



## Cultural Studies Review

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## CULTURE REVIEW

# Persistence

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Even though the *Cultural Studies Review* is now, after two iterations and many years, finally reaching the end of its career, its production teams' commitment to serving the cultural studies community exemplifies the value of persistence. Unfortunately, its closure takes on added significance right now as it joins a worrying number of instances of institutional disinvestment in our field. Persistence seems to be running in just one direction. At its peak, Australian cultural studies had many strong local journals, it was successfully taught as a stand-alone field in a couple of dozen universities, it returned outstanding results across a range of ARC grants programs, and it became one of the most internationally engaged and respected of the humanities research fields in Australia. It even reached the point where people in other disciplines started to think there might be an advantage in pretending that they did cultural studies, too. We had mixed feelings about this, of course. While it provided welcome evidence of our influence and visibility, it also had the ironic consequence of tempting some of those who strongly identified with the field to engage in precisely the kind of boundary policing that had made cultural studies necessary in the first place. Nonetheless, for at least twenty years from the late 1980s, Australian cultural studies was that rare thing—a field of critical teaching and research in the humanities that prospered in what were, in general, difficult times for the humanities disciplines in Australia.

It is probably uncontroversial to say that we have passed that point now. Institutionally, politically, academically, in terms of where cultural studies currently sits in the spread of humanities and social science fields within the Australian university sector, things have changed. The institutional security of Australian cultural studies programs, one of our most enabling assets in my view, has begun to unravel and increased precarity—of provision, of employment, of support—now seems inevitable. At the national level, cultural studies has almost completed its transition from a teaching field to a research field. Given our history, that is a dramatic shift: cultural studies in Australia, as has been the case elsewhere, built its constituency within the sector on the back of its undergraduate teaching. Only then did

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the distinctive tradition of writing and research that has marked Australian cultural studies emerge at scale. The shift carries significant long-term risks: it narrows the pipeline of well-trained and committed graduates coming into our higher degree programs and thus into the cultural studies workforce, while setting up an entropic cycle of declining enrolments leading to declining investment in the remaining undergraduate programs within our universities. A concomitant decline in research income would likely lead to similar consequences for cultural studies researchers.

We might think that the main drivers of these conditions are the usual suspects. The structure and level of higher education funding, the sector's infatuation with STEM over HASS, cuts in funding to the ARC, the importance of research dollars in determining the distribution of opportunities, and the government fantasy that research commercialization might eliminate the need for public funding—all of these, of course, play their part in tilting the national research and higher education system away from the HASS fields of teaching and research. However, it looks to me as if the more culpable influences are actually at the level of the individual institution—and there, at the level of Faculty and School management rather than any further up the hierarchy. This is where decisions about course offerings are made, where we find colleagues teaching 'out of their field' to solve problems caused by poor forward planning, where casual appointments are used as a readily available but irresponsible means of dealing with School budget shortfalls, and where the strategic imperatives of senior management are so thoroughly internalized by academic managers that many of these decisions are produced by what a former ABC staffer once called 'the pre-emptive buckle' rather than challenged, tested and resisted. The upside to this, if these observations have any validity, is that we may be underestimating the power we have at the local level to remedy some of this—and thus the more positive prospects if such issues were addressed with the degree of persistence for so long displayed by the editors of *Cultural Studies Review*.

If we are to persist, and not to indulge in the pre-emptive buckle, we need to think about what kind of cultural studies it is that we want to champion into the future. There is a danger that contemporary cultural studies operates too much like a classic discipline, its debates becoming inward-looking and internal. Yet, this is a time when cultural studies has an especially significant public and political contribution to make—for instance, understanding how communities are constructed in the digital era, or understanding the workings of cultures of adaptation and shifting cultures of uses in the context of climate change, or dealing with the function of populism and its transformation of politics. In such areas we must persist in demonstrating the value of our approaches. We might also think more programmatically about the possibilities of collaboration with other fields and approaches in order to work at a sufficient scale to make a substantial difference. The cultural studies I would wish to champion would be a more public-facing cultural studies, then, more comprehensively concerned than of late with proving how its work matters outside the discipline as well as within it.

Finally, though, and even as we pursue such possibilities, we must accept that the need for persistence, for committing to the long haul as we do our work and press our case for recognition and investment, is not merely contingent. Rather, it is constitutive; persistence is always going to be necessary, in good times and bad, as a means of building and maintaining a public for our work. That is what the editors of the *Cultural Studies Review* understood, and that is why they persisted, against the odds and to our collective benefit, for so long.