Reading Theory: Toward a Comparative Cultural Studies. *A Review Article*

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Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory, edited by Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

The Cultural Studies Reader, edited by Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings, edited by Charles Lemert (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1993).

Perhaps no cultural artefact is more characteristic of recent work at the boundary of the humanities and social sciences than the theory reader: that assemblage of texts, some left whole and others dramatically abridged, that offers itself up as a guide to, a condensation of, and a program for an emergent field of scholarly practice. In postcolonial studies, feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, science studies (the ubiquity of the suffix "studies" is already telling), readers promise to map terrains, trace genealogies, equip toolkits—to make possible research and teaching that move across the divides of disciplines and genres. The field of cultural studies has proven particularly fertile ground for the anthology; only readers, perhaps, can make visible both its dynamism and open-endedness, while acknowledging the privileged place it accords the theoretical essay.[1]

[1] Since the publication of *Cultural Studies,* which grew out of a 1990 conference at the University of Illinois, there has been a steady production of edited volumes. See Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Houston Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindeborg, eds., *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Martin Barker and Anne Beezer, eds., *Reading into Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Valda Blundell, John Shepherd, and Ian Taylor, eds., *Relocating Cultural Studies: Developments in Theory and Research* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Chris Newbold, eds., *Approaches to Media: A Reader* (New York: Arnold, 1995); Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, eds., *Cultural Remix: Theories of Politics and the Popular* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995); Gail Dines and Jean Humez, eds., *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995); Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan, eds., *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); John Frow and Meaghan Morris, eds., *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press,

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Indeed, the production of readers responds to a change in academic writing practices: a partial displacement of the monograph as the site for certain kinds of theory work. It also responds, however, to the new demands placed on reading subjects by the erosion of disciplinary boundaries and to the suspicion (shared by faculty and students) that one can never read widely enough. Anthologies—and the photocopied course packs that stand in for them and cannibalize them—are in turn working to transform practices of reading and writing, perhaps in ways that have yet to become visible. Students have become adept at negotiating and reproducing the shifts in vocabularies, rhetorics, and problematics that these collections enable—whether they are also helped to come to terms with, let alone produce, more sustained kinds of analysis remains an open question.

Here I want to confine myself to thinking about the work done by three texts that operate at intersections of social and cultural theory: One offers a historical survey of social theory; one weaves together the multiple strands of cultural studies; one builds from the useful debris of the disciplines. However, none of the three volumes, which assemble previously published materials, functions simply by mapping a terrain from a particular vantage point. Each also participates in the *construction* of spaces for scholarship and in the making of new knowledge. Each generates precisely the kinds of productive tensions, disruptions, and collisions that have tended to characterize post-disciplinary work as it carves out its spaces in the academy and beyond. Despite their differences, the three anthologies also tell similar stories about the fate of theory's objects. They suggest a certain crisis of the category of "the social" and point toward its displacement by "the cultural" at a particular historical moment and in relation to particular forms of power. Taken together, the volumes suggest a movement toward a cultural studies that is both comparative and transnational.

Charles Lemert's *Social Theory: The Classic and Multicultural Readings* is the most ambitious of the three collections; it is also (and perhaps inevitably) the most unsatisfying. This reader assembles excerpts, sometimes very brief other times longer, of texts by some eighty-nine authors. Sociologist Lemert works to juxtapose the writings of the "great official social theorists" (Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud), those of the "great but ignored" (W. E. B. Du Bois, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna Julia Cooper), and a wide variety of more recent work (from Immanuel Wallerstein and Theda Skocpol to Gloria Anzaldúa and Trinh Minh-ha). The texts are grouped

1993); Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan, *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Arnold, 1993); Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991); Jessica Munns and Gita Rajan, eds., *A Cultural Studies Reader: History, Theory, Practice* (New York: Longman, 1995); Paddy Scannell, Philip Schlesinger, and Colin Sparks, eds., *Culture and Power: A Media, Culture and Society Reader* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1992); John Storey, ed., *What is Cultural Studies?: A Reader* (New York: Arnold, 1996).

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into five chronological periods, beginning with "Modernity's Classical Age: 1848–1919" and ending with "After Modernity, Since 1979." Lemert introduces each section and each author and provides an orienting essay on "Social Theory: Its Uses and Pleasures."

As the title of the introduction suggests, Lemert means his volume to be both practically useful (in and outside the classroom) and a source of varied pleasures. Some readers are bound to quarrel with the editor's choices and with his criteria for what gets to count as a "classic" (pp. 25–33), but the book's table of contents promises a breathtaking tour of work in political economy, sociology, psychology, feminist studies, postcolonial theory, and, in a more limited way, cultural studies. John Kenneth Galbraith is set alongside Jürgen Habermas; Mao is placed between Gandhi and Ruth Benedict; Molefi Asante's piece on Afrocentrism is followed by Jeffrey Alexander's "Post-positivist Case for the Classics." However, the brevity of the selections that make up the volume raises a number of questions—not only about what would count as an "adequate" introduction to Durkheim, Weber, Jean-François Lyotard, or Gayatri Spivak[2]—but also, and more broadly, about what it means to do social theory.

For Lemert, social theory is a way of coming to terms with the world, a "basic survival skill" of humans that is mobilized particularly in moments of "social disruption" (p. 11). Although some in the academy may theorize for a living, everybody can and does do it; and Lemert deploys engaging anecdotes to make his case. He locates the emergence of "professional" social theory in the culture of the Enlightenment (indeed, he argues more broadly that cultures "engender" modes of theorizing) and identifies its chief problematic as a coming to terms with the (Western) modern. Today, in the wake of the 1960s, Lemert sees new spaces being created for lay and marginalized theories: "At the end of the nineteenth century," he writes, "social theory was chiefly done by experts; today, even the experts pay closer attention to what some might call everyday-life social theory" (p. 7).

If Lemert's account captures the rise and fall of certain kinds of professional (and lay) practice, it is less clear on what it has meant, or might still mean, to theorize the *social*—that peculiar object of knowledge and power that emerged in the nineteenth century.[3] Indeed, the specificity of social theory (in relation, say, to political theory, or literary theory, or cultural theory) remains elusive in all but a few of the selected texts. We are not helped, in this respect,

[2] Lemert writes in a postface, "Final Notes: Where Does Reading End?," that he would ask students to supplement his collection by reading the whole of *The Protestant Ethic* or *Souls of Black Folk* (p. 663).

[3] On the emergence of "the social" see Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (New York Pantheon, 1979), and especially the preface by Gilles Deleuze; François Ewald, *L'Etat providence* (Paris: Grasset, 1986); Giovanna Procacci, "L'economia sociale ed il governo della miseria," *Aut aut*, 167–8:63–80; Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

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by Lemert's surprising insistence that social theory be "distinct from the formal theories of social sciences and official policymaking" (p. 15). To be fair, Lemert wants to make visible the critical (at times heroic) qualities of social theory and to hear it as "talk rooted in the common experiences of those least able to avoid the consequences of social disruption" (p. 15). But the claim that social theory stands apart may also enable deforming readings: It allows it to appear logical, even easy, to separate the preface and conclusions of Durkheim's *Suicide* (which get to count as "theory") from all the practices of quantification and the rhetorical tactics that Durkheim deployed to construct the social as a stable domain of knowledge and intervention. And we are also able to imagine that this interrogation of a "social pathology" occurred outside efforts to govern populations.

More broadly, *Social Theory* and other readers like it[4] make it difficult to grasp the nature of the varied projects undertaken by the authors they collect. The brief selections have a way of flattening differences (between articles and book chapters, polemics and research proposals, case studies and theoretical essays). After reading the selected passages from Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, it is all but impossible to understand why he would be moved to also write volumes on Judaism and the religions of China and India: The stakes of such a comparative project remain invisible. And the excision of most internal references in more recent selections frustrates efforts to situate the texts in relation to disciplinary boundaries, unfolding debates, and emergent paradigms.

In sum, the construction of Lemert's volume makes it difficult to see how much modes of theorizing were linked to the construction of new objects, whether the ego, the social body, gender, or postcoloniality. Indeed, by the end of the volume, the social appears to have largely been displaced by the cultural; but we see only glimpses of the work that was required to produce this and other shifts in objects—for example, from organic bodies to cyborgs (Donna Haraway), from the politics of class to the "new cultural politics of identity" (Cornel West). Here, too, we need to ask about the conditions that have favored the decline of "the social" and the emergence of "the cultural" as a theory object.[5] What, for example, might the emergence of programs of *cultural* studies have to do with the transfigurations of the nation, the corporation, and the university?[6]

[4] See, for example, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995). For readers on postcolonial theory that resist this flattening, see Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, eds., *Colonial Discourse, Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

[5] See, for example, Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale: une chronique du salariat* (Paris: Fayard, 1995) and Pierre Rosanvallon, *La nouvelle question sociale: Repenser l'état providence* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).

[6] For a provocative discussion of what is at stake in theorizing the cultural in the university of

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The Cultural Studies Reader, edited by Simon During, begins to ask these and other questions. In During's view, cultural studies now functions as a "transnational discipline," but its history is one of shifting centers of gravity and troubled problematics. During, who teaches cultural studies at Melbourne, traces the field (in what is by now a conventional move) to two founding texts—Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*—and to an institutional locus, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.[7] He argues that, at its inception, cultural studies was characterized less by its materialist theory of culture than by its attention to "the subjective" and by its engaged forms of analysis. But if cultural studies began as a sociological project that focused on the everyday lives and experiences of British workers, it quickly became something more, something different, taking up broad explorations of culture's political functions and offering critiques of culture's hegemonic effects.

In a spirit that typifies much (early) work in the field, During is at pains to read projects of cultural study (in and outside the academy) in relation to economic crises and political realignments.[8] But he also highlights the transforming encounters of the Birmingham School with feminist and antiracist theory and with projects of postcolonial studies. He traces a number of important displacements of the field's center: from working class cultures to constructions of identity and difference, from critiques of mass culture to engagements with the popular, from the local to the global, from theory to ethnography. For During, cultural studies now embraces a series of overlapping projects: the affirmation of "other" ways of life on their own terms (p. 15), celebratory readings of commercial culture ("cultural populism") (p. 17), and "cultural policy studies" (p. 18). During works hard to fit a wide variety of work under the cultural studies umbrella, as when he traces a branch of cultural policy studies back to Foucault, whose work is remarkable for its silence on questions of "culture." But During helps us to make sense of the fact that many who are "in" cultural studies are engaged in noisy dialogue with Foucault and other French scholars.

The polysemous and multinational thing that, for During, cultural studies has become is revealed by the texts he assembles (some are edited to make

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the late twentieth century, see Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[7] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958). Compare the origin stories told by Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October,* 53 (Summer 1990), 11–23 and Lawrence Grossberg, "The Formations of Cultural Studies: An American in Birmingham," *Relocating Cultural Studies* (Summer 1990), 21–66.

[8] During is particularly fascinated by the relations between the triumph of Thatcherism and cultural studies' re-orientation toward the "culture of difference." Culture is newly theorized at precisely the moment that Thatcher announces that "there is no such thing as 'society'" (p. 13). Compare Marilyn Strathern's discussion in *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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them more "accessible"). We move from cultural studies patriarchs Williams and Stuart Hall to feminist theorists Teresa de Lauretis and Michelle Wallace. During's collection is not, however, bound by the historical framework of his introduction; instead, it is more playful and enables a number of different readings. The texts are organized thematically ("Space and Time," "Sexuality," "Leisure," "Media"), and the groupings sometimes produce pleasant surprises. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's famous criticism of the culture industry introduces a section on "Theory and Method" that also includes James Clifford's "On Collecting Art and Culture" and Roland Barthes' "Dominici, or the Triumph of Literature"; a section on "Carnival and Utopia" brings together Richard Dyer's influential piece on the Hollywood musical with a chapter from Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics and Transgression.* Several of the selections approach the status of canon (Hall on "Encoding, Decoding"; Eve Sedgewick's "Axiomatic"); others are unexpected. We are treated to an interview with Foucault on modern architecture ("Space, Knowledge, Power") and a piece by Pierre Bourdieu on being a sports fan. Each selection is preceded by a brief editor's introduction that works to locate the piece within its historical context and in relation to other work in and out of cultural studies. Indeed, it soon becomes clear that the volume can be read in many ways, linking, for example, Michel de Certeau's reflections on the rhetorics of walking in the city to Meaghan Morris's work on the pedestrian politics of shopping malls.

Given During's emphasis on the place of ethnography in cultural studies, it is perhaps surprising that few of the texts undertake this messy work. With the exception of the pieces devoted to popular media (Ian Eng on *Dallas,* Will Straw on heavy metal music), there is comparatively little in the way of sustained cultural analysis; it is a pleasing irony that one of the most ethnographically "thick" texts is Raymond Williams' 1961 study of advertising excerpted from *The Long Revolution.* Still, the volume does much more than introduce readers to a wide range of work that now counts as cultural studies; it also enacts the field, stimulating a series of awkward (but productively awkward) conversations.

The stakes of those conversations—the stakes involved in debates about who will speak of and for culture—are perhaps best revealed in *Culture/Power/History.* This book is a product, its preface tells us, of a particular kind of institutional mechanism, the Program for Comparative Study of Social Transformations at the University of Michigan, which brought together editors Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry Ortner, each at the time located in one or more "disciplines." The volume is collaborative in an important sense: it constitutes a collective coming to terms, in an "adisciplinary" space (p. ix), with disciplinary differences and limits and with the possibilities of boundary crossing.

This exercise in "creative disobedience" (p. ix) is organized not around the

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emergence of a field or a practice (say, theorizing the social) but around three shifting objects of knowledge. The editors argue in an excellent introduction that culture, power, and history have each undergone a series of destabilizations. Culture, for example, had emerged within anthropology as designating something bounded, durable, and coherent. Recent historical developments, as well as repositionings within the academy, have made it appear instead to be a contingent and fractured production. And if culture was once talked about as shared, anthropologists and others must now ask "shared by whom and under what conditions"? (p. 3). In this introduction, British cultural studies is somewhat decentered: "Culture" (or rather a particular way of worrying over culture) is pictured as moving out of anthropology toward the discipline of history and toward varied projects of literary studies. But when Sherry Ortner's "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties" is juxtaposed with Hall's "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," what is made visible are the struggles to lay claim to objects and terrains and in so doing to remake them.

In each section, one of the triad culture/power/history is emphasized, though all are inescapably present; and the book invites mobile, or better "disobedient," readings. In the section that foregrounds power, essays by Foucault and Bourdieu are grouped with Linda Alcoff's survey of culturalist and poststructuralist feminisms. In the same section, Tony Bennet's piece on "The Exhibitionary Complex" deploys Foucault and (more quietly) Gramsci to investigate the ways nineteenth-century museums and exhibitions functioned as technologies of state power, while Donna Haraway reads the gendered codes of nature and culture in the dioramas of the Museum of Natural History.

The sections focused on "history" and "culture" are no less dynamic. The first has Eley "placing" Habermas in nineteenth-century debates about the public sphere, Ranajit Guha reading historiography as a practice of counter-insurgency, and Sally Alexander exploring the possibilities and limits of a feminist history. The second includes a number of essays that take up the resistent potential of "culture": Susan McClary on Madonna's "Resurrection of the Fleshy," Dirks on ritual and subversion in southern India, Stephen Greenblatt on social energy in Renaissance theater.

The editors are especially attentive to strategies of defamiliarization and denaturalization, moves they describe as the "most salutary contribution" of anthropology (p. 39) but which are also effects of the volume itself. They end by emphasizing "our" need to explore other worlds, other modes of being. Indeed, this volume goes the farthest of the three toward engaging the non-western.

Together, the texts in this volume—indeed the three volumes taken together—seem to open up a new terrain we might designate as comparative cultural studies. It is comparative at three levels: in its juxtapositions of disciplinary problematics and languages; in its bringing into relation of dispa-

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rate cultural practices (literature and science, museums and eugenics, television and evangelism); and in its traffic across national boundaries. Retained is British cultural studies' attention to the everyday, the popular, and the material; but this project is loosened from a certain ethnocentrism. Anthropology's notion of culture is in turn, as we have seen, fractured and politicized.

This, is perhaps, all that we could ask of a theory reader: that it leave us productively disturbed. To be sure, the three readers here provide pleasures and discomforts of different kinds and degrees, but each challenges us to make knowledge that is always aware of its limits and its situation, as well as of its transformative possibilities.

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