

[CFP- April 2021 - Are Cultural Studies a Method?](#)

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Type:

Conference

Date:

April 9, 2021

Location:

France

Subject Fields:

Cultural History / Studies, Film and Film History, Journalism and Media Studies, Music and Music History, Theatre & Performance History / Studies

You'll find below a call for papers for a conference entitled "Are Cultural Studies a method?" organised by Gabrielle Adjerd (Nanterre Université), Anaïs Goudmand (KU Leuven), Marianne Hillion (Sorbonne Université / University of Warwick) & Marion Leclair (Université d'Artois).

The conference will take place on **April 9th, 2021 at the University of Artois (Arras, France)**. Papers may be presented in French or English and both languages will be used in the exchanges.

Proposals (max. 2500 characters with a short bio-bibliographic notice) should be sent **before 31 January 2021 to je.cultural.studies@gmail.com**.

Are cultural studies a method?

Cultural Studies are usually traced back to the 1950s and the publication, in close succession, of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958). While the former was translated into French in 1970 as *La Culture du Pauvre*, there has been, to this day, no French translation of the latter.

Two distinct paths thus opened to the career of Cultural Studies. Williams, who had been a member of the British Communist Party since the 1930s and was taking in the 1950s an active part in the renewal of the British Left around the *New Left Review*, drew increasingly on continental marxist literary criticism. In the rest of his work, he developed a theory of culture (both as institution and art) -- cultural materialism -- understood as social product, taking in his stride an impressively varied range of cultural practices, from eighteenth-century classical poetry to the Victorian novel and BBC programmes.

At the same time, Richard Hoggart, joined by Stuart Hall and Angela McRobbie, founded the *Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies* in 1964 at the University of Birmingham. Its prime interest was for culture as a field of opposing forces competing for hegemony, and it focused especially on strategies of cultural resistance from the dominated, on the complex articulation of class, gender and race, asserting the significance of a work's use and reception as an object of study in its own right.

This second branch of Cultural Studies seems to have been more successfully exported than the other across the Channel and the Atlantic. The stress it lays on cultural power relations enabled it to adapt all the better, perhaps, to academic contexts susceptible to the influence of French theory and sociology. As they spread outside Britain, Cultural Studies divided into multiple sub-fields, aiming at the study and revaluation of a range of cultural practices historically devalued by academia (*fan studies, star studies, comics studies, porn studies, game studies, food studies...*), cross-fertilising minority studies (*women's studies, gender studies, queer studies, black studies...*). Cultural Studies have thus played a part in reshaping academic syllabuses, into which formerly devalued cultural objects have found their way -- even though Cultural Studies departments or degrees are still rarely found in France.

This second branch of Cultural Studies has also attracted the more scholarly interest from academics in the last ten years. Hoggart et Hall, and the contribution of Cultural Studies to identity politics, were at the heart of the conference organised in 2016 by Maxime Cervulle on Cultural Studies and Marxist criticism. They are also given pride of place in the French anthology of Cultural Studies edited in 2008 by Hervé Glevarec, Eric Macé and Eric Maigret, as well as in the 2015 book by Maxime Cervulle and Nelly Quemener on the methodological and theoretical axioms of Cultural Studies.

But the question remains, whether the swiftly evolving, partly conflicting and theoretically varied field of Cultural Studies offers anything like a common methodological ground. Yet, such a question is very much in need of asking, at a time when the institutionalising of Cultural Studies in France compromises their ability to define themselves any longer against existing academic subjects, as an anti-discipline or a post-discipline. Jameson provokingly suggested that Cultural Studies share a political programme more than anything else -- that they are a banner under which the different trends of the academic Left have rallied since the 1980s. The case could also be made for a *thematic* common ground to Cultural Studies, in their preferred focus on historically devalued cultural practices.

The purpose of this conference, however, will be to try and approach Cultural Studies not as a thematic unit defined by its choice of object, but as a unified methodology. So doing, the conference seeks to continue the work of two previous conferences on the method of literary criticism ("Materialist approaches to realism" and "For a materialist critique of literary works") organised by the *Séminaire Littéraire des Armes de la Critique* (ENS - Ulm), within which the present conference on Cultural Studies was first conceived. It will seek to find a methodological common ground to Cultural Studies, by focusing on the key-concepts it has elaborated and on subsequent changes in their uses.

What has been the conceptual legacy of the empirical approach of the founding authors of Cultural Studies? What is left of Raymond Williams' cultural materialism? Are Cultural Studies, properly speaking, materialist? How have they evolved? What concepts do they chiefly rely on today? More generally, can Cultural Studies, despite their rejection of positivism, be considered as a methodology?

Papers can address, but are not limited to, the following topics:

Concepts & categories

- Are such categories as “popular” or “mass culture”, developed by the Frankfurt School in the postwar decades, considered as obsolete by present-day scholars in Cultural Studies? Has anything changed since the constatation made by Jan Baetens in 2005 of a relative decline in the use of “popular”?
- Has the concept of hegemonic groups or the dominant/dominated binary, inherited from Gramsci via Stuart Hall or from French sociology, replaced that of class?
- How central to Cultural Studies is the notion of *resistance*, from the understanding of cultural audiences as active partakers in cultural production (rather than alienated and passive consumers) and Harry Jenkins’s celebration of fan creativity, to the more nuanced focus on “toxic fans” in the works of Matt Hills?

Methodology

- Are Cultural Studies essentially defined by their choice of object?
- How does the militant contemporariness of Cultural Studies apply to non-contemporary works of art?
- Has Cultural Studies’ ambition to revalue formerly devalued works implied a correlated shift from a descriptive to a normative paradigm of cultural criticism?

Institutional questions

- What have been Cultural Studies’ links with sociology in the French academic field? With cultural history? With anthropology? With communication and media studies?
- Can the rise of Cultural Studies be understood as a response to the growing imperative of interdisciplinary versatility in an academic context where permanent positions are scarce?
- What is the significance of the recent development of *studies* (cultural studies, gender studies, theatre studies etc.) within the French academic field?
- Where do postcolonial theory and gender studies (or ethnic studies in the US) stand on the question of the marxist legacy of cultural studies? To what extent can this be called a dissociation?

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