

## **Notes on Cultural Studies, History and Cosmopolitanism in UK**

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This paper briefly reviews aspects of the historical relationship between cultural studies and history in the UK university context and illustrates the specificity of cultural history approaches by drawing on the author’s own work on cosmopolitanism.

## NOTES ON CULTURAL STUDIES, HISTORY AND COSMOPOLITANISM IN UK

In this brief paper I will raise a few points about cultural studies and cultural history and their historical relationship to each other in UK -- particularly at the institution at which I work -- and then illustrate some of these points by drawing on my own research on cosmopolitanism.

So first a very short history of cultural studies at the University of East London (UEL) where I have worked since 1983 and where I am currently co-director with Jeremy Gilbert of the [Centre for Cultural Studies Research \(CCSR\)](#). UEL was the home of the first undergraduate Cultural Studies degree in the country, founded in 1981. In those days the programme was not modularised and I arrived when the first intake was in its third year so the broad framework of the course had already been established. What was distinctive about its design was that all students had to do a 'core' and options in one of three main strands: philosophy, literature or popular culture. The core, running through the three-year course was a more or less chronological 'history' starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, so from the start was an indication of the way different knowledges were prioritized. It was influenced by Raymond Williams' work and focused on the history of class formation and class cultures, 'race' and colonial power, women's lives, popular experience, everyday life, sexuality and the politics of resistance and consent etc --- all the things you would expect a radical innovative department to be concerned with but at the time still very unusual. Marx, Gramsci, Foucault, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Juliet Mitchell, Sheila Rowbotham, Angela McRobbie and Marshall Berman were among the influential thinkers students (and staff) were expected to read.

The teaching group came from a range of disciplinary backgrounds: sociology, history, literature, philosophy, history of art. A few of us had been linked in one way or another to CCCS in Birmingham. All were on the left. Through the collective teaching of carefully planned courses we taught each other and ourselves. We also produced collaboratively a couple of key volumes of essays in 1990s using this mix of intellectual approaches: *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity and Cultural History*, edited by Bill Schwarz (1996) and *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, edited by Alan O'Shea and myself (1996).

From the beginning there was some tension in the group -- mostly productive tension -- between the 'proper' historians, those who had been trained as historians, whose interest and objective it was to 'uncover' and piece together features and narratives of the past, particularly of an unfamiliar or hidden past, and those whose disciplinary orientation had been developed in sociology and 'theory' and who were more concerned to track the genealogies of the big political questions of the present, whose interest was conceptually driven. (For a discussion of these divisions see Geoff Eley 2005; John Tosh 2006).

In general I think the direction of the influence between these two broad camps was predominantly from cultural studies to history. Over the last decades there has been a tremendous expansion among the more orthodox historians of what counts as acceptable historical source material and how to make sense of it, as well as a more reflexive consideration of the sociopolitical embeddedness and constructedness of all versions of the past.

Cultural studies in Britain has had an impact not only on history in its various traditions but on all aspects of the humanities and social sciences -- on sociology, geography, literary studies, gender studies, urban studies, language studies, visual culture, media studies, psychosocial studies, philosophy, anthropology, economics, art history and fine art practice (indeed the plethora of 'studies' on this incomplete list is itself evidence of this shift). All these are among the established university 'disciplines' in the UK that have been transformed by the more iconoclastic, flexible, interdisciplinary, political and contextual approaches of cultural studies. So does this mean -- as Jeremy Gilbert has suggested in the blurb for this

session – that cultural studies and cultural history have lost their critical specificity and usefulness?

I think not. I will use my own cultural historical work to illustrate this claim. There are of course many other appropriate examples but my book [Visceral Cosmopolitanism](#) (2007) is what I know best and it does effectively exemplify the shift in that it doesn't fit comfortably into any critical mode except cultural studies /cultural history. This is in broad terms because it privileges argument, draws on an expanded archive (sources include ballet narratives, costume design, department store promotions, contemporary fiction, film, photographs and social science texts, media reports, psychoanalytic theory, biography and autobiography -- including my own) and, in the tradition of cultural studies, is less preoccupied with adhering to methodological convention than I think are its closest neighbours, history and sociology.

It is also an example of 'British cultural studies' in its thematic focus and its concern with the specificity of postcolonial race relations, cultural difference, gender and everyday life in the UK context.

Yet it wasn't in the first instance driven by existing conceptual concerns despite my rootedness on that side of the methodological divide. My theoretical and historical interest in cosmopolitanism did not precede my work in the archive. In fact at the time there was practically no scholarly research on the topic. I came across it by chance when I was working in the archive of the department store Selfridges looking for evidence of the impact of imperialism on commercial culture before World War One. I found no references to empire at all but a good deal in the founder Gordon Selfridge's own daily syndicated newspaper columns about how pleased he was that London was losing its insularity and becoming more cosmopolitan and modern. He wanted his store to be at the heart of these changes and publicised the launch in 1909 with full-page advertisements in all the major newspapers in the world welcoming customers in twenty-six languages, among them Arabic, Japanese, Hindi, Russian, Yiddish and Esperanto.

**'All nationalities meet at Selfridge's and all are welcome'.  
Advertisement from 1909 launch campaign in 26 languages**



As well as being a cosmopolitan moderniser, Selfridge was also an enthusiastic supporter of the contemporaneous movement for women's suffrage. So this was the starting point of my pursuit of historical manifestations of cosmopolitanism across the span to the twentieth

century. Although the concept emerged from the archive rather than an already existing theoretical debate, it was nevertheless shaped by the conceptual material I had already been working on – by gender, modernity, and commercial culture. This already-established groundwork explains the distinctive focus, argument and conclusions of the book.

So the main concerns of the book are:

1. To explore cosmopolitanism in relation to everyday popular and commercial modernity -- to look at its vernacular and domestic expressions -- at the micro- narratives of cosmopolitanism and personal interaction in the local context -- at home, in London.
2. To analyse it as a structure of feeling and aspiration part of modern consciousness: hence as an empathetic, inclusive and sometimes unconscious cluster of identifications with and desire for difference or the 'other'; as an intuitive sense of self part of common humanity with a disregard for borders. This the 'visceral' cosmopolitanism of the title of the book. The focus is on the allure of difference rather than the repudiation of difference - on antiracism rather than racism.
3. To foreground questions of gender and the position of women in relation to this structure of feeling. In the book I argue that women have been the historical drivers of cosmopolitanism in twentieth century Britain for a number of reasons, including their more intimate relationship to mainly male migrants from abroad; their greater participation in popular modernity through consumption and the movies and, more contentiously, their greater disposition to empathise with cultural others.
4. To explore and explain the geopolitical specificity of London. How do the meanings and experiences of 'multiculturalism' and epidermal difference differ in London from US cities such as Chicago or other (post)colonial metropolises of the West such as Paris and Amsterdam? What are the differences between UK and other European countries with sizeable intakes of migrant populations? How relevant is the historical specificity of UK class formation and the British privileging of class culture and language to the current outcome?
5. To track the historical development of cosmopolitanism from an oppositional culture a hundred years ago to the cultural mainstream today – to look at change. This is the 'normalisation' of my title. I trace cultural and 'racial' difference from 'alterity' to mere difference. The term alterity (drawing on Sennett and others) expresses the provoking quality of the unknown unclassifiable other.
  - For those who have not been to London: what does this normalisation consist of? As Caribbean-British playwright Kwame Kwei Ameh points out in his recent radio programme 'The London Story', one in three Londoners were born outside UK. London, he says, is 'a city at ease with itself', 'the California of Europe', 'proud of its diversity', and one which has changed enormously since 1970s.
  - One way of measuring the change is to look at what is often considered the limit point of 'integration' – that is to say sex and marriage between different cultural groups. These are now commonplace in UK cities and, although the figures are inevitably contested, it is estimated that about 62% of young males of Afro-Caribbean origin under 30 and in a relationship are with white partners or someone from another ethnic group. The figure for young Afro-Caribbean women is about 50%. There is a similar tendency among other ethnic and 'racial' groups though the figures are lower. The phenomenon operates across the class spectrum and includes the Queen's cousin who is married to a

Nigerian. Diana and Dodi are another instance (see chapter 7). These figures are many times higher than in US or elsewhere in Europe.

6. My focus is not on plurality and co-existence or on multiculturalism, but on cultural mixing, merger, indeterminacy, fusion and mutuality, on 'mongrelisation' as a historical process, on 'impurity' and 'how newness enters the world' (as Salman Rushdie has put it, 1991). Stuart Hall also refers to our 'mongrel selves' in 1992.

It is important to stress that the book only explores certain aspects of the culture. As I reiterate throughout, xenophobia, racism and racialised imaginings are tremendously significant currents in the history of twentieth century Britain and have co-existed in varying degrees of tension with cosmopolitanism and antiracism.

So how, more concretely, does the fact that I locate myself in cultural studies and identify myself as a cultural historian distinguish my work on cosmopolitanism from that rooted in other disciplinary approaches?

1. It is different from the work of sociologists like Ulrich Beck who, despite his focus on the 'cosmopolitanisation' of 'the fundamental concepts and institutions of modern society' doesn't explore the specificity of different countries, historical change or gender or the quotidian practices and feelings of cosmopolitans. My approach is also different from sociologists of cosmopolitanism like Urry and Hannerz who, although more concerned with disposition, focus largely on intellectual and emotional detachment, on seeing difference from afar, not on identification or empathy.
2. It is different on the whole from the work of postcolonial theorists who for very good reason have focused on the injuries of racial and cultural difference rather than its allure, on racism rather than antiracism (though Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha both refer fleetingly to the ambivalence and desire which lies at the heart of interracial relations). However, there is quite a bit of overlap between 'visceral cosmopolitanism' and Gilroy's notions of 'conviviality' and 'planetary humanism'.
3. Conventional historians have been ambivalent about 'modernity' and the blending of the textual with everyday culture, as for instance in the eclectic approach adopted by Marshall Berman in his seminal 1982 text *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. The thematic and theoretical concerns of my book and my methodological approach are similarly unconvincing for many historians -- though judging from the number of recent invitations from history departments to talk about the work that seems to be now changing.
4. But my book also has a different emphasis from the work of the more radical cultural historians whose focus has tended to be on the invention and consolidation of a conservative English 'tradition', on 'conservative modernity', on the legacy of Empire and melancholia about its loss (see eg the work of Bill Schwarz, Alison Light, Wendy Webster, Chris Waters, Sonya Rose and contributors to the journal *British Cultural Studies* on the 1950s and 1960s) not on the more positive developments of antiracism and engagement with migrant others. (My new research is on this topic and period. I am currently looking at the work, much of it unpublished, of anthropologists and sociologists, mainly women, among them Ruth Glass, Ruth Landes, Sheila Kitzinger and Judith Henderson, who were involved in 1950s and '60s race relations research in UK).
5. Feminists have on the whole not yet addressed the specific relationship of women to cosmopolitanism (though see the work of Ulrike Vieten). There has been some attention

in the work on global cities to gender difference but not as far as I am aware on issues of cultural interaction and the everyday as raised in the book.

6. Psychoanalysts and theorists drawing on the framework of psychoanalysis have been concerned on the whole to explain the unconscious factors underlying prejudice and the repudiation of difference rather than its attraction, see eg Freud (1930) on the 'narcissism of minor differences'. In general there has been very little interest in the psychodynamics of inclusivity and empathy or in gendered differences in response to belonging and cultural 'otherness'. Bracha Ettinger's theory of the matrixial is among the exceptions.

It is not only a broadly cultural-history interdisciplinary approach which distinguishes my work from that of others concerned with the rapidly expanding topic of cosmopolitanism. There is also the more iconoclastic tradition of 'arguing against' which has characterized much cultural studies research from its inception and which here has been combined with my insistence on viewing everything through a feminist lens. My perspective has also been influenced by my personal history and psychic formation, an account of which, in an autobiographical chapter, I interweave with the main narrative of the book. This is where I explain my interest in the topic -- a contextual element too often missing from most historical accounts which tend to present themselves as somehow unembedded in the vicissitudes of life outside the text. Finally, it is also worth noting that my conclusions and the way I write --- the construction of a more progressive reading of British encounters with cultural and epidermal difference in the last century is also the outcome of a generally more optimistic albeit argumentative disposition. This is not a problem per se, and is not a disavowal of more melancholic readings, but like all factors which influence our understanding of the past and present, needs to be noted.

So in conclusion: the general message I want to convey for this spotlight session is that cultural studies in Britain, and especially at UEL, has strengthened 'history' and accounts of the past though the boldness and breadth of its themes, archive and method, its use of cultural theory and its consciousness of contextual and biographical factors. Conversely, historical consciousness has also influenced much cultural studies. A questioning of chronology and causal association is likely to yield a more complex picture than is often the case in textual analysis, which is so often the dominant mode in our discipline. We need to contextualise not only our data but also our argument in historical, geo-political and autobiographical terms. As cultural studies scholars we must remember not to invoke and critique theory as though it were produced in a vacuum -- without roots. All theorists are people who live at specific historical moments and produce theoretical propositions as part of their engagement with or against other theorists and bodies of thought in specific historical and political contexts.

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