



## Cultural studies questionnaire

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GORDON BROTHERSTON

**1. Which practitioners of cultural analysis do you particularly admire and why?**

Jean Franco, for *The Modern Culture of Latin America*, revolutionary when it appeared in 1964. David Viñas, for *Indios, ejército y frontera*, which cuts to the root of Latin American liberal discourse. Rodrigo Montoya, for his readings of Quechua survival. The poet Ed Dorn, who introduced me to Charles Olson and to the fundamental work of Carl Ortwin Sauer. Julio Ortega, for respecting the 'textual nature of Latin American cultural difference'. Not all of them may be recognized as 'practitioners', but each has identified key points of cultural reference. Will Rowe, for conversations over many years.

**2. How did you become involved in cultural analysis, what are the principle concerns of your own work and what areas might you work on in the future?**

By growing up in Merseyside; reading *The Uses of Literacy* at an impressionable age; listening, in Cambridge, to Raymond Williams's (Welsh) deconstruction of 'the English tradition' and its late eighteenth-century promotion of an imperial upper class through non-State education; being really unconvinced by C.P. Snow's talk—fashionable in the 1950s—of 'the Two Cultures' (the other being 'science'). Then, in the sixties, helping to set up both the Department of Literature and the Latin American programme at the University of Essex; and travelling through Mexico and the Andes, and meeting Angel Rama in Montevideo. Principal concerns include the articulation of time and accounts of genesis; visible language and script; literary translation. In this, tracing that which is most, and is least, 'Latin' about Latin America, in the latter case, the traduced and suppressed traditions of the indigenous New World, saliently, the cosmogony recorded in Mexico's ancient books. With the help of today's right, we are again being presented, quaintly, with the dictum that there was no literature, no philosophy in America before Columbus, a severe shrinking indeed of that continent's claim on culture.

**3. What are the key problems that confront the study of culture in the late twentieth century?**

The term is indispensable, yet so baggy, and un-etymological.

**4. The critical analysis of culture clearly requires a multidisciplinary approach: how do you see this being achieved? How useful is the term Cultural Studies?**

The term 'multidisciplinary', obviously relevant to long-standing disciplines like law, mathematics, and music, can now be better applied to literature and other media, and hence clear the fuzziness inherent in such academic 'lang-lit' items as English, French, Spanish, Portuguese. Within the construct of Latin American 'area' studies this approach can be precisely rewarding, as long as the prior notion of discipline is not forgotten, critically with regard to genre, especially poetry.

**5. Cultural Studies are currently becoming fashionable, particularly in the USA and Britain but also in Latin America. How do you view this development?**

In his day Cicero was as fashionable as he was ignorant and arrogant about cultures older and richer than Rome's. Others rightly refer to the scandalous parochialism, in this sense, of certain US Latin Americanists. Here, Leibniz might be a better reference and, indeed, has been cited as a philosophical base by one such Latin Americanist: the consequent smugness about belonging, in this sense, to 'the best of all possible critical worlds' has visibly dulled anxiety about such obscenities as the 1980s genocide in Guatemala (the US role in which Clinton, to his credit, apologized for, in Antigua, on 11 March 1999).

**6. What is the relationship between cultural analysis and politics? The word culture is being used increasingly loosely, even emptily. How does that affect the work of the cultural critic? Anything else you would like to add?**

After what Octavio Paz fondly referred to as the 'death of socialism' in the 1980s, Cultural Studies has become the practicable way (in Spivak's words, 'the only thing to do') of retaining at least a notional link between academic practice and the will to social justice and political responsibility, let alone survival, on a detailed planetary scale; and, in this, of reintegrating 'science' into culture and education, or at least of thoroughly reworking Marx's categories of culture, science and religion.

Half a century ago, scientists in the employ of post-war national governments, Soviet and Western, assured the world that testing nuclear devices in the open atmosphere was not unhealthy. (Adding in some Christian ethics in the 1980s, Thatcher's appointee, the bishop of London, opined that it was 'morally justifiable' for the State not just to possess and test but actually to use nuclear weapons 'in a fallen world'; and now, with scarcely anyone noticing, nuclear-enhanced weapons are being used in Iraq and Serbia, causing tremendous genetic damage.) In the last decade, scientists in the employ of transnational corporations have been insisting that genetically modified food is absolutely healthy, when no-one can know, fallaciously claiming it is just another step in the long story of plant hybridization. Legal initiatives over the same period sponsored by the MAI (Multilateral Agreement on Investment) show that even governments (Canada is a recent case in point) are powerless against the transnationals, a new and large common enemy bent on ridding business of all environmental and

ecological constraint. The liberal shibboleths of 'public', 'informed choice', and 'elected legislature' tumble more heavily than ever, for example in current campaigns to ensure such food need not be labelled, and even to ensure that organic food cannot be properly labelled. For all the electronic overload of communication, this is effectively censorship, practised by powers with no national flag yet greater than any State has been. It is force-feeding, that defines us entirely as not what we eat but what we consume. It is a new empire that makes *antropofagia* truly tasteless and allows no-one to be postcolonial.

Cultural Studies admirably challenges received 'history', the canon, generally distrusts the 'Western premise', and excels in analysis of mass culture (MTV, telenovelas), the control of production, the popular and the urban, and, in Latin America, the whole question of 'hybridity'. It has a particular advantage in inheriting the political insights of Marxism without necessarily being bound by Marxist definitions of culture. Hence, there is the chance of going beyond the binary that through Hegel sundered Kultur from Natur, and of not exclusively identifying knowledge with the economics of a single global history—a point well made in Ward Churchill's classic *Marxism and Native Americans* or, for that matter, César Vallejo's *Poemas humanos*. In principle, Cultural Studies opens the space, not before time, to review other knowledges on this planet, which the west has wished to suppress (for example, in the Inquisition-style gesture of firing Sauer from his academic post) and suppresses as viciously as ever. Why negate the millennia of practical successes that our species has had in cultivating its surface, above all in the American tropics, that unrivalled source of food (plant genetics), medicine, calendars, 'ideation'. (Lathrap), and (if we are to believe Italo Calvino) imagination.

Just now, politics appear in fact to be coming very much 'down' to food, prompting the need to revisit its initial intimacy with culture, whose 'root' after all is *colere*. Rousseau's bias against Cain, along with Hegel's demoting of Natur—both features of the biblical tradition which in this sense Marx never fully disowned—have perhaps dictated an unadvisable course. At all events, capitalism and [western] science meanwhile claim full and final triumph in the 'field', implanting the prettily-named 'terminator-gene'. Surely a call for more urgent and holistic studies of culture, and a corresponding pedagogy.