely, including (with more consideration of positionality) by George Alexander in 1978 and (with more restraint) by John Fiske and others in the 1980s?

Yes and no. The rhetoric is much the same, but its meaning and purpose have mutated.

Most obviously: unlike the 1978 collection, there is no reference to Marxism in Mel and Glen's essay, no connection whatsoever to an organised social movement within that tradition (and why, you may ask, should there be?). But by the same stroke the enemy has changed. The old enemy was capitalism and the 'bourgeoisie', now it is the Right, and even more than the Right, it's America—or rather the kind of America habitually imagined from afar and without any real sense of the place. It is as if the American religious right and current administration form not just very powerful (if right now increasingly unpopular) fractions inside an extraordinarily various and complex society, but America's essence.

What has also changed in this recent academic work is that the relationship to theory—this time Agamben—is now wholly academic and distanced. In 1978, George and Meaghan wrote (knowingly or not) in the spirit of 1968 as if they, and those they were reporting on, shared a single (if dispersed) social movement, whose home was not, or not only, the university. There was, as it were, more conceptual and political intimacy available to them in their intellectual work: for instance, they knew the languages of the theorists and activists they discussed, which is not the case for Mel and Glen who refer only to translations. And in 1984 John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner were applying semiotics to the video form for the first time, drawing on and bleaching out semiotic theory to analyse popular culture in a move that would indeed soon enable Australian cultural studies to achieve certain of its most characteristic forms. That constitutes the excitement of their work: the possibility of (as people used to say) 'theoretical breakthroughs', even though, in this case, most of the breakthroughs turned out to be break-ups.

One more important change: today's young academics turn to revolutionary discourse in a system where many 'senior' academics in the field have given up on such language not just for intellectual/political reasons but on the sensible grounds that it is counter-productive

and that the most urgent task is to negotiate with those who hold real power in order to win the best possible deal for the humanities as measured by goods supplied by the system: ARC grants and formal policy settings which take account of disciplinary needs. In the 1970s and early 1980s, there were no ARC grants, there were no governmental structures that turned some senior academics some of the time into bureaucratic courtiers (thankfully, as Graeme, whose work in this area I much admire, reminds us, very effective ones!). In fact back then there were no senior academics in cultural studies at all.

Everyone is right of course to reproach me in case my relation to those old days were merely nostalgic, but that doesn't mean that things haven't changed or that amnesia is better than nostalgia (did I suffer from it). It doesn't mean either that in Australia theory was always 'mixed' with non-theory in a unique way as many who've participated in the discussions above seem to believe: I think my citations suffice at least to indicate that it isn't quite how it was. Or that I have gotten the theory-politics relation wrong in principle: again I think my citations indicate that the discipline constructed itself here around the theory-politics couple and that the post-1968 revolutionary discourse in which theory and politics were characteristically merged is being repeated, increasingly emptily, by the most recent generation, even as complex pressures and formations lead cultural studies in other directions.

How to do things better? One starting point would be to think more cogently about the transnational system within which we all work. Let me put this more radically: to think critically today it helps to take a position of expatriation (at least for a moment) whether you work from Australia or from the USA or from Britain or from Singapore or Taiwan or Italy or Turkey ...

I mean by 'taking a position of expatriation' two things. First, expatriation figured idealistically and metaphorically as a position that refuses to limit its critical reflection to the terms of a particular national academic system. This doesn't require travel or a commitment to fully fledged cosmopolitanism but it does involve a turn to intellectual traditions and contexts outside and between conventionally conceived national interests and management mechanisms. In these terms, writing a dissertation on Aristotle's cultural values from Melbourne is a form of expatriation. So would be working (to use the language of Kantianism) in the 'manifold' of the everyday that cannot be contained by the wills and procedures of nation building.

The need for such forms of expatriatism is all the more urgent since, despite having read Graeme's eloquent and (in regard to Australia) formidably well-informed rebuttal of my assertions, I continue to believe that the system of research management and the control exerted over it by the media and politicians does indeed constrain the kinds of work being done in Australia, even if it probably increases the amount of 'research' being carried out. We'd need a more sustained, internationally comparative argument to persuade me otherwise.

But expatriation is not only a metaphor. In drawing attention to the word I am also pointing to the effects of relatively cheap jet travel; the globalising of the academic labour market; the transnationalising of the student body; the everyday availability of the web for people like us; the proliferation of international academic exchanges and conferences; and the formal policies of internationalisation that most Australian universities as well as DEST [the Department of Education, Science and Training] have embraced—through which today expats in the most literal sense assess ARC grants, review Australian faculties and departments, read submissions to Australian scholarly journals, belong to Australian editorial boards, organise conferences in Australia, and apply for ARC grants themselves.

In a word: these days you don't have to live in Australia to play in the Australian game. Physical geography no longer limits information flows, conceptual geography, professional networks or pedagogical relations in the way it did even in the early 1990s, let alone in the days when Clive James and Germaine Greer left Sydney as young grad. students (by boat?) in the 1960s.

My appeal to expatriatism implies that the material infrastructure for a certain escape from, even resistance to, the compressing force of totalitarianising national governments around the world is possible for many people in all kinds of institutions. And where expatriatism really reveals its power is when it begins to work from within the national culture and society to expand and undo it. The work of expatriation (either metaphorically or literally) can help Australia to become the kind of complex society (like China or the USA) against which essentialisms quickly shiver and break. To think against the expatriate here is to risk joining the nationalist and totalising framework that Howard's conservatism lives off.

The various forms of resistance to expatriatism, thought as I am thinking it, all work to hinder renovation of theory and critique. Which is why I won't buy 1) the argument that 'responsible' academic work aims to cut the best deal in the national system as it is; 2) the complacent celebration of Australian cultural studies, past and present, without a careful, distanced, comparative examination of what it was, is and might be; 3) the repetition of various forms of old revolutionary discourse, or the more or less mechanical importation of glamorous, up-to-the-minute European theory.

These are certainly not what I mean when I say that Australian cultural studies needs more critique and theory. Exactly what that critique and theory would look like I don't know. Yet I do think that more tolerance of, or rather more will for, expatriation as I am thinking it would help to hasten their articulation. And more will for expatriation requires less cringe of the kind expressed in beating up on those who leave the country, or in knee-jerk defences of the status quo, or even in being passive in regard to transnational intellectual flows (big-name foreign philosophers, old rhetorics of revolution). After all Australians are highly privileged agents in the larger world, able, by engaging in it, to contribute intellectually and

creatively to it, especially within a discipline which, as we all are agreed, has so much presence here.

(And that I can write 'here' from afar, send my message in a few seconds around the world, be understood and, thus, in four strokes of the keyboard, transport myself discursively to Australia from Baltimore, is of course a crucial semiotic/infrastructural precondition for the global expatriatism that I am invoking.)

— MEAGHAN MORRIS, LETTER TO JOHN FROW, 4 DECEMBER 2005

Thanks for asking me to comment on this exchange, which darts off in many interesting directions. I don't want to try to round it off. I like the 'guard down' quality of most of the contributions and I'd rather make a historical comment then add a few personal remarks about research funding, revolutionary desire and expatriation—topics not easily disentangled, however silly it sounds, and all of them classic, dramatic, petty-bourgeois intellectual themes! I've been reading a lot of George Gissing these past couple of years—Hong Kong is no place to find out about new books in English—and *Born in Exile* (1892) and *The Odd Women* (1893) combine the lot.

I'm not sure that a thirty-year time frame is long enough for getting a grip on the issues raised by this discussion but I am sure that it's hard to make sense of them with reference to Australia alone. I'm always more interested in continuities than breaks, in how things survive and persist by changing, though of course this means asking what is 'new' and how you can know (my main reason when I was young for being interested in Foucault). So I heartily agree with Simon that amnesia is not better than nostalgia—I think it's worse—but then, cultural critics have been accusing each other of both vices for as long as I can remember. Having a theoretically correct or 'cool' positioning in relation to the present moment seems to be a recurring desire of our field, and for that I'm inclined to blame the rhetorical legacies of the revolutionary tradition in Europe (the kind that chopped off people's heads) as they have filtered into academic disciplines.

There is an uncanny circling-back for me in parts of this discussion, and not only because Simon mentions work I did in 1977. When I first read his remarks about the aftermath of May 1968, Paris was burning, again, and a lot of commentary was flying past; 'lacan dot com' was particularly quick off the mark with ads for a string of essays by Slavoj Žižek. Apart from the newspaper columns crowing that the riots showed how wrong France is to resist the full-on free trade miracle that is the 'true revolution' of our times, most Western accounts I saw made much of a contrast with 1968 and an absence of politicised revolutionary *purpose* driving the very young, racialised rioters of November 2005.

Some of my colleagues, however, linked this event to their own thinking and activism around youth and schooling issues in Hong Kong, to the almost indescribable social

turbulence of cities in mainland China and across the region, and to Larry Grossberg's *Caught in the Crossfire: Kids, Politics and America's Future*, a book which seems to be arousing more interest in Asia than in the USA. I don't know about Australia. Since Sydney had its own *banlieue* riots not too long ago, I looked up the csaa archives, hoping for a comparison. I may have missed something, but a future historian from Mars using csaa archives as a source for November 2005 might never know that the Paris riots took place, or else might conclude that Australia in this period was cut off from the world.

I don't for a moment imagine that no discussion took place. With the work of Ghassan Hage and Greg Noble immediately to hand, that's unthinkable. Academic listservs exist for professional purposes and necessarily focus on those most of the time. It's interesting, though, to see what arouses passionate interest across a group, and what does not. (The largely dormant *Traces* collective list did not wake for the Paris riots, either, although some members are very much resident in France, but it did stir for the strike at NYU). What I wonder about is rather the pertinence for Australian cultural studies of the radical history to which Simon recalls our attention. I don't think it is irrelevant but it also feels like the *wrong past* to bring immediately to bear, if what one is looking to document is the kind of change that Simon calls a 'loss'.

I'm skirting close to Simon's basic criticisms here, so let me take a deep breath and try to say exactly what I mean. While I'm pleased to see *Language, Sexuality and Subversion* included 'genealogically' now in accounts of cultural studies, I don't think that book or any of my work until little more than a decade ago had much direct impact on Australian cultural studies or played a role in its formation, apart from the sort of mutual influencing that goes on across a small society. Nor did I seek such a role at the time; "Banality in Cultural Studies", written in 1988 and enlarged in 1990, was a fairly hostile, external critique of *British* cultural populism (then exemplified for me by Iain Chambers and Mica Nava as well as John Fiske) but also of Baudrillard's work on the media.

Certainly, that piece was the beginning of an intellectual engagement. But what brought me in from the cold, as it were, in 1993 was on the one hand the international *take-up* of my work as 'cultural studies' (in particular by *Cultural Studies*, the book of the 1990 Illinois conference where I first met Graeme Turner), which, like it or not, put me on the Australian map; and on the other hand your suggestion that we co-edit an anthology of *Australian Cultural Studies* to bring in to the foundations of what was clearly an emerging academic field something of the complexity and flavour of existing local debates about culture, in which I had indeed participated.

So I don't think of Australian cultural studies as having lost an earlier critical or theoretical edge. I see its history rather as one of growing intellectual diversity and catholicity, and

not only because my work now finds a place within it. Leaving aside the exceptionally vibrant relationship to be found in Australia now between cultural studies and work in the social sciences, law, and even the sciences at times, just two examples would be the research links with indigenous studies and some strands of Asian studies, which today have a richness and a *critical* strength which was missing in the era of 'motherhood' statements by white cultural critics, predominant just fifteen years ago.

I'd have to admit that my work has changed, too. I didn't have much time in the 1980s for *AJCS* (too boring-academic) and I had a good chew in *Meanjin* on Fiske, Hodge and Turner's *Myths of Oz* (too blokey-populist). More than any other single factor over the years, Tom O'Regan's work on cultural institutions persuaded me to see the social and political potentials of intellectual work in a much more complex light, and to understand the *activist* value of affirming its variability. Tim Rowse's 'thick' histories of policy in Australia have had this effect for me, too. So when I contemplate the work that Graeme and others do with government, I don't think dismissive thoughts about functionaries and deals. I have a sense of amazement that a wild, improbable continuity has been *created* with the past, and against all the odds; it is not meant to be *possible* for humanists now to play this kind of role, and yet it has become so again. This gives me hope.

But I share Simon's unease about the Australian research funding system, because it forces young scholars from the outset to do work that the *profession* (not the government) can sign off on. There's a real incentive to dullness in a system that requires propositions to be formed from day one in conformity with what those controlling the profession at any given time regard as a well-made statement, and in this respect *conformism* is not a misplaced word to use. Conformity (the kind in which minor modifications of existing practice are valued), competence and, as you say yourself, competitiveness are the goals of any peer-review based system. However, this is not a problem with the ARC as such, which also strikes me as creative in relation to similar bodies elsewhere, but with an overall approach to university underfunding which leaves most people no alternative to the ARC route to buying 'time' for writing and research. When proving *professional* conformity becomes not only the necessary threshold of a humanities career but its ongoing substance (which is still not entirely the case in the USA or in most East Asian countries, despite the spread of the 'the Australian game' to the latter), then burble about innovation does have a technocratically hollow ring.

I also wonder if you would feel that your work has not been warped by 'the ARC system' if you were not an Anglophone primarily writing for other Anglophones. There's a polylingual dimension to the issue of what counts as 'internationally' competitive research which isn't part of this discussion, and yet it has been shaping new institution-building initiatives in cultural studies right across Asia, in Latin America and in Africa for more than a decade.

I've written a lot about this in recent years but, apart from a few individuals, Australian cultural studies collectively seems to take little interest in these globally burning issues. It seems much more *American* in that respect than it used to be.

Which brings me to revolutionary desire and expatriation. I'm no revolutionary but, *pace* Simon, I actually do still believe that semiosis and ideological practice has great power to 'de-utopianise' our political desires. In Hong Kong, where people have little else at their disposal, it is impossible to dismiss these things or to ignore the courage and persistence of those who use them to resist and oppose the 'inevitable'. I wouldn't dismiss them in Australia, either, but, in a context where *leftist* means 'pro-Beijing' (with all that this now implies of support for authoritarian, economically neo-liberal, post-revolutionary big government), and where revolutionary talk is not especially prized, it is perhaps easier to remember that while 'seriously difficult periods', in Graeme's words, can last for decades—and in Chinese time frames, for centuries, though that's too much of a stretch for me—this is not a necessary or sufficient reason for changing one's principles.

I left Australia not because things there were bad, but because things happening here are so extraordinary, so exciting, and so consequential for Australia's future. I wanted to live and work on an everyday basis in an Asian city undergoing an immense transformation, and to work with friends fighting for a liveable future in other Asian cities. This had nothing to do with conditions in Australian universities, although I wrote about those when I left. Except for five years as an ARC Senior Fellow I had never held a full-time academic job in Australia or *anywhere else* before coming to Hong Kong; I just don't enjoy most of normal academic life. True, a feeling that Australian insularity was closing in again made it easier to leave, but in Lingnan University I saw a chance to be part of a wonderful experiment in creating a whole department of cultural studies. I've loved it, and learned as intensely as I did at Paris-VIII Vincennes in the mid 1970s, and at the New South Wales Institute of Technology in the early 1980s—both of them, in fact, practical experiments in 'de-utopianising' the revolutionary desires of their day.

This is my third and longest period of 'expatriation': I lived in France in the 1970s and spent years on and off in the USA in the 1980s. While I get frustrated with what strikes me as the introversion now of much of the Australian cultural studies I read and some of the conferences I see, this is not a new experience. Australia in my lifetime has always been like that, vast in self-absorption: inside it, you embrace this by creating a cosmos of differences; outside it, you criticise by over-generalising the nation and voiding history since your departure of complex events. This may be why the *genre* of Australian expatriate complaint is so recognisable, and so irritating to inmates; to become an irritable inmate myself once again, I only have to pick up *The Road from Coorain*.³

In present circumstances, though, Simon's affirmation of the worldly need for exploring 'intellectual traditions and contexts outside and between conventionally conceived national interests and management mechanisms' seems life-preserving to me, although I cannot say with confidence that this kind of exploration is less practised in Australia now than it was, and I *can* say for sure that Australia is not the only country where such a call needs making. Anyone irritated by insularity and national self-regard should take a deep, calming breath before attending a cultural studies conference featuring, say, intellectuals from mainland China and in particular from Beijing.

I also doubt that there is a special virtue to expatriation that makes this term a good metaphor of the deep necessities Simon invokes. (Not least because the *linguistic* expatriation forced on most of the world by the Anglocentric 'international' system is a rising pressure towards cultural nationalism and 'civilisationalism', especially among Latin American, Chinese and Korean scholars.) In another circling-back, I have just been revising for a book an essay I wrote in 1991 in response to a piece by John Hartley on 'Expatriation: Useful Astonishment in Cultural Studies'. John was thinking of disciplinary displacements as well as multicultural social realities at the time, and I was fretting about 'white settlers' and their disgruntlement. I still argue today, though, that it does not help to *over-extend* 'expatriation' as a model for cultural practice, when relations between communities inhabiting a nation are every bit as complex to explore (in terms of traditions and contexts) as those relations we call 'trans-' and 'inter-' national. Thinking about translation is more useful, because it allows us to handle difficulties arising from institutional differences as well. But that's a subject for another exchange.

-
1. <<http://lists.cdu.edu.au/pipermail/csaa-forum>>.
 2. John Frow and Meaghan Morris (eds), *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign, p. xiv.
 3. Jill Ker Conway, *The Road from Coorian*, Random House, Sydney, 1990.