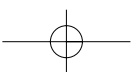
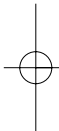
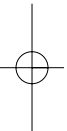


Cultural Studies



Cultural Studies
Theory and Practice

3rd edition
Chris Barker

with a foreword by Paul Willis

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Foreword

Paul Willis

'Culture' is a strange and capacious category. It's one of those concepts, perhaps the best example, that we simply cannot do without – it is used everywhere – but which is also very unsatisfactory and cries out for betterment. No one can define it exactly, say what it 'really' means. That's partly why it's so useful of course, because we can always say later we meant something slightly different whilst getting on for now saying something nearly right of great importance. So many things are contained in the word.

At an everyday and human level, cultural interests, pursuits and identities have never been more important. This has to be broadly considered, of course, as individuals and groups bearing a felt responsibility for and wanting a hand in the making of the self as something more than a passive or unconscious acceptance of a historically/socially prescribed identity (simply *being* working class, black or white, young or old, etc.). Everyone wants to have, or make, or be considered as possessing cultural *significance*. No one knows what the social maps are any more, so it is more important not be left out, overlooked or misrepresented. Everyone wants a stake in the action, though no one is quite sure where the party is.

At the same time and in a connected way, 'culture' has become an important and much used theoretical and substantive category of connection and relation. Both in academic and popular writing and commentary we see countless references to 'cultures of ... schools, organizations, pubs, regions, sexual orientations, ethnicities, etc.' You name it and you can add, 'culture of ...'. All those evoked domains of 'culture' are seen as containing a multiplicity of human forms and relations: from micro-interpersonal interactions to group norms processes and values to communicative forms, provided texts and images; wider out to institutional forms and constraints, to social representations and social imagery; wider out still to economic, political, ideological determinations. All can be traced back for their cultural effects and meanings, all traced for their mutual interactions

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from the point of view of how the meanings of a particular 'culture' are formed and held to operate.

Small wonder, then, that the mode of academic enquiry that seeks to comprehend some of this, 'cultural studies', should be a field of at times intractable complexity and perhaps the first great academic experiment in the attempted formation of a 'non-disciplinary' discipline. No single approach can hope to comprehend the above in one sweep; no one sweep producing some partial understanding can fail to notice what other sweeps might produce. We are condemned to a kind of eclecticism because of the very eclecticism and indissoluble combinations of the dissimilar in the increasingly complex 'real' world around us.

Whatever its complexity and disputed origins, cultural studies is now coming, perhaps, to a kind of maturity, a special kind of maturity, of course, in light of the above: the coming to majority of the first of the 'non-disciplinary' disciplines! Clearly we need new measures of maturity. The fullest test of maturity will be whether cultural studies is to be without discipline (bad), or capable of avoiding the pitfalls and really exploiting the advantages of 'postdisciplinarity' (good) to produce genuinely new and 'connected-up' knowledge. Previous cultural studies textbooks have made worthy and illuminating attempts to give a history of the subject, to plot its growth through successive waves of new thought and critique. But that kind of narration cannot give the essence of the nature of cultural studies' ambition to found a new disciplinarity of the disciplines. For in this endeavour even a notion of 'multidisciplinarity', of the tracing of multiple linear paths, will not really do. What is needed is openness to and choice from strands (both past and present) within and between inherited fields of method, enquiry and theory. Their ability to illuminate complex empirical subjects of study, rather than their conformity to the particular tests and procedures of founding academic traditions, should govern these choices. Though welcome, it is hardly surprising that the early 'textbook' attempts to chart 'a cultural studies discipline' through a historical route should have engendered their own towers of Babel, combusting with fierce debate and bad-tempered rivalries over true ownership and alternative myths of origin.

Chris Barker has pioneered a new and promising course. Clearly and coherently expressed, it is likely to be an exceptionally useful one for those confronting the undoubted difficulties of teaching cultural studies and cultural studies approaches. Rather than attempting to show another version of the provenance of cultural studies, he has plumped for breadth and the collecting together of relevant theoretical and empirical strands, from wherever they might come. He presents a whole cluster of modern perspectives judged for their usefulness to the understanding of contemporary cultural forms. In doing this, Chris Barker certainly draws from theorists and writers who would not necessarily situate themselves in cultural studies, thereby providing a whole range of theoretical resources, methodological options and empirical connections which are useful for the understanding of any particular focus and which far outstrip those available in

any one traditional discipline. This leads him to grapple with deeper and more serious concerns than would a conventional 'introduction to ...'. In reverse direction, it might be noted that the variable and contested importation of cultural studies' perspectives into other disciplines and domains shows their own struggle, from their own positions and histories, to achieve greater adequacy and purchase in comprehending multifaceted and ruptural cultural change. There is, of course, no guarantee that cultural studies will indeed be the privileged site for the emergence of a discipline of the disciplines, or even that, though necessary, the latter is even possible. There are and certainly will be other contenders.

However, Chris Barker has made a bold thrust to grab the prize. I was particularly impressed by the sections on contemporary issues and problematics – 'World Disorder', 'Sex and Subjectivity', 'Space', 'Cultural Policy', as well as the more well-trodden ones of 'Identity', 'Youth Culture', 'Television', 'Ethnicity and Race' – which reveal some concrete grounds of a complex and rapidly changing 'real' world within which all approaches must now situate themselves if they hope to contend with the contradictory currents of contemporary change. At the same time, though, these connected 'sites' are presented in selected theoretical contexts of what has gone before and in the light of a constellation of theoretical insights, 'cultural studies' or not, which help to illuminate, connect and place them.

One of the crucial issues in trying to produce a textbook for a (first-stage) mature cultural studies is to find and argue for a supra-disciplinary base, a loose coherence of connecting tissue or metaphor, which is capable of anchoring a principled eclecticism (rather than a theoretical anarchism) whilst still retaining a wide empirical grasp. Here I have an uncertainty or perhaps lack of competence in judging Chris Barker's path. Although a colleague and a friend, certainly honoured in the asking, I was in some ways a strange choice to be invited to provide this Foreword. I have been (rightly) generally associated with an ethnographic/qualitative approach and (misleadingly) associated with a 'culturalist' formation within cultural studies, both of which are granted important but only finally subordinate status within this book. Like Chris Barker, I am not fussed about disciplinary boundaries, less fussed than he is actually about the privileged status of cultural studies, but I would seek to ground the complex, unwieldy and weighty category of 'culture' ultimately upon notions of 'experience' and 'practice', sensuously understood and (ethnographically) studied.* Contrastingly, Chris Barker proposes a 'language-game' account of the 'discursive formation' of cultural studies, seeing all cultural forms as structured like language, and ends, tellingly, with a Rortian emphasis on pragmatism within cultural studies as that which can influence 'reality', 'learning how best to cope with the world', but in no way 'reflecting' it. I have doubts about a model derived from language

* See issues of the Sage journal *Ethnography*, edited by myself and Mats Trondman, and *The Ethnographic Imagination* (Willis, P. [ed.] (2000), Cambridge Polity Press).

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for understanding sensuous aspects of experience and lived practice, and cannot wean myself from a notion that in order to change reality, something of its actual music must first somehow be recorded and appreciated (ethnographically) in its own terms, even as, learning from Chris Barker, 'fractured subjects' and 'anti-essentialism' must hold some sway in how this is understood and presented.

Chris Barker wants his book to engender debate. It's worked already! I have learned a great deal from this book and respect its breadth and fairness, as well as finding points of difference and new departure for my own thinking. There is much here to help me develop more adequacy and elegance in my own work, continuous with and by no means contradicting that of Chris Barker. There is an excellent basis and framework here to help teachers lead students to an understanding of the necessary ambition of the cultural studies project and to make their own *informed and knowledgeable* decisions about how to approach and understand the importance, fullness, variety and pace of contemporary cultural change.