**Cultural Politics Now**

*John Armitage, Ryan Bishop, Mark Featherstone, and Douglas Kellner*

**Abstract**: Although neither a cultural philosophy nor a political theory, the concept of cultural politics emerged, as we conceive it, decades ago in a time and a place when it was often argued that the study of culture and the academic discipline of cultural studies were unavoidably political because of questions of value, ideology, and power this study entails. This article by the editors of the journal *Cultural Politics* provides a short survey of the field, its emergence, issues of interest and its relationship to cultural studies. To do so within an era of full-blown globalization, with all its attendant laudatory dimensions and many burdens and discontents, because of the unavoidable inter-cultural tensions and stresses around identity, belonging and power these processes produce, we address several pressing questions about politics, culture and textual engagement. How can we theorize cultural politics and the political goals of cultural theory and analysis in the English-speaking world and beyond when uncertainty around identity is the driving force of the project itself? What does a contemporary politics of culture and a cultural politics look like *now* and how might that terrain be shifting? How can we theorize culture as a political issue and politics as a cultural field?

**Keywords**: cultural politics, cultural studies, critical theory, knowledge production, geopolitics, disciplines, institutions, cultural texts

Neither a cultural philosophy nor a political theory, the concept of cultural politics emerged, as we conceive it, largely in the 1980s, a time and a place when it was often argued that the study of culture and the academic discipline of cultural studies were unavoidably political because of questions of value, ideology, and power this study entails. Cultural politics has come of age in the era of full-blown globalization, with all its attendant laudatory dimensions and many burdens and discontents, because of the unavoidable inter-cultural tensions and stresses around identity, belonging and power these processes produce. How we describe the political nature and influence of cultural works and texts today becomes an essential question for the field simply because the terrain of the globalised world is culturally complex and defined by tension, contestation, and struggles over value. These initial questions about politics, culture and textual engagement prompt many others for cultural politics. How can we theorize cultural politics and the political goals of cultural theory and analysis in the English-speaking world and beyond when uncertainty around identity is the driving force of the project itself? What does a contemporary politics of culture and a cultural politics look like *now* and how might that terrain be shifting? How can we theorize culture as a political issue and politics as a cultural field? [[1]](#endnote-1)

To begin answering some of these questions, it is useful to know how cultural politics complements, differs from, and positions itself in relation to cultural studies. It is largely due to a concern to extend the formulation and institutionalization of cultural studies, especially in the Anglophone global university, that cultural politics emerged to think through the tensions, stresses, and strains with the global cultural field. Within cultural studies there has long been a much-vaunted political dimension to its research and its work based upon a recognition of the inherently political nature of the ordinary. But this politics was a target for those who wished to ignore many of the messages cultural studies generated in its earliest manifestation precisely because what early cultural studies sought to achieve was a critique of the taken for granted and common- sensical. However, as cultural studies became increasingly accepted in the university as a discipline, this political agenda increasingly narrowed, and it did so, most pointedly, through the elevation of the individual, the consumer, and the subject who ends up making and remaking their own identity. This thesis suggested that the individual can appropriate power in myriad ways through their own use of cultural resources. Now, to be sure, an important aspect of modernity, postmodernity and poststructuralist thought revolves around notions of the subject as constituted through economics, history, forms of governance, technology, discursive regimes and language, but the issue with this well intentioned turn to micro politics that focused upon the individual to the detriment of structural constraints is that it ended up playing into the hands of power, particularly the emergent neoliberal capitalist system where the pleasure seeking consumer is sovereign. In this way the telescoping of the subject into that of the individual became unduly limiting, solipsistic and ultimately conservative. What started off as an attempt to understand culture politically, and recognise the constructedness of the cultural sphere, ended in a micro politics which was valuable because its ability to recognise the ways in which different people use culture on an everyday basis, but potentially problematic because of its tendency to screen out the very real effects of power. The danger here was, that the personal was not only the political, but *only* the personal *could be* political.

For many reasons, and with no small amount of irony, this formulation of the political reflected the role of the professionalised faculty member within the university: narrow, circumscribed, rote, delimited, and timid. Thus, cultural politics emerged to revisit and advance the original project of cultural studies and broaden out its political field to take in macroscopic forms. The numerous forms of academic writing on cultural politics in the present period – from work on continental philosophy to political theory, migration studies, feminist and queer theory, technoculture, history, ecocriticism, security studies, media theory, anthropology, aesthetics, artistic practice, sociology, critical military studies, film studies, and literary studies – render it as a field that is, on the one hand, differentiated in terms of the cultural and theoretical influences upon it, including Theodor Adorno, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Antonio Gramsci, Donna Haraway, Friedrich Kittler, to name but a few disparate figures. On the other hand, both the field of cultural politics and the academic inspirations behind it share much in common in their aims and effects, chiefly in relation to theorizing oppositional, critical, and reconstructive approaches to the political through a vast array of cultural forms and formulations. In the obverse, emphasising the cultural, the same move involves critical refigurings of the political sphere in response to the broad cultural shifts over the same period.

Engagement with politics in cultural studies has at times tended toward discussion of individual cultural appropriations, but perhaps this is because politics itself has grown so microscopic in a world where the individual is apparently king that cultural studies cannot engage it in any other manner. Structure has, in many respects, vanished in the globalised world by virtue of the fact that is everywhere and, for this reason, nowhere, just as culture as a “whole way of life” (as Raymond Williams had it) has disappeared into delimited choices between tyranny and conformity. Some of this circumscription was, however, in no doubt, due to a rather machinic replication of the research that had allowed cultural studies to carve out a niche in the university at the outset. However, a great deal of what was innovative and ground-breaking regarding research on the fronts of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, diaspora, immigrant status and other individual identity issues became increasing contested and complex, even though the larger social and cultural contexts in which they operated had not changed a great deal, if at all. The conditions of women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and other groups routinely denied access to equitable treatment in wealthy nations has remained appallingly bad, especially in the US, despite decades of cultural studies research and publications with an explicit “political” agenda aimed at redressing such inequities. There is no sense in which it is possible to place the blame for this lack of change on cultural studies, of course, but the increasing tendency to focus on the micro in the name of the valorisation of marginalised identities has to some extent played into the hands of power that, as Althusser and Foucault both understood, rules through processes of individual interpolation and bio-political governmentality. In this way, the individual is free to appropriate and play with culture, because playfulness is part of the late capitalist ideological hegemon where the desires of the individual are sovereign.

Under these conditions perhaps the sometimes-tepid responses to the intellectual interventions by cultural studies might be the result of working and reworking the terrain of the individual at a time when its status has been badly eroded by larger and more intractable forces and powers that paradoxically tend to repeat the liberal and neoliberal mantra that the individual is everything, a critique Wendy Brown and many others have performed. By accepting and repeating this ideological position, where the individual is sovereign and wider social, political, and economic issues vanish from view, the danger is that critical cultural studies ends up becoming an ideological device that celebrates individualism and individual attempts to escape power in a world where it no longer matters how the individual responds to power microscopically because of the way control scales down from the global through the regional and the national, to the micro and the bio in a kind of political isomorphism that shapes individual desires through the incentives of political economy. In this situation, where, as science and tech studies teaches us, power is written right through to the cellular level, individual appropriation of media and cultural forms becomes less effective, unless it is also able to scale through to a truly microscopic level of resistance and similarly scale up to some kind of national or even global political formation. This is an argument that several well-known cultural studies thinkers -- such as Sara Ahmed, Larry Grossberg, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Luciana Parisi and Eve Sedgwick, -- make and in so doing they begin to stake out the ground for a renewed form of cultural studies, what we are calling here cultural politics, because of the ways in which it very explicitly politicises everything from the cellular through to the global. The arguments of key writers such as Butler, Haraway, Grossberg, and Hardt and Negri are compelling and speak deeply to those still committed to the humanist tradition and the trope of the human as figured in the Italian Renaissance that is the subject of its intellectual pursuits, but also shifts the terrain of cultural analysis towards the post- and more-than-human in recognition of new expanded reach of power. Thus, the key thinkers of the new cultural studies, cultural politics, focus upon ‘other’, perhaps more deep-seated and potentially productive issues at play in the construction of power, ones not considered directly or overtly political by current conventions within the academy or outside of it, and ones not necessarily reducible to the human or the late capitalist individual as the centre of academic inquiry. As noted above these are issues analysed by theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Geoff Bennington, Jacques Derrida, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Friedrich Kittler Achille Mbembe, Lisa Parks, Peter Sloterdijk, Isabelle Stengers, and Tiziana Terranova to name but some.

The value of these researchers’ work is therefore that it points toward engagements with the political that operate at scales that could revive and advance the political agenda of cultural studies research, thus converting their inquiries into cultural politics by taking in new global and biological levels of influence and construction. Some of these scholars pursue this agenda by consistently returning to the theoretical roots found in a tradition of continental philosophy that runs from Kant, who first insisted upon the strict separation of representation from the thing itself, and Hegel, who sought to bring representation and the real back together, to the present, where the reality status of representation remains up for grabs with concerns about “post-fact” cultural politics dominating the global public sphere. They especially address contemporary issues, as befitting cultural politics, in ways that avoid presentist myopia and work the informed ground of historicity and metaphysics to explain the current conditions that make politics and the political possible. The value of this approach is that it maintains the dynamism of cultural studies, and constantly thinks and rethinks the meaning of key ideas such as the “multitude” or “migrant”, and prevents the choking off of that which is political by deciding in advance what constitutes conceptual meaning and by ignoring what is operative within the capacity to decide at all. What is at stake in the decision proper is, therefore, constantly questioned by the new cultural studies. As Derrida endlessly pointed out, if one ignores the metaphysical tradition upon which decision making -- and thus pragmatism, action, institution-building, and law – are based then one can have no hope of affecting the type of change one wishes to create (2002: 24-57 and 1992: 1-34). Power will constantly escape, because it is written into the very ground of our understanding of the world – the conceptual, the linguistic, the cultural sphere itself.

To this end, these scholars returning to the useful and demanding issues raised by theory remind us that the common articulation of the political can be, and often is, a semi-automatic articulation of standard “liberal” responses to events that do not get underneath the conditions in which decisions are and can be made. In effect, these cultural politics scholars examine the political discourse of power to reveal how an unproblematized and uncritical approach to the political as a concept undermines the intentions of their discourses and analyses. This is the essence of what Derrida calls “deconstruction,” and it gestures to ways beyond the “safe,” even automatic, analyses of the political that threatens to side-track the discipline, while also providing material for the enhancement of activist practice that needs to understand constructions of power in order to oppose them effectively.

The timidity that negatively affects much critical inquiry in the present results from a set of embedded and not always clearly articulated positions and relationships. These are both part of what constitutes the field of cultural politics and what the field studies. In this respect cultural politics is necessarily oppositional and generally aligned against the accumulation of state and corporate power. The wider disciplines that feed into cultural politics must operate within an increasingly professionalized and corporatized institution (the global Research and Development university), itself functioning within a blisteringly narrow economic, geopolitical and militarized nation-state. Given the reach of power, the western nation-state is suspicious of the university, because of its critical potential, while simultaneously depending its contribution to the knowledge economy for its very existence and perpetuation. This is why cultural research within the university is inherently political. It is unavoidably caught up in a politics of information and knowledge, and more importantly in a politics of normativity. For this reason it is incumbent upon us to bear in mind these infinitely complex and enfolded relations when thinking about how critical academic work has arrived where it is, and how it might extract itself from its current situation, if those whose work operates within and contributes to it wish to do so.

There is, therefore, no real “safe” intellectual option because power is everywhere and represented in every corridor of the institution. Although it is the result of forces beyond our individual abilities, and potentially our ability to transform our institutionalized position, contemporary cultural analysts must remain critical. They must try to resist forces that place us increasingly in a Hobbesian free-for-all of sheer professional and individual survival – albeit one of an admittedly high bourgeois comfort level – and continue to critique power. In such situations, the professorate is under such pressure that timidity makes sense - a timidity by default, borne out of a concern about the next round of evaluation, the tenure clock, the promotion ladder, and accruing retirement funds and benefits. Like many systems within which the university functions and with which cultural politics engages, cultural analysts are subject to pressure from institutional trajectories that leave them furiously working away to meet performance indicators in the proper timeframe to make the next step, each individual moment infinitely deferred toward some larger, later goal to be attained sometime in the future, whether it be tenure or retirement or death. The goal is always “to come,” and its futural dimensions both debilitate and liberate us, if we can cast a keen critical eye on how it does so. This is the promise of cultural politics because it can align itself with these embedded systems within which we perform research and teach although the impediments of the constantly deferred future goal might seem more obvious than its boons. In this way it is possible to translate the destructive neoliberal performance principle, most likely to result to depression and burn out, into a utopian politics similar to those Ernst Bloch wrote about in terms of the ‘yet to come’. The fury of the institution is, under these conditions, the fire of the critical and the new that opposes power itself. Thus the futural power of cultural politics can be interpreted and mobilized as a means for derailing instrumentalism by working within its logic and using its underpinning rationale against it. In this manner, the shape of cultural politics cannot be held hostage to the institutional ties that bind us despite depending on those ties for its existence. It is in this respect comparable to Deleuze and Guattari’s minor utopianism outlined in their final work*, What is Philosophy?*, which is always inventive, creative, and dynamic on the very edge of the hegemonic, majoritarian form. Although it is possible to make the case that Deleuze and Guattari’s schizo theory was appropriated by power in the period of neoliberal empire, the waning of this power in the present under conditions of the collapse of the American hegemon and the mountains of unmanageable debt resulting from its ruination means that the schizophrenic position is once more a critical tool for the disruption of domination by virtue of the ways in which it refuses the narrow instrumentalism of institutions obsessed with narrowly quantitative measures of performance. In this way, theory teaches and moves us forward into the future, if we will but listen attentively, and make use of its alternative visions of the ‘yet to come’.

But there has recently been a reluctance to specific kinds of political engagement that remain so essential to the establishment and import of different disciplines in the humanities, arts and qualitative social sciences. In the aftermath of the four synchronised terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda on the United States on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001 and all the many responses to them, as well as the continued resurgence of extremism of many different kinds, a call for politics to enter more centrally the research and pedagogic agenda emerged, and it has led to a useful movement away from the overly narrow analyses of identity politics aimed at the level of individuals. Various English-language interdisciplinary journals have begun to broaden their horizon in the past few years, with special issues on governments and liberalism, as well as on globalization and de-colonial options to it, security and surveillance, and intellectual property reveal an attentiveness to the failures of governance at a range of levels and scales, the complexities of geopolitical economy and the many effects of the resurgent security state in Europe and North America. There has been, it seems, a recent imperative to *be* political again without delimiting this political to the individual. Yet at the same time the fallout from September 11 has seen a turn to the empirical, the substantive, and hard facts that dismisses the ideas of construction and the constructedness of representation in the name of a more simplistic us/them binaries where the differences between people are no longer made in history and politics, but rather treated as if they were transparent, self-evident, and natural. Given this turn, the objective of cultural politics is concerned with embracing the shift from the individual to the wider political frame, but at the same time remaining critical of the empirical turn that takes representations for facts, facts for imperatives to action, and reifies difference to ensure a truly *cultural* understanding of the political field sensitive to the way meaning is *made*. *Cultural Politics* was established over a decade ago to address exactly these concerns and to help foster the emergent field of cultural politics. A brief list of some of the special issues and sections that the journal has produced over the years gives a sense of the field and how the journal wishes to shape it: “Just Targets,” “Velocities of Power,” “Peter Sloterdijk’s Jovial Modernity,” “Nuclear Stories: Cold War Literatures,” “Bernard Stiegler: Philosophy, Technics and Activism,” “Baudrillard Redux: Antidotes to Integral Reality,” “Lyotard’s Aesthetics,” “Affective Landscapes,” “Utopias,” “Friedrich Kittler and War,” "Mediated Geologies," and "The Spirit of Luxury," with the latter special issue attending to historical and economic, moral and aesthetic questions concerning art and luxury branding, contemporary manners, luxury fashion, and inequality (Armitage and Roberts 2016).

In addition, the numerous forms of academic writing on cultural politics in the present period – from work on continental philosophy to political theory, post-colonial theory, feminist and queer theory, technoculture, history, security studies, pedagogy, anthropology, aesthetics, sociology, film studies, and literary studies – render it as a field that is, on the one hand, differentiated in terms of the cultural and theoretical influences upon it. On the other hand, both the field of cultural politics and the academic inspirations behind it share much in common in their aims and effects, chiefly in relation to theorizing oppositional, critical, and reconstructive approaches to the political through a vast array of cultural forms and formulations.

Although there has been a return of geopolitical issues in many fields, including sub-fields of sociology and politics, they tend to remain filtered through a “human rights” lens that valorises the efficacy of human agency whether collective or individual. This specific attribute of the Enlightenment and central quality of the humanist enterprise has emerged recently in works by Gayatri Spivak, Paul Gilroy and others pointing toward what they call “a planetary humanism,” which seems little different from the old dreams of Kantian universalism that drive the agendas of the very governmental practices these scholars purport to resist. These works from within the academy complement those of World Social Forum or the Occupy Movement outside of it while engaging in the conversations surrounding the popularity and influence of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* and *Multitude,* both provocative but deeply problematic works. Although one wishes, of course, to continue holding dear the ideals of liberation, equality, and justice, one also knows, of course, that, particularly in the age of US President Donald J. Trump (Kellner 2016), these same ideals are used to justify the War on Terror, unfettered markets, the easy moralisms that pass as ethics, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the return of racist xenophobia, hate crimes, and immigrant scapegoating in Western democratic states. Unfortunately, much current research in the humanities and social sciences far too often is not engaged with the technological developments driving these conflicting actions that are predicated on the same seemingly unassailable universal ideals; nor does it come to terms with how these ideals circumscribe action and decision-making. Further, such research almost never considers the metaphysical foundations underpinning the *a priori* ideals that action is supposed to instantiate, nor does it engage in the critique of the human itself that forms the counter-point to technological developments that remains the dream of globalists and nationalists alike. These issues linking *a priori* ideals to action and their metaphysical underpinnings demarcate the domain of cultural politics as a field, providing the empirical and theoretical terrain for its critical engagement with the world.

Media studies, cinema studies, TV studies, and new media studies have also sometimes eschewed a critical examination of the historicity and genealogies of the technological innovations upon which these subfields are founded. This eschewal therefore also ignores the military pedigree of the technologies the fields purport to analyse, and their enabling role in the increasing militarization of the geopolitical and quotidian that characterizes the past seventy years. Specific theorists, especially Paul Virilio, make these central to their research, but the militarization of the world remains a relatively unconsidered story within much humanities and social science-based research. Such a situation is striking given that not only is the militarization of daily life concomitant with the securely enshrined power of science and technology, but also that it entails the militarization of virtually every level of culture, most especially that of the global R and D university forged in Cold War ideals and values. (Bishop 2006) If cultural studies, for example, takes culture as its primary focus, and if this object of study is synonymous with culture in the post-World War II world, then the military and its manifest influence demands sustained and critical attention – a point made in the middle of the 20th century by thinkers as antithetical as Theodor Adorno and Martin Heidegger – particularly since martial principles have insinuated themselves into every aspect of life in the new neoliberal world, including the university itself where performance is everything. What this means is that there is no ivory tower today and cultural studies cannot evade becoming cultural politics organised around the politicisation of every scale of bio, linguistic, and institution construction simply because militarisation is endemic to the contemporary university. Undoubtedly an increasing awareness that it is wise to move away from the centrality of the individual and identity politics (or at least a narrowly-construed ahistorical identity politics) that has led the field from the 1990s onwards has filtered into a good deal of cultural thinking today. There is now a clear sense that the individual and identity is formulated through power, and critical research requires explorations of the way that happens. However, for cultural politics, this intellectual move demands a politics with an ethics unencumbered by simplistic moralisms, that is critically sensitive to the ‘matter-of-fact’ culture of corporatism identified by Veblen a century ago, and examination of the technicities of thought and the conditions – metaphysical, material and technical -- that make thought possible. Otherwise, we fall back on the unquestioned justifications of any endeavour in the present: monetization or weaponization. (And if you have one, in truth, you have the other.)

In this way cultural politics is centrally important because it is explicitly committed not merely to critiques or defences of recognized or dominant discourses but also to the ‘autocritique’ of cultural studies itself and to the definition of an emergent interdisciplinary field that brings together sociology, politics, media studies, film studies, literature, and philosophy. No longer content with straight-forward critical conceptions of intellectual, socio-economic, and cultural structures, contemporary cultural politics looks to newly forged re-assessments of the epoch and its historicity, to critiques of extant limits and rationalities, to concepts of ‘telecracy’ and ‘communicative capitalism’, the anthropocene, postdigitality, media archaeology, targeting, witnessing, haunting, boomeranging, and ballistics.

It is our hope that an important part of the work in the field of cultural politics today, as we conceive it, can be found within *Cultural Politics*, which has articles that provide occasionally oblique but uniquely evocative, conceptions of culture and power. *Cultural Politics* provides researchers and students with clear and current explorations of the lively and changing theoretical debates in cultural politics and connected disciplines. It also delineates the enhancement of the understanding of cultural politics and an appreciation of how cultural politics has now permeated numerous theoretical positions from Marxist theory to feminism, psychoanalysis, post-colonialism, poststructuralism, environmental studies, and postmodernism, as well as sophisticated and strategic combinations of theoretical influences that fall outside of easy categorizations, no matter how open they may be. Building upon work carried out in cultural studies, then, *Cultural Politics* does not offer a straightforward plea to study race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality as such but rather develops an appeal to mount a critique of the theoretical work conducted under the banner of cultural studies *as* cultural politics – an appeal mounted in this article -- and an appraisal of the possible effect such a critique might have on future investigations into the academic field of cultural politics. This move, then, understands individual phenomena as operating within, resulting from and altering larger, macro, trajectories at scales ranging from the bio, the eco, the national, the regional, and the global. This is the terrain of cultural politics which we understand in terms of a new expanded form of cultural studies that recognises the universal reach of power today and understands that critique and auto-critique must therefore be similarly expansive and pervasive in scope.

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