Introduction

The think-tank of American cultural studies

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Edited by Jon Cruz, our American co-editor since 2009, this special issue tells the multifaceted story of, and reflects on, the arrival of British cultural studies in the USA. This issue celebrates our transatlantic partnership and marks our ongoing attempt not to be 'European' in any direct or essentialist manner. The contents of recent volumes of this journal have made clear that there is merit to daring to think in terms of location and history. It will also be clear that 'European' has become just a part of our name. This issue suggests we take one step further: it accepts location and history as starting points for doing cultural studies, and for reflecting on cultural studies itself. In doing so, it holds up an unsettling mirror for those who believed there is a pure and undiluted political project on one side of the Atlantic, and a commercialized cash cow for university administrators on the other. While such fictions may be comfortable for those who live in denial of new globalised realities, they also mask the interlocking mechanisms of cultural criticism and social policy. Rather than situate cultural studies outside of this dynamic, this issue confronts us in the most elegant manner with the fact that we 'Europeans' are as much produced by it as our colleagues elsewhere. More than they do, we need their reflection to take a long hard look at ourselves too.

As behoves a very special issue, the contents of this issue are unconventional, to say the least. Granted, you will find arguments, examples and theory that are familiar. There is a good chance that the names of its contributors can be found on your bookshelves. However, neither the article that offers its insightful analysis of cultural studies crossing the Atlantic Ocean, nor those that follow it, stick to the conventional rules of publishing an academic journal. The introductory article takes the time it needs to unfold its history; content takes precedence over form, i.e. the 7,000 word article. Form, in the rest of the issue, is also given more leeway, but that is primarily to allow those addressing us a far greater degree of freedom than is possible in the article format generally: they are interviews, or conversations really, written up in close collaboration with the interviewees, participant design in a form-free issue that has stepped out of the boundaries of paper-published paternalism. This is the European Journal of Cultural Studies entering the new era, celebrating in this one special issue how the digital, globalised world allows for new
forms, new friendships and new views of who we are and where we come from. We reinvented the journal to reinvent and rethink cultural studies itself: cultural studies as developed in the USA is more than an offspring or a prodigal child. It is a field of thought and political practice that touches all of us across the globe.

Many of us will think that they know how cultural studies arrived in the USA and was taken up, who the key people involved were, why it became so popular, how it changed and acquired a different character and what the current situation is. We may hold firm opinions about it and about cultural studies as a whole. A common argument holds that in crossing the Atlantic cultural studies was deformed, that it became incorporated and commodified and lost its political guts and relevance. Others will argue to the contrary, that cultural studies was strengthened by American scholars who contributed significantly to its further development. Behind these reflections, there is a need to know what cultural studies really is. Although many scholars emphasise that cultural studies is cross-disciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary or even anti-disciplinary, they also want to stress that not just anything should be allowed to be packaged and sold as cultural studies. Sentiments such as these are discussed in this special issue, which apart from the marvellous essay by Jon Cruz, consists of interviews with a group of key figures in the field. On both sides of the Atlantic there has been an interrogation of what cultural studies really is, or could be. The most striking thing about this special issue is its ability to provide a mirror in which we can recognize ourselves from an unusual vantage point: it presents us with features that we may not have realized are part and parcel of the legacy of cultural studies.

There has been introspection of cultural studies among its practitioners, and more or less fitting definitions of it as a cross-disciplinary field or intellectual movement. Reading about and reflecting on what happened when cultural studies was imported and institutionalized in American academia makes us aware all over again how doing cultural studies – or doing research with the attitude and style that one has somehow picked up from the Birmingham school – is much more than a theoretical or even a political approach; it is a practical skill more than one ordinarily realizes. In that sense, establishing cultural studies in the US functioned as ‘Garfinkeling’: that is, the experiments that American sociologist Harold Garfinkel made his students do. We particularly refer to Jon Cruz’s account of how different academic disciplines reacted to the undisciplined, eclectic way in which cultural studies scholars mix bits and pieces from various vocabularies and schools of thought. The rebuff for such a disrespectful style, and perhaps a failure to pay tribute to all important names in the hierarchy of a field of research, is reminiscent of our own experience. Reading about these tensions in the relations of cultural studies to neighbouring disciplines in the USA makes us realise that such a style is an inherent feature of cultural studies as an intellectual project. It does not mean that as cultural studies scholars we do not need to acknowledge our debt to those from whom we have learned things, but we tend to consider different concepts depicting more or less the same things as synonyms, rather than as referents of competing paradigms. That is because cultural studies is first and foremost a joint enterprise to try to understand power, politics and hegemony in contemporary society, and hence to find forms and methods of agency, empowerment and resistance. Although highly theoretical at times, the long-term cultural studies project is not about trying to form a strict theoretical paradigm to create a
picture of society; rather it is about being open and eager to take on board whatever conceptual and methodological tools it takes to tackle the mysteries of dominance. If cultural studies has a deep core identity, that would be it. In that sense, the fact that people doing cultural studies in the USA have faced rejection and buttment due to their "undisciplined" attitude confirms that they are part of the same enterprise.

Of course, the challenges faced by American cultural studies scholars have been somewhat different from those faced by British scholars or cultural studies practitioners elsewhere in the world, both in regard to institutional arrangements in the academy and society at large. Consequently, the themes tackled in research and the methods and theories employed will vary to suit the context. Yet, referring to what Lawrence Grossberg says at the end of his interview, ideas travel, and in a way cultural studies can be considered as a loosely organized global think tank that provides a means by which to make sense of power and politics in current times.

First, the story of cultural studies in the USA demonstrates that cultural studies is not just any think tank, it is quite an extraordinary one. In his essay on the emergence and formation of cultural studies in the USA, Cruz discusses how the civil rights movement created the conditions for the establishment of ethnic studies and the incorporation of multi-racial, multi-ethnic, gender and sexuality dimensions in curricula in the American university system. The term 'cultural studies' subsequently became a means to merge all these separate programmes under a single label; in other words, minorities became legitimate objects of research. The understanding that social divisions are produced by and in particular power relations became part of the social and cultural policy by which American society tried to deal with inequality and civil rights issues brought to the fore by civil rights activists. In that sense, we need to thank the administrators who took policy measures to establish what later became known as cultural studies. While doubtless intended to channel social unrest, these new programmes also opened the gates of higher education to a growing number of students from less privileged backgrounds.

Second, the frameworks and discourses within which cultural studies scholars began to discuss culture, power and domination was an intervention in previous conceptualizations. This cultural studies became an instrument of governance and an actor in channeling social and cultural conflicts and tensions, as well as a conceptual guide for their analysis. Having all read our Foucault, we know quite well that power and knowledge are always intertwined in society; but this perspective on cultural studies is still quite dizzying in all its uncomfortable simplicity. Governmental tool and site of resistance: this issue's reflection on how cultural studies developed may focus on the USA, but it has vast relevance for self-reflection on either side of the Atlantic. We hope you will enjoy it as much as we have.