

CATHARINE LUMBY

## democratising cultural studies

JOHN HARTLEY

*A Short History of Cultural Studies*

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Shortly after John Hartley published *A Short History of Cultural Studies*, I was invited to give a lecture about his work in a lecture series titled Key Thinkers organised by the Research Institute for the Humanities at Sydney University. Most of the other thinkers chosen for the series were French and dead. Hartley is, of course, English and very much alive, and the question of whether he should get a guernsey as one of media and cultural studies seminal thinkers is still a matter of debate in some quarters. At the conclusion of my talk, a young man who I took to be a postgraduate student got up and congratulated me on making a persuasive case for the importance of Hartley's ideas. There was, however, one thing which continued to worry him, he said. Wouldn't I agree that Hartley was a little *too* optimistic? And didn't this optimism suggest a lack of critical distance in his work?

It's a response that crystallises, to the point of caricature, an anxiety that has animated debate in cultural studies since its inception(s). It's an anxiety of both influence and relation. And it's one that Hartley characterises in terms of a key dialogue in the field, a dialogue between the 'struggle' and the 'democratisation' strands. He writes of the latter: 'It was less concerned with governability than with emancipation; less interested in class antagonism than in the productive capacity of cultural systems; less interested in governmentality than in the media as vehicles for the extension of "cultural citizenship"'. (33) He puts his own work, along with that of Richard Hoggart, Meaghan Morris and John Fiske, in this camp. Stuart Hall and Tony Bennett are relegated to the other.

The author now of a dozen books in the media and cultural studies arena, Hartley was never going to pen a polite and submissive homage to heavy hitters in the field. Despite his claim that 'the book is not offered as a personal position, nor does it seek to argue towards positions with which I agree', it's clear from the opening pages that the real strengths of Hartley's history lie in his intimate familiarity with the origins and outcomes of debates in the field and in the book's diagnostic dimensions.

(6) None of which is meant to deny that the author has set out to offer a genuinely broad-minded account of what he sees as the key debates, figures and controversies that have shaped the field, but rather to acknowledge that the combination of Hartley's participant observer status and his highly original and confident authorial voice always guaranteed a history which is oriented as much around a desire to frame the future of the field as it is around a desire to offer an account of its past.

Any history of cultural studies is necessarily controversial because it presumes to impose retrospective linear unity (or, worse, draw universal truths) from a field that is grounded in self-reflexive flux. Hartley's response to this obvious trap is to set off in pursuit of a series of different histories in the same book—and rather than doing this in the conventional way, by arranging his chapters in either chronological or conceptual terms, he does it by tracing his histories in relation to broad intersecting bodies of knowledge and practice: literary criticism; theories of mass society; art history; political economy; feminism, anthropology and

sociology; pedagogy; and publishing. Each provides the author with an opportunity to explore overlapping historical tensions in the history of ideas about culture, power, difference and identity. It's an approach that allows him to map the evolution of debates around these terms in a way that draws underlying individual, disciplinary, political and institutional investments to the surface. It's a history, in this sense, which genuinely sets out to map discourse, rather than a set of abstract ideas.

Hartley has always been a writer who is just as interested in what media texts and audiences can tell us about academic theory and practice, as in what academics have to say about media texts and audiences. Throughout this book, he moves between critical theory and its outside, showing how shifts in academic thought and practice are often responsive to the same economic and social forces that shape other forms of culture and bodies of knowledge. So a discussion of the rise of semiotics and structuralism and the attendant interest in discourses segues into a discussion of cooking shows and the way people have become more interested in the vocabulary of cooking than in its actual practice. In a related vein, his discussion of the rise of cultural studies examines the key role of the political economy, as well as the role of publisher Allen Lane, through both his indirect activities as a democratising force in the knowledge economy and his direct capital funding of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

This concern to articulate the relationship between cultural studies and culture in its

broadest sense leads Hartley to include an array of writers, thinkers and cultural practices you are unlikely to find in any other work mapping the field. Thus, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Paine, El Lissitzky, Tom Wolfe, Kate Moss and Mrs Isabella Beaton all get cameos as unwitting collaborators in the enterprise of cultural studies. The introduction of surprise guests isn't the only sense in which Hartley's history takes a crowbar to the cultural studies canon—the book also offers a sustained critique of Stuart Hall and, implicitly, of the pre-eminent role his work has been assigned by a number of key commentators in the field. Ultimately, Hartley argues Hall's relationship to popular culture was one of 'brutal disavowal'—he did not believe 'culture was a worthy object of study for anything intrinsic to it, but because it was the place where "socialism might be constituted"'. (104) Undoubtedly, part of the reason Hartley embarked on this history was to throw light on the roots of what he calls the 'democratisation' strand or school—a school, whose British origins he locates in Cardiff and whose progenitors were S.L. Bethell and Terence Hawkes.

Compelling as this re-tilling of established conceptual ground is, the real revelations in Hartley's book lie in the relentlessly original connections he makes between knowledge and the forms and means through which it circulates. In Hartley's hands, cultural studies is never just a set of ideas, it is a set of cultural practices, pursuits and products that inform and shape theory in the very moment cultural studies claims to interrogate them. For Hartley, cultural studies is a 'philosophy of plenty'—the key to its project, in all its various guises, is the

democratisation of both knowledge and the cultural domain itself. It's an emphasis that will undoubtedly worry readers who equate critical acuity with the maintenance of a studied pessimism about one's object of study. But for this reader, and no doubt many others, *A Short History of Cultural Studies* will prove a seminal text for its author's erudition, wit and unmatched ability to re-embed abstract concepts and debates where they belong—in rich historical, political and cultural contexts.

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