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BOOK REVIEW

Cultural Studies: Not Drowning but Waving?

Gilbert B. Rodman. 2015, *Why Cultural Studies?*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester. ISBN 9781405127974. RRP AU\$44.95 (pb)

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There is now an extensive back catalogue of essays, monographs and conference presentations addressing how the cultural studies project is losing its way and what needs to be done to get things back on track. The most recent addition to the discourse of the concerned is Gilbert B. Rodman's book-length polemic *Why Cultural Studies?* Arriving in the wake of Lawrence Grossberg's *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Duke, 2010) and Graeme Turner's *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* (Sage, 2012), Rodman's book is a sustained deliberation on the issues that continue to frame cultural studies as in crisis: disciplinarity, pedagogy, politics, the role of theory, institutionalisation and internationalisation. One would expect Rodman, a former president of the Association of Cultural Studies and the founding manager of the CULTSTUD online list, to bring a global perspective to these issues but the book has a 'US slant' to it by design. (xvi) According to Rodman, the cultural studies project is too diverse and widespread for him to provide a truly global perspective. More contentiously, he justifies the US slant by arguing 'that whatever happens in, to, or with US cultural studies somehow matters to other regional/national formations of cultural studies in ways that are rarely (if ever) true in reverse'. (xvi) This US centrism jars with Rodman's own point that the cultural studies project, particularly in its North American iteration, hasn't internationalised enough but urgently needs to do so. Throughout, Rodman's engagement with those who Ariel Heryanto has recently dubbed cultural studies' 'significant others' is sparse, as if the role of being a senior spokesperson in the field meant neglecting to better accommodate how a 'politics of listening' might be as important as a politics of voice in the process of decolonising a discipline.¹

¹ Ariel Heryanto, 'Cultural Studies' Significant Others: The Case for Indonesia', *Antropologi Indonesia*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2005, pp. 1-15.

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To answer why cultural studies continues to matter it is necessary to take into account multiple global-local contexts, as difficult as that may be. The endeavours now bracketed under the banners of inter-Asia cultural studies, South and Central American cultural studies, and African cultural studies all have lessons for the cultural studies project in general, as demonstrated by numerous recent volumes, but Rodman gives these little attention.² Rodman is also very spare in his engagement with the important feminist discourse that has shaped the cultural studies project since the 1970s, and he does not engage in depth with newer cultural studies practitioners who conceive themselves as activists. My point is that the caveat provided by Rodman doesn't suffice: the relevance of cultural studies cannot be settled without a more inclusive discourse than provided in this book.

It is not that Rodman is complacent about the state of US cultural studies. Rather, he argues that cultural studies is being made 'safe and harmless' (165) as efforts continue to make it fit the academy. Institutionalisation is pacifying cultural studies as it becomes 'just another major' for undergraduate students concerned with degree certification and job prospects. Further dilution of the cultural studies project occurs, he argues, as non-practitioners make use of the cultural studies label. According to Rodman, much of what is now called 'cultural studies' isn't 'cultural studies at all' (6) and he encourages accredited practitioners to police against this tendency when reviewing manuscripts and journal articles. This advocacy of professional gatekeeping seems at odds, however, with his critique of institutionalisation wherein professionalisation is woven through a tapestry of neoliberal appointment, funding and promotion mechanisms. In Rodman's diagnostic, there is now a 'careerism' endemic to the cultural studies project that was previously 'allergic to such'. (151) Another consequence of concerted efforts to make cultural studies fit the disciplinary model of the university is the marginalisation of amateur practitioners 'in activist groups, alternative media, arts quarters, community centres, galleries, museums, nonprofit organisations, policy centres, political movements, think tanks, and so on'. (54) The energy and impact that collaborations between academics and non-academics generate is consequently diminished in favour of an over-emphasis on intellectual-theoretical work at the expense of the 'political side of the project'. (41) Rodman concludes that its current institutional conditions make it more difficult than ever to sustain the political imperative at the core of the cultural studies project. According to Rodman there is a need to disarticulate from the contemporary academy. This isn't to say that cultural studies should not be part of the university but, as Rodman puts it, we shouldn't 'assume that the primary (much less the only) path for cultural studies runs through the university'. (60) As many readers will recognise, Rodman's position contrasts with that of Turner who argues that institutionalisation provides a pragmatic way for ensuring the cultural studies project continues.

Given the institutional figurehead he has become, it is refreshing to see Rodman underline the value and importance of para-academic cultural studies practice and collaborations between those who are part of the academy and those who are not. While Rodman makes the point that knowledge production happens both within and outside the university, some of his examples seem somewhat dated if not nostalgic. He tends to look in the rear view mirror to see how the cultural studies project used to be rather than looking forward. Thus we

² See Myungkoo Kang, 'There Is No South Korea in South Korean Cultural Studies: Beyond the Colonial Condition of Knowledge Production', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2004, pp. 253–68; Meaghan Morris, 'Decolonising Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Fred Chiu', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2002, pp. 27–32; and Kuan-Hsing Chen, 'Introduction: The Decolonizing Question', in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 1–56.

read about the historic role of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham and the significance of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, Kenya, but not about Lisa Yuk-ming Leung and John Nguyet Erni's current work on minorities in Hong Kong which brings together community groups, students, street politics, activists and creatives.³ Similarly, besides a mention of Melissa Gregg, who now works outside the academy for Intel Corporation, Rodman provides little discussion of new cultural studies practitioners who operate in the belly of the beast or in the context of organisations dedicated to refugee rights, sexual ethics, gender equity, peace, postcolonialism, disability rights, ethical consumption, fairer labour conditions, environmental causes, ethical human-animal relations, free movement of peoples, sovereignty rights, human rights, legal change, safe spaces or any number of identity issues.

At one point Rodman singles out undergraduate students, particularly those in the United States, as not really at a stage whereby they can adequately engage with 'prickly questions of cultural politics, social justice, and radical democracy' or 'understand their education in ways that lead to the sort of passionate and disciplined commitments that characterise the best work in cultural studies'. (93–4) This reflection occurs in the context of lamenting the number of 'how to do cultural studies' textbooks being put out by publishing houses but nonetheless comes close to a dismissal of students and their importance to the cultural studies project. As an observation it runs counter to my own experience watching cultural studies students take part in the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Although readers can no doubt supply their own examples, I'm also aware of cultural studies students and para-academic practitioners fighting against refugee persecution in Australian offshore detention facilities—read concentration camps—on the Pacific islands of Manus (Papua New Guinea) and Nauru. In the United Kingdom my own students have worked with the Worker's Education Association, a nation-wide volunteer-run adult education project targeting those from the most deprived areas that would have been familiar to Raymond Williams and other first-generation cultural studies folk. I also regularly visit the website of the KUNCI Cultural Studies Centre in Indonesia to find out how the cultural studies project is globally morphing through various student-led initiatives.

Although Rodman insists that younger scholars were 'the leading edge of cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s' (104) he now points to the lack of new scholar impact in certain canonical academic journals. At one point he writes: 'Young scholars who claim "cultural studies" as their intellectual home are much more likely to be supplicants at the holy altars of gainful employment and tenure than they are to be major (or even minor) players in reshaping cultural studies for the future.' (104) But why look in institutionally privileged journals that thrive in a publish-or-perish regime for signs of change? What of those on the streets who are too busy to be worried about evaluative ranking mechanisms and the tabulation of research outputs under a cultural studies code?

Rodman insists on the critical pedagogy at the heart of the cultural studies project and the identification of a 'more common object of explicit discussion, analysis, debate, and/or theorisation'. (176) Following the work of Paulo Friere, Rodman insists that cultural studies unfolds as 'a radical, liberatory and (most crucially) dialogic process between "teachers" and "students"'. (57) Though Rodman provides no empirical evidence to back up this claim, I can think of exemplary instances to be found outside the United States. In the cultural studies program at Southern Cross University, a regional public university in Australia, Baden

³ John Nguyet Erni and Lisa Yuk-ming Leung, *Understanding South Asian Minorities in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2014.

Offord has co-developed a ‘bespoke cultural studies pedagogy’ that draws upon the ‘cultural knowledges and experience of its students’ in order to tackle global and local human rights, social justice, settler and Indigenous matters, and environmental/non-human wellbeing issues.⁴ The Southern Cross model reflects Turner’s insistence on the ‘integration of the student’s own cultural capital’ into the cultural studies classroom (Turner, 77). The term ‘bespoke’ articulates the relation between local conditions of possibility and wider liberatory politics, rights and ethics that activate an ethical sensibility and process of self-transformation that is focused on creating and proliferating cooperative ways of being in the world. This position sits well with Rodman’s call to understand cultural studies as not only a discipline but a ‘calling’ and ‘being in the world’ that cannot be accomplished by theory alone or by treating politics ‘as if it were a secondary concern’. (61, 42)

Certainly Rodman’s argument against the ‘fetishisation of Theory’ resonates with me, as does his point that cultural studies needs to be ‘driven forward by questions arising from “real world” political struggles’. (173, 52) As a community-activist I often work with people outside the academy who, when they come into contact with excessive theorisation, tend to apply a reality check and ask: ‘Well, how’s that *actually* going to work?’ In addition to theoretical reflection, one of the functions of cultural studies as I now conceive it is to imbue students with a canny sense of how to undertake political-activist-creative work outside the university. At the same time we must address issues of social justice, sexism, work exploitation, environmental awareness, animal welfare, racism, classism, ethics and equity within the very institution the cultural studies project has been absorbed into. Although Rodman points to Edward Said’s contention that an intellectual can manage ‘to work within an institution without actually becoming a creature of that institution’ (171) there is little practical advice about how to maintain this distinction.

Regardless of whether the target of critique is intra- or extra-institutional, Rodman insists that, given its history and conceptual tools, the cultural studies project is ‘squarely in the territory of the left’. (43–4) Although the progressive class and race politics that traditionally defined the ‘territory of the left’ has now expanded to include ‘feminism, environmentalism, anti-racism, and so on’ (45), the leftism of cultural studies isn’t as straightforward as Rodman presents it. I am thinking in particular of what Duane Rouselle refers to as the ‘anarchist developments in cultural studies’.⁵ Perhaps we could start to reconceive cultural studies via a new language that abandons the legacy framework of left versus right model in favour of bell hooks’s feminist-inspired love ethic. As hooks explains

*All the great social movements for freedom and justice in our society have promoted a love ethic ... Were a love ethic informing all public policy in cities and towns, individuals would come together and map out programmes that would affect the good of everyone.*⁶

Is the future of the cultural studies project in the territory of love? That is something worth thinking about.

Like most of us, Rodman wants cultural studies to once again aim to ‘agitate, provoke, disturb, and unsettle’. (2) In the final chapter, he offers up nine suggestions in a manifesto of sorts but, like many manifestos, this is one is short on pragmatic advice. By the end of

⁴ Baden Offord, ‘Ramping Up Cultural Studies: Pedagogy and the Activation of Knowledge’, in *The Pedagogies of Cultural Studies*, ed. Andrew Hickey, Routledge, London and New York, 2016, pp. 51–70. Baden Offord is now at the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University, Western Australia.

⁵ Duane Rouselle, *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, <http://www.anarchist-developments.org/>.

⁶ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*, HarperCollins, New York, 2001, p. 98.

the book I felt that such advice was needed. To find it, we need to look elsewhere. A useful alternative to the discourse of the concerned can be found in the work of the two economic geographers who go by the joint name J. K. Gibson-Graham. In *A Postcapitalist Politics* they provide an exemplary pragmatic approach to a cultural studies project that is conceived as both unified and multiple.⁷ Unified and multiple in the authorial domain, Gibson-Graham interrogate in detail the how, what, where, why and when engaged by various local projects around the world that build toward alternative ethical futures. While Gibson-Graham aren't strictly cultural studies folk, they sure do get to the nitty gritty of showing the rest of us how to do intellectual and political work in the cultural sphere. Their example suggests that, rather than focus on what everyone else is doing wrong, perhaps if we pay better attention to cultural studies' significant others and concentrate on and share what is being done well we will collectively maintain enthusiasm, passion and energy for a cultural studies project that is not drowning but is actually waving.

About the author

Clifton Evers is a lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Newcastle University. His research interests include gender (particularly masculinity), mobile media, action/lifestyle sports, space, bodies and emotion.

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⁷ J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006.