



Impure

The Practical Politics of Cultural Studies

Acts

Henry A. Giroux

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Henry A. Giroux

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Needless to say, the views represented in this book are my own, and I make no pretense to speak for the field(s) of cultural studies. This book has been in my head for over a decade and based on my ongoing experiences in and outside of the academy, many conversations with friends, and ongoing research in the areas of social theory, critical pedagogy, and cultural politics. What emerges is a critical analysis that hopefully will contribute to the ongoing debate about the purpose and meaning of cultural studies, particularly one that links theory and practice, knowledge and power, and economic justice and cultural politics as part of a broader project of deepening and expanding the principles of a radical democracy to all aspects of society.

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Revitalizing
the Culture
of Politics

An Introduction

What does it mean to take seriously, in our present conjuncture, the thought that cultural politics and questions of culture, of discourse, of metaphor are absolutely deadly political questions?

–Stuart Hall, “Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities”

THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL CULTURE

Within the current historical conjuncture, cultural issues appear to dominate the American political landscape, but in a framework that might best be described as schizophrenic. Viewed as a sphere of impressive technological inventiveness, on the one hand, and a terrain beset by the increasing contradictions of democracy on the other, culture is both celebrated and scorned. In the first instance, there is the general recognition that the new technologies of culture, obvious in all things electronic and computer based, have radically altered the traditional relationship between science and progress, on one hand, and the private

and public spheres on the other. Information has now become capital; the circulation of texts, speech, and images are no longer impeded by space. Moreover, the culture of print has been forever altered by the rise of a powerful visual and digitally produced culture. For many, this radical change within the cultural sphere represents a new revolution in the marriage of technology and the applied sciences, refashioning how we think of power, politics, and everyday life as part of a larger, wired global reality. But the break-through in the computer-based information revolution elicits more than awe; it also signals new configurations of wealth, power, and leadership, partly mirrored in the control exercised by media conglomerates such as Disney, Viacom, and Time Warner, and in the endless media celebration of corporate leadership patterned after the Bill Gates clones that sprout up daily in Silicon Valley.¹

The electronic and technical innovations in the cultural sphere, such as the Internet, cable television, and digitally based communication systems, constitute new and powerful components in shaping how we define, understand, and mediate all things social. Yet the largely positive view of culture that accompanies such innovations appears almost exclusively in technical and practical terms, which leads in the second instance to the negative “other” of culture. Although the politics of culture fashioned as a technological laboratory (what Herbert Marcuse calls “the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterize”² the cultural sphere) retains a glimmer of progress in the popular imagination, the culture of politics—culture’s capacity to give rise to and nourish those discursive resources and material relations of power that shape democratic public life—appears to be in crisis, subject to derision and scorn by forces that occupy a wide range of ideological perspectives. Many educators, intellectuals, and policy makers view the notion of culture as a dangerous or romantic form of practical politics, with its proliferation of critical discourses designed to address major social problems and remake institutional arrangements.³ According to pundits across the ideological spectrum, the strategic and performative nature of culture as a terrain of politics, having some purchase on creating social change through the expansion of democratic identities, relations, and institutional arrangements, is posed as either a threat to

established configurations of power or as a cynical diversion from “real” class-based, political struggles.

The evisceration of political culture is especially evident in a post-Littleton, Colorado, and post-Monica Lewinsky climate in which cynicism replaces hope as the vast majority of the nation’s people feel removed from an electoral democratic system whose impact seems most felt in the tabloid media, while largely absent from social life. Politics signals its own exhaustion as it appears largely as a choice, as Russell Jacoby sees it, “between the status quo or something worse. Other alternatives do not seem to exist.”⁴ Coupled with the general public’s increasing loss of faith in public government, public institutions, and the democratic process, the only form of agency or civic participation offered to the American people is consumerism as opposed to substantive forms of citizenship.⁵ As Robert W. McChesney argues,

To be effective, democracy requires that people feel a connection to their fellow citizens, and that this connection manifests itself through a variety of nonmarket organizations and institutions. A vibrant political culture needs community groups, libraries, public schools, neighborhood organizations, cooperatives, public meeting places, voluntary associations, and trade unions to provide ways for citizens to meet, communicate, and interact with their fellow citizens. Neoliberal democracy, with its notion of the market *uber alles*, takes dead aim at this sector. Instead of citizens, it produces consumers. Instead of communities, it produces shopping malls. The net result is an atomized society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless.⁶

The erasure of democratic politics from the cultural arena can also be seen in the suppression of dissent across a wide variety of public spheres, including the media, universities, and public schools, which are increasingly coming under the control of megacorporations or being corporatized.⁷

As conglomerates such as Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and Bertelsmann gobble up tv networks, radio stations, music industries, and a host of other media outlets, it becomes more difficult for stories critical of these concentrated industries to see the light of day. When Viacom

recently acquired CBS most of the stories covering the event in the dominant media focused on the personalities of the top CEOs involved in the deal. With the exceptions of a few reports in the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, the threat the deal posed to the free flow of information and the implications it might have for undermining a healthy democracy were largely ignored in the dominant media. Concentrated corporate control does not welcome stories or investigative reports that are critical of corporate culture and its policies and practices. For example, soon after Disney bought ABC, Jim Hightower, a popular radio talk show host, was fired for making critical remarks about the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the Disney corporation. Similarly, in 1998 Disney-owned ABC refused to air a 20/20 segment by Brian Ross that was critical of Disney World and its hiring practices, specifically its refusal to do adequate background checks on its employees. Similar examples can be found in all of the major networks. What is clear is that hard-hitting progressives such as Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Stanley Aronowitz, Angela Davis, and bell hooks rarely appear on national television, national radio, or in the dominant print media.

Similarly, as higher education is increasingly corporatized, it also becomes subject to policies and practices that limit dissent and the free flow of information. For example, progressive and leftist intellectuals find it increasingly difficult to either protect their existing appointments or to get hired. The attack on the democratic principles of academic freedom and intellectual diversity are further exacerbated by the moral panics created in the media by conservative politicians, academics, and policy makers such as William Bennett, Pat Buchanan, Roger Kimball, Charles J. Sykes, Roger Shattuck, and William Kristol. These conservatives benefit significantly from an endless amount of financial backing from such right-wing sources as the John M. Olin Foundation, the Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Smith Richardson Foundation, to name only a few. These conservative public intellectuals are far outside of the mainstream of popular opinion on many issues. Yet they are regularly hosted in the dominant media as celebrities unwaveringly dedicated to bashing left progressive academics and offering instant sound bites about the decline of civility, the corruption

of Western values, and the growing need to purge the universities of any dissenting voices, especially if they come from the left. Clearly, left progressive positions that might offer a challenge to such views are conspicuously missing from the dominant media. Such an assault on the culture of democratic politics is further strengthened as schools divorce themselves from pedagogies and models of learning that address important social issues, interrogate how power works in society, or engage crucial considerations of social justice as constitutive of the interrelationship between cultural practice and democratic politics.

Though most commentators would argue that political culture has been on the decline since Watergate, there is little understanding of the dialogical relationship between culture and democracy. Typically, conservatives believe that American culture is in crisis and the problem is democracy. In this discourse, democracy promotes unpatriotic dissent, moral relativism, the dumbing down of schools, welfare, and the lowering of standards, most of which can be traced to the upheavals of the 1960s.⁸ Such sentiments are echoed in the halls of Congress by majority whip Tom Delay, who believes that the culture of politics has been corrupted by the breakdown of religious values, moral relativism, and the bodies of welfare recipients who drain the national treasury.⁹ For Delay, moral righteousness is the defining postulate of civic virtue and is considered far more important than the democratic principles of liberty, freedom, and equality, which more often than not give rise to forms of dissent that undermine the true believer's faith in "certainty and the absolute conviction [that] they are right."¹⁰ Such views can also be found in high-profile conservatives such as presidential hopefuls Pat Buchanan and Gary Bauer.

For many neoliberals, in contrast, the crisis of political culture is presented in somewhat different terms. In this perspective, democracy is in crisis and the problem is culture. Yet culture is less a problem for its lack of moral principles than it is for its proliferation of cultural differences, its refusal to offer a unified homage to the dictates of the market, and its spread of violence and incivility through popular culture. In this model of liberalism, popular culture threatens the image of the public sphere as white, undermines the liberal notion of consensus, and challenges dominant values that celebrate instant

gratification and the endless pursuit of getting and spending. In this view, the public sphere undermines the freedom associated with private gain and resurrects a notion of the social marked by political differences and the allegedly antagonistic calls for expanding democratic rights. On the other hand, liberalism in its more “compassionate” strains advocates a discourse of culture as gentility and civility, one which dismisses the democratic impulses of mass culture as barbaric, and the ethos and representations of an electronically based popular culture as irredeemably violent, crude, and in poor taste.¹¹ What both positions share is a cynicism toward and a condemnation of national political culture as impure, sullied, and corrupted by the logic and discourse of difference. Both positions condemn those democratic, nonmarket, noncommodified forces which provide a critical vocabulary for challenging the self-serving notion that the free market and corporate domination of society represent the only feasible alternative to the status quo and that the neoliberal view of society represents humanity at its best. Neither position offers any hope that America’s future will be any different from its present.

Finally, there is the notion largely held by an orthodox materialist left that culture as a potential sphere of political education and change undermines the very notion of politics itself, which is often reduced to struggles over material issues rather than struggles that accentuate language, experience, pedagogy, and identity.¹² This position appears stuck in time, collapsing under the weight of its own intellectual weariness and political exhaustion. Weighted down in a nine-teenth-century version of Marxism, contemporary scholarship from the left often refuses to pluralize the notion of antagonism by simply reducing it to class conflicts while further undermining the force of political economy by limiting it to a ghostly economism.¹³ In addition, orthodox leftist criticism mirrors the increasing cynicism and despair exemplified in its endless invocation of such terms as “reality politics” and its call for a return to materialism. In the end, its rhetoric appears largely as high-minded puritanism (“the only true members of the church”) matched only by an equally staunch ideological rigidity that barely conceals its contempt for notions of difference, cultural politics, and social movements.

BEYOND THE CULTURE OF CYNICISM

In contrast to these positions, I argue in this book that struggles over culture are not a weak substitute for a “real” politics, but are central to any struggle willing to forge relations among discursive and material relations of power, theory, and practice, as well as pedagogy and social change. I want to address the contemporary politics of cynicism by making a more substantial case for both the politics of culture and the culture of politics—as well as the primacy of the pedagogical as a constitutive element of a democratic political culture that links struggles over identities and meaning to broader struggles over material relations of power. In the chapters that follow, I offer some examples of what it might mean to theorize cultural studies as a form of practical politics in which the performative and the strategic emerge out of a broader project informed by the shifting and often contradictory contexts in which popular politics and power intersect so as to extend the possibilities of democratic public life. Such examples, and the implications they have for a practical version of cultural studies, range from an analysis of the multicultural discourses of academia to the popular representations and institutional formations of the Disney empire. All of these examples point to the need for a new kind of cultural politics—and a new kind of political culture—in which discourse, image, and desire intersect with the operations of material relations of power to foreground the ways in which power is deployed, experienced, and made productive within and across multiple spheres of daily life.¹⁴ Such examples also speak to the necessity of reinvigorating the intellectual life necessary to sustain a vibrant political culture and, as Elizabeth Long sees it, “putting knowledge in the service of a more realized democracy”¹⁵

The regulatory nature of culture and its power to circulate goods, discipline discourses, and regulate bodies suggests that the nervous system of daily life is no longer to be found in the simple workings and display of raw industrial power—the old means of production—but in the wired infrastructures that compute and transmit information at speeds that defy the imagination. As it becomes increasingly clear that the politics of culture is a substantive and not secondary force in shaping everyday and global politics, the culture of politics provides the ideological markers for

asserting the ethical and public referents to think at the limits of this new merging of technology and politics. No longer relegated simply to the Olympian heights of high culture, or summarily dismissed simply as a reflection of the economic base, culture has finally gained its rightful place institutionally and productively as a crucial object of debate, a powerful structure of meaning-making that cannot be abstracted from power, and a site of intense struggle over how identities are to be shaped, democracy defined, and social justice revived as a serious element of cultural politics.

CULTURE AND POLITICS

As the interface between global capital and new electronic technologies refigure and reshape the face of culture, the importance of thinking through the possibilities and limits of the political takes on a new urgency. What constitutes both the subject and the object of the political mutates and expands as the relationship between knowledge and power becomes a powerful force in producing new forms of wealth, increasing the gap between the rich and the poor, and radically influencing how people think, act, and behave. Culture as a form of political capital becomes a formidable force as the means of producing, circulating, and distributing information transform all sectors of the global economy and usher in a veritable revolution in the ways in which meaning is produced, identities are shaped, and historical change unfolds within and across national boundaries. For instance, on the global and national levels, the foreshortening of time and space has radically altered how the power and wealth of multinational corporations shape the cultures, markets, and material infrastructures of all societies, albeit with unevenly distributed results.¹⁶ As wealth accumulates in fewer hands, more service jobs command the economies of both strong and weak nations. Furthermore, Westernized cultural forms and products erode local differences, producing increasingly homogenized cultural landscapes. Finally, as state services bend to the forces of privatization, valuable social services such as housing, schools, hospitals, and public broadcasting are abandoned to the logic of the market. For many, the

results are far-reaching: an increase in human poverty and suffering, massive population shifts and migrations, and a crisis of politics marked by the erosion and displacement of civic values and democratic social space.

Increasingly within this new world order, the culture-producing industries have occupied a unique and powerful place in shaping how people around the globe live, make sense of their lives, and shape the future, often under conditions not of their own making. Stuart Hall succinctly captures the substantive nature of this “cultural revolution” when he argues,

The domain constituted by the activities, institutions and practices we call ‘cultural’ has expanded out of all recognition. At the same time, culture has assumed a role of unparalleled significance in the structure and organization of late-modern society, in the processes of development of the global environment and in the disposition of its economic and material resources. In particular, the means of producing, circulating and exchanging culture have been dramatically expanded through the new media technologies and the information revolution. Directly, a much greater proportion of the world’s human, material and technical resources than ever before go into these sectors. At the same time, indirectly, the cultural industries have become the mediating element in every other process.¹⁷

According to Hall, culture has become the primary means through which social practices are produced, circulated, and enacted, on one hand, and given meaning and significance on the other. Culture becomes political not only as it is mobilized through the media and other institutional forms as they work to secure certain forms of authority and legitimate specific social relations but also as a set of practices that represents and deploys power thereby shaping particular identities, mobilizing a range of passions, and legitimating precise forms of political culture. Culture in this instance becomes productive, inextricably linked to the related issues of power and agency. As Lawrence Grossberg points out, the politics of culture is fore-grounded in “broader cultural terms [of how] questions of agency involve the possibilities of action as interventions into the processes by which reality is continually being

transformed and power enacted.... Agency involves relations of participation and access, the possibilities of moving into particular sites of activity and power, and of belonging to them in such a way as to be able to enact their powers"¹⁸ What Grossberg is suggesting here regarding the possibilities for critical agency has important implications for engaging culture in both political and pedagogical terms.

As I have written elsewhere, culture has now become the pedagogical force par excellence and its function as a broader educational condition for learning is crucial in putting into place forms of literacy within diverse social and institutional spheres through which people define themselves and their relationship to the social world.¹⁹ The relationship between culture and pedagogy in this instance cannot be abstracted from the central dynamics of politics and power.

Culture from the broadest perspective is always entangled with power and becomes political in a double sense. First, questions of ownership, access, and governance are crucial to understanding how power is deployed in regulating the images, meanings, and ideas that frame the agendas that shape daily life. Second, culture deploys power in its connections with the realm of subjectivity—that is, it offers up identifications and subject positions through the forms of knowledge, values, ideologies, and social practices it makes available within unequal relations of power to different sectors of the national and global communities. As a pedagogical force, culture makes a claim on certain histories, memories, and narratives. As James Young has noted, it tells “both the story of events and its unfolding as narrative” in order to influence how individuals take up, modify, resist, and accommodate themselves to particular forms of cultural citizenship, present material relations of power, and specific notions of the future.²⁰

I argue in this book that the current crisis of cultural politics and political culture facing the United States is intimately connected to the erasure of the social as a constitutive category for expanding democratic identities, social practices, and public spheres. In this instance, memory is not being erased as much as it is being reconstructed under circumstances in which public forums for serious debate are being eroded. The crisis of memory and the social is further amplified by the

withdrawal of the state as a guardian of the public trust and its growing lack of investment in those sectors of social life that promote the public good. Moreover, the crisis of the social is further aggravated, in part, by an unwillingness on the part of many liberals and conservatives to address the importance of formal and informal education as a force for encouraging critical participation in civic life, and pedagogy as a crucial cultural, political, and moral practice for connecting politics, power, and social agency to the broader formative processes of democratic public life. Such concerns not only raise questions about the meaning and role of politics and its relationship to culture, but also suggest the necessity to rethink the purpose and function of pedagogy in light of the calls by diverse ideological interests to corporatize all levels of schooling in the United States. The importance of challenging the threat to public life and political culture posed by the corporatizing of schools cannot be underestimated.

The demise of politics as a progressive force for change within the cultural sphere is particularly evident in the recent attempts to corporatize higher education, which, while offering one of the few sites for linking learning with social change, is increasingly being redefined in market terms as corporate culture subsumes democratic culture and critical learning is replaced by an instrumentalist logic that celebrates the imperatives of the bottom line, downsizing, and outsourcing. Obsessed with grant writing, fund-raising, and capital improvements, higher education increasingly devalues its role as a democratic public sphere committed to the broader values of an engaged and critical citizenry. Private gain now cancels out the public good, and knowledge that does not immediately translate into jobs or profits is considered ornamental. In this context, pedagogy is depoliticized and academic culture becomes the medium for sorting students into an iniquitous social order that celebrates commercial power at the expense of broader civil and public values.

Under attack by corporate interests, the political right, and neoliberal doctrines, pedagogical discourses that define themselves in political and moral terms—particularly as they draw attention to the operations of power and its relationship to the production of knowledge and subjectivities—are either derided or ignored. Reduced to the status of training, pedagogy in its conservative and neoliberal versions appears

completely at odds with those versions of critical teaching designed to provide students with the skills and information necessary to think critically about the knowledge they gain, and what it might mean for them to challenge antidemocratic forms of power. All too often critical pedagogy, within and outside of the academy, is either dismissed as irrelevant to the educational process or is appropriated simply as a technique. The conservative arguments are well-known in this regard, particularly as they are used to reduce pedagogical practice either to the transmission of beauty and truth or to management schemes designed to teach civility, which generally means educating various social groups about how to behave within the parameters of their respective racial, class, and gender-specific positions. Missing from these discourses is any reference to pedagogy as an ideology and social practice engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge, values, and identities within concrete institutional formations and relations of power.

Similarly, those liberal and progressive discourses that do link pedagogy to politics often do so largely within the logic of social reproduction and refuse to recognize that the effects of pedagogy are conditioned rather than determined and thus are open to a range of outcomes and possibilities. Lost here is any recognition of a pedagogy without guarantees, a pedagogy that because of its contingent and contextual nature holds the promise of producing a language and set of social relations through which the just impulses and practices of a democratic society can be experienced and related to the power of self-definition and social responsibility.²¹ On the other hand, neoliberalism with its celebration of the logic of the market opts for pedagogies that confirm the autonomous individual rather than empower social groups and celebrates individual choice over plurality and participation. Excellence for too many neoliberals and conservatives is often about individual achievement and has little to do with equity or providing the skills and knowledge that students might need to link learning with social justice and motivation with social change.

The evisceration of democratic political culture from public life is also evident in the current attempts of conservatives and liberals to hollow out the state by withdrawing support from a number of sectors of social life

whose deepest roots are moral rather than commercial and provide a number of services for addressing dire social problems, particularly as they affect the poor, excluded, and oppressed. The evisceration of politics is also visible in the ongoing legislative attacks on immigrants and other people of color, in the containment of political discourse by corporations that increasingly control the flow of information in the public sphere, and in the shrinking of noncommodified public spheres that provide opportunities for dialogue, critical debate, and public education.

TOWARD A PRACTICAL CULTURAL POLITICS

Central to any practical politics of cultural studies is the need to reinvent power as more than resistance and domination, as more than a marker for identity politics, and as more than a methodological ploy for linking discourse to material relations of power. All of these notions of power are important, but none adequately signifies the need for cultural studies to foreground the struggle over relations of power as a central principle that views cultural politics as a civic and moral performance linking theory to practice and knowledge to strategies of engagement and transformation. The reinvigoration of political culture in this position becomes a strategic and pedagogical intervention that has a purchase on people's daily struggles and defines itself partly through its (modest) attempts to keep alive a notion of citizenship as a crucial performative principle for activating democratic change. Toward this end, cultural studies must be guided by the political insight that its own projects emerge out of social formations in which power is not simply put on display but signifies ongoing attempts to expand and deepen the practice of democracy. Cultural studies is more than simply an academic discourse; it offers a critical vocabulary for shaping public life as a form of practical politics.

This book was written in response to the growing academicization of cultural studies and the increasing cynicism and despair that has taken over national political life in the United States. It grew out of my concern with the deception of the discourse of democracy and ethics among progressive cultural workers and educators. Cultural studies, like

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