

“THE DISTURBANCES OVERSEAS”: A COMPARATIVE REPORT ON THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH STUDIES

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This is an adaptation of a talk first presented to the Council for College and University English (CCUE) conference on English for the Millennium, Sept. 1996. CCUE is the British professional body that represents the discipline and departments of English in England, Scotland, and Wales. The talk was meant to provide a transatlantic perspective on the future of the discipline. Originally it was published in CCUE News (June 1997) and later adapted to presentations throughout the U.K. The excerpts here focus on issues of multiculturalism, interdisciplinarity, and cultural studies.

WHEN I DRAW ON MY EXPERIENCE in the United States it is not because I am unaware that the centrality of English literary history is less controversial in England than in its former colony, but because the areas that I see as fundamental to the future of English — a diverse Anglophone population and the demands of the marketplace — are fundamental to both. Twenty years ago, American and British academics were different worlds. The formal democratization of the university and official ideologies of neoliberalism, or market orientation, have brought them closer together. My argument is that the future of English depends less on theories or ideas than on human geographies, institutional conditions, and our embeddedness in market society.

First I shall say categorically that I believe that what is variously referred to as the crisis, the culture wars, or the opening up of literary studies in the U.S. in the past two and a half decades has been a good thing. As higher education has become increasingly democratized, the problems of society have become the problems of higher education, including ethnic and racial conflict, gender conflict, political and economic inequality, intolerance, and lack of consensus. Rather than lament that the common language of English literary history is being assaulted or diluted by barbarian hordes, it would be better for us to acknowledge a multicultural society and its conflicts as a source of renewed vitality for the humanities (see also Graff). I shall draw on my experience at Stanford from 1982 to 1996.

What is relevant for us today about Stanford’s so-called culture wars — the wars over what should be taught that became the focus of national debate — is that they reflected

the larger social issues of California, or to be more accurate, the culture debates fed into a complex loop that included and affected the social issues. California has the largest population in the U.S., two-thirds the size of the population of Britain. Geographically, it shares a border with Mexico and is closely connected with Canadian and Asian Pacific Rim cultures. It is a multiethnic and multicultural society. A few decades ago it was at the forefront of radical politics and experimental lifestyles. Today it is at the forefront of reaction against them. Recent initiatives passed by voters reversed affirmative action on behalf of women and ethnic and racial minorities. Two years ago the state's voters passed anti-immigrant legislation that is still contested in the courts and anti-crime legislation that has given California the highest per capita rate of incarceration in the world. Both anti-immigrant and anti-crime laws are directed in multifarious ways against people of color. Even those of us who believe that multiculturalism is dangerous in that it can obscure political and economic inequalities with mere celebration of cultural difference thought that, given California's population, it was worth the risk.

My first point, then, is that local population was key to the future of English in California, and I expect that local populations will be key to the future of English in Britain. And by local here I mean the ethnic and racial mixes in Britain that are a consequence of its former empire, current trade, and tourism as well as geographic proximity to specific institutions, as in the, say, "Celtic fringe" population Exeter draws from Cornwall and Wales. Both these kinds of global and local populations have shifted the meaning of English from an island's literature to something more like Anglophone cultures. I believe that that is the most important point I shall make.

The second factor that will determine the future of English will be the economy of higher education. The sources of funding will go a long way toward determining student populations and the future of elitism. Whether British education will in fact become more democratic will depend on the outcomes of current political discussion of fees and funding.

Beyond population and finances, the lack of autonomy of the academy will affect its future, whether the sources of influence are state or national governments or private. At Stanford, the power of scientific, political, and economic cadres on campus constantly forced us humanists to justify ourselves. On the academic Senate we had to explain to engineers why the university should support graduate students in English and why undergraduate engineering majors should be required to take at least one course in the study of culture. I had to explain at one point that the study of gender referred to men as well as women and that race was a social and analytic more than a biological category. Indeed I, who had the misfortune to be regularly elected by my peers to governing bodies, spent so much time explaining contemporary work in the humanities to scientists, engineers, and economists that I made a virtue of necessity and made "the role of the humanities in market society" the burden of my research. At this time I found myself on occasion introduced to scientists and social scientists, as well as to potential donors, as an "applied humanist." Now although this title had been thrust upon, rather than sought by, me, I found myself explaining how humanistic training could contribute to solving social problems, like racism, poverty, sexism, apathy, and so forth.

My solutions, it need hardly be said, did not spring idealistically from my head in contemplative self-communion, but from dialogue, reading groups, and seminars with colleagues in different disciplines working on similar issues. Indeed our Cultural Studies Group, made up of a dozen or so staff/faculty¹ from literature, anthropology, philosophy,

history, law, religious studies, and classics, was brought together as much by the local politics of curriculum development as by our similar political orientations. To us this was the heart and soul of interdisciplinarity. We did not become interdisciplinary in the New Historicist model by reading texts from biology or medicine or anthropology as a literary critic reads a poem, but by working with colleagues from other disciplines on social problems of passionate interest to us all. Alone, each of the disciplines has its fetishes and blindspots. When you put them all together in a seminar on the future of the city or the nation, or on women and development, or on comparative studies in race and ethnicity, or on environmental justice, or on affirmative action, or on beauty in the built environment, each discipline's idiosyncrasies become clear enough. We either learn enough of each other's languages to debate and criticize each other responsibly or we quit talking to one another and claim interdisciplinarity by transcending disciplines. The latter route we found was the road to oblivion or at least marginalization. Experts find transdisciplinarians absurdly ambitious and tend to exclude them from policy discussions. I shall return in a few minutes to the distinction between experts and intellectuals, but at least for the foreseeable future it is crucial for the future of the humanities that interdisciplinarity be in essence a dialogue between disciplines. This became very clear to us in California working on issues of race and ethnicity, where individual ethnic studies programs with national scopes — Chicano Studies, African American Studies, Asian American Studies — centered in the humanities and text-based are giving way to comparative studies in race and ethnicity, where the processes of racialization in different nations at different points in history can be compared, or ethnic conflict can be compared by political scientists, cultural critics, psychologists, and feminist scholars in all disciplines.

A recent report sponsored by the Gulbenkian Commission in Portugal and chaired by Immanuel Wallerstein has recommended precisely this interdisciplinary structure for higher education, and it is currently getting publicity on both sides of the Atlantic (Wallerstein et al.). Its four recommendations for restructuring the human sciences include the expansion of institutions bringing together scholars around specific urgent themes for a fixed period of time; the establishment within the university of research programs that cut across disciplinary lines and have specific intellectual objectives; the compulsory joint appointment of staff/faculty between two departments; and compulsory joint work for graduate students. Not surprisingly, in both the U.S. and Britain some of the most innovative of this kind of interdisciplinary work is already in place at the new universities, while the old institutions are often entrenched in narrow disciplinary divides.

The Gulbenkian Report points out that postmodern theory and cultural studies together occasioned the first revival of the humanities since they were eclipsed by the sciences in the nineteenth century. Even granting that traditional English literary history may not be so contested in England as it is in other areas covered by the Report, and expecting that it will continue to be taught in the universities, I'd now like to make a case specifically for the contribution of cultural studies to the interdisciplinary work I have been describing.

Cultural studies should not mean the exclusive study of popular culture or mass media, although it may, and in most cases should, include these. The term should recall the kind of critical social theory that was associated with the early days of cultural studies in Birmingham in the 1970s. Cultural studies is the study of the ways that individuals and groups represent themselves to themselves and thereby construct their identities. This

definition has been most recently elaborated with reference to those the Gulbenkian Report calls the “forgotten peoples of modernity (those neglected by virtue of gender, race, class, etc.)” (65). But it was also present in Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, in which he attributed the impulse to art and culture to human nature. “By our nature,” he said, “We must represent ourselves to ourselves, draw out of ourselves and put before ourselves what we are” (Hegel 35–36). When political theorists say that economic liberalism is the total subordination of the economy and politics to culture, they mean by culture the desires, needs, and tastes of individuals. This is one way a people can represent itself; this is how neoliberal market society represents itself, as a society of individuals each maximizing her self-interest according to her particular individual constitution. Although mainstream economists like to model people as individuals abstracted from social environments, we should rather include in our study of identity family or kin, geographical community, class, race, nation or state, religion, and any other aspects of identity that become salient in particular social relations. Furthermore, in mass media society, we must assess the relation of dominant public identities, as in the media, to local or private identities. Cultural studies, in the sense I intend, asks how people mediate or transform those dominant representations in their daily lives. Equally importantly, as I have argued recently in this same journal, in market societies like our own, cultural studies explore precisely how individuals’ desires, needs, and tastes are socially formed (Gagnier).

To see the kind of contribution cultural studies can make, I shall now narrow my discussion to this particular culture: modern market culture. The early theorists of market society, the so-called classical political economists, had much to say about how market rights could conflict with the development of the capacities necessary to democracy, among which they included the ability to make informed decisions, sympathy, empathy, and cooperation, and they therefore put limits on what could be commodified. In the history of economics, substantive differences between utilities (as in needs vs. desires) and between markets (as in labor vs. oranges) have been eroded and the discipline has focused on abstract growth and efficiency. A cultural critic of the market today, however, would not limit her discussion to growth or efficiency. She would see market society as a system of social relations in which people are both producers and consumers. To a large extent they would represent themselves according to divisions of labor, and these divisions would reflect not only kinds of work, some fulfilling in themselves and others mere drudgery in exchange for other commodities, but also kinds of work related to gender, race, and nationalities. But people are not only self-identified according to what they produce, or the services they provide, they are also self-identified according to what they consume and the pleasures they receive. A cultural study of market society — a nonreductionist study — would see people as both producers and consumers, born of labor and desire.

Although economists can model the distribution of commodities through price mechanisms, they do not tell us much about the deep structures of taste and preference. But literature and other cultural discourses can. As recently as the 1960’s, economists read novels like Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* and related economic progress to stages of cultural assimilation. They do less of that kind of work now, despite the fact that at least in Britain more people read novels than ever before and more novels represent cultural diversity than ever before. Indeed, the dominant branch of economists in conscious or unconscious imitation of the methods of physics aims to represent human choice and constraint purely in terms of mathematical structures. This is as far from the kind of

knowledge that novels provide as it is from Adam Smith's definition of economics as the science that provided for the needs and desires of the people. Yet market culture works like all culture, in a loop. People are born into it and it shapes them; their shaped needs and desires then shape it. If we should engage the debate whether universities should be responsive to market demands, or, less parochially, whether the world should pursue the neoliberal agenda generally, we should employ our various expertises in the critical study of the construction of needs, desires, and tastes.

That is the kind of role I think we are destined to play if we succeed in doing cultural studies. The immediate question, then, is how this role of applied humanist derives from the study of literature, and I propose three ways: through the development of analytic tools; through the kind of knowledge that has traditionally been called aesthetic; and through the knowledge of history.

First, the development of analytic tools. Students learn how to study literature through studying language. The American New Critics developed a superior pedagogy in the close reading of poems, for those raised on it have an awareness of the structure and meaning of language that forever sensitizes them to all forms of discourse. More recently the critical technique of deconstruction especially allows students to grasp how ideology works through language, categorization, taxonomy. If you learn how to read well, attentively, critically, you have most of the tools to function as a citizen in a democracy. Here I would only add that reading is not enough. The oral interpretation of literature and the performance of language — the traditional domain of rhetoric and the drama — will empower students as well, and perhaps empower them beyond the isolated, fetishistic relation to texts that has limited many of our colleagues. Importantly, literature in other languages should be strongly encouraged, for nothing so quickly gives one a critical perspective on one's own culture as the language of another. Most Ph.D. programs in literature in the U.S. modestly require reading knowledge of at least two languages other than the language of the program. When I entered graduate school in 1976 these were typically French and German, with some variation among Romance languages or some classical languages. When I quit directing the Graduate Programs in English and Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford, graduate students just as often were examined in their knowledge of Hindi, Gujarati, Korean, Arabic, Swahili, and Hebrew — and native speakers of these languages were by no means the only ones who were examined in them or who will use them in their theses.

If the critical study of literature can provide the analytic tools to evaluate ideas, yet another requirement for democracy, as I mentioned above when I alluded to the early political economists, is empathy — an idea closely associated with the history of aesthetics. There has been a great deal of critique of the history of aesthetic in the last decade, but the sympathetic response to the predicaments of others; the visceral response to beauty; emotion, taste, feeling — for recent critics, the physical, feeling space of the body itself — remain the reason why people read literature rather than philosophy or sociology. Literature tells us how people *feel*, their *subjective* experience — however mediated that may be by structures of power, discourse, and ideology. I have spent the last few years tracing the history of aesthetics in relation to the history of economics, and it is clear that “the Aesthetic” is not nearly so monolithic as it has been pronounced to be: there have been aesthetics that were forms of ethics, relating to the constitution of certain kinds of subjects, like Kant's or Mill's; there have been aesthetics that focused on the producer and provided

theories of human nature as creator, such as Marx's, Ruskin's, or Morris's; and there have been aesthetics of taste that focused on the consumer's pleasure. There have also been aesthetics of evaluation, like Arnold's, although by no means is value in the sense of evaluation so central to the history of aesthetics as some theorists apparently believe. Aesthetic knowledge — the kind that relates to sense, feeling, and emotion — is necessary for democracy.

Finally, the study of literature gives us historical perspective. Most social scientists, like scientists generally, are presentist. They think in linear, progressive terms. They believe that the history of their discipline is the history of error and that the current state of knowledge is all the knowledge that has survived. In my work with economists, it was not unusual to find very distinguished ones who had never read *The Wealth of Nations* or Ricardo's *Principles*, much less Marx's *Capital*. Most literary scholars, on the other hand, believe that history can provide possibilities, roads not taken, gardens of forking paths. I started studying the history of economics seriously in the mid-1980s as a way to understand how the language and culture of Reaganomics — which we now call neoliberalism — had come to be so impoverished. Compared to the political economists from Smith to Mill to Marx whom I regularly assigned to my students, the neoliberal language of growth and efficiency appeared eviscerated, missing something. When students read Morris, or Wilde, or Wheeler, or Schreiner, they reverse the obliteration of historical memory that the mass media foster. They learn that socialism in the nineteenth century did not preclude individualism, and that socialists once called themselves democrats and feminists. It seems to me that some of the really disappointing recent work is precisely that which provides semiotic or tropological analysis — even brilliant analysis — without knowledge of history or aesthetic feeling. Our highpowered theoretical tools must not be wielded ignorantly or unfeelingly. Some of our sexier discourse analyses do just that.

In so delimiting the field of cultural studies I have implicitly addressed the charge posed by Ian Small and Josephine Guy in *Politics and Value in English Studies: a Discipline in Crisis?* (1993). While most American academics responding to the perceived crisis of literary studies have offered economic or institutional analyses like John Guillory's (1993) or Gerald Graff's (1992), Guy and Small have posed the intellectual question of expertise. They have recently argued that English Studies have lost their expertise and that without identifiable expertise we cannot justify our degrees to the public. I have argued that our expertise lies in the study of cultures, including the study of cultural conflict that leads to self-critical crises of expertise. We represent the critical study of language, literature, discourse, and other communicative forms; of feeling, emotion, taste; and of cultural history. It may be that this expanded domain looks rather more like that of the intellectual than the expert, and I shall conclude with a few thoughts on the distinction between experts and intellectuals.

The departmental structures of universities today are very good at reproducing disciplines, which produce experts. An expert is thoroughly engaged with the questions, methods, and products of a narrowly circumscribed field and produces a body of work within that field. Experts — as in expert evidence or expert witnesses — are called population geneticists, moral philosophers, Victorianists, or labor economists. An intellectual within the university must be an expert but she is also more: she is accustomed to reflect upon her field and upon its relation to other kinds of knowledge. An expert in the humanities knows how to interpret a literary or philosophical text within chronological or

generic boundaries; but an intellectual also knows how to reflect upon her interpretation and place it in a larger context. Universities can so fetishize narrow forms of expertise that they drive out intellectuals. This routing can occur through the regular processes of peer review, in which we often ask narrow, limited experts to evaluate intellectuals, and intellectuals duly come out wanting in the requisite narrowness. It may have been ever thus, that experts and intellectuals have always been rivals, the one calling for more discipline and the other more latitude, with the one tending toward indifference to anything outside one's narrow specialty and the other toward megalomania. But it may also be that, after a century and a half of increasingly narrow experts, we may need more intellectuals. In the nineteenth century, intellectuals were explicitly distinguished from experts for their willingness to discuss and take positions on *culture*, the ways that people represent themselves to themselves and thereby construct their identities. Personally, I would not want to return to a nineteenth-century man-of-letters model of transdisciplinarity so much as a model of the expert who is also an intellectual, who uses her expertise in the service of larger social issues.

The departmental structure of universities reproduces disciplines, which reproduce experts. Is there a conflict between what the university reproduces and what the market demands? That is, as the social scientists say, an empirical question. Whether the taxpaying public wants more psychologists, economists, and historians or more intellectuals working on the causes of crime, the relation of economic growth to distribution, or the way that colonial history impacts development is something we actually have few reliable data about. Even if we had them, we would have to consider whether the university *ought* to respond to public demands. For even if the public and the university could achieve consensus on the narrowness of experts, it is likely that our definitions of intellectuals would differ. It could be that the public would want neither experts nor intellectuals but technicians.

Yet for reasons that are increasingly interesting to me, and despite pervasive market rhetoric, the government runs the universities in Britain like planned economies under old-fashioned bureaucracies, not really addressing how or whether we might produce better experts or intellectuals or technicians, or in what proportions we should produce them. Yet these are exactly the questions we should be asking. I think that this irony of market rhetoric covering over massive central planning should be pointed out, especially by those of us expert in the forms of irony. For English in the millennium, like so many things, will be determined by planning or markets. It is our fate as educators to intervene in the debate about mass education and to intervene in the loop of market culture. We did not make these conditions, but we should certainly have something to say about them.

That is where the paper usually officially ends. Discussion usually begins with what many perceive as the decline of the traditional single-honors degree, classification, and examining systems. If English will increasingly appear to younger generations not as an island's literature but as a complex and interactive anglophone culture, in which the classics will be most eagerly read in relation to the hybrids they've "produced" in contact with other cultures and through a variety of historically specific media (e.g., film or the Internet), then English students will increasingly expect more contact with other disciplines. If students are taking classes across a range of disciplines, then a grade point average reflecting their progress in different modules would be more accurate than a final exam and mark in English alone. Moreover, a grade point average, being precisely an average of the assess-

ments made by different instructors, would obviate the need for double and triple marking, as these are only necessary when everything depends on such a comparatively small amount of assessed work. If we are training intellectuals as well as technicians and experts, the optimum might be the broader education assessed continually rather than the narrow education assessed at the climactic end.

On a more sublime note, seeing “English” as a language interacting with many diverse cultures, some of whom are making their voices heard at university for the first time, means that the teachers of that language are privileged to study the expression of society’s needs and desires, or as one Victorian Londoner (Marx) called it, “the self-clarification of the wishes and struggles of the age” (Marx 15).

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NOTE

1. “Staff” is the term used for academics in Britain, “faculty” in the U.S.

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