

Let's tell a different story:  
Interview with Lawrence Grossberg

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Lawrence Grossberg is the Morris Davis Distinguished Professor of Communication Studies and Cultural Studies, Adjunct Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and the Director of the University Program in Cultural Studies, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

We interviewed Professor Lawrence Grossberg after he attended the "Cultural Studies and Institution" international symposium organized by the Department of Cultural Studies at Lingnan University in Hong Kong in May 26-28, 2006.

We asked Professor Grossberg to talk about his academic life, especially as an intellectual experienced in Cultural Studies. We didn't go too deeply into the theories included in his papers or books, but mainly focused on the question of youth identity and youth culture. Finally, we hope that through this interview our readers can know better to this far-sighted, humorous and charming scholar.

E for E-magazine, L for Lawrence Grossberg

E: In your presentation in the symposium, you gave some of the context in which you first met Cultural Studies in Britain, and you also talked about why you left the U.S. So maybe your political stance and your own understanding of Cultural Studies as political are related to your experiences?

L: Ah, well, I think they are certainly intertwined. Because my reasons for going to England, to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University had to do with my politics and my political involvements during the 60s, it probably made me more sympathetic to the project of Cultural Studies than some other people might be, and maybe it made me see the political side of Cultural Studies more strongly than some other people have seen it. I guess. I don't know.

E: Then what is the relationship of Cultural Studies to political intervention in your story?

L: Well, political intervention is a broad category, and I think there are many ways of understanding the sense in which Cultural Studies, at least as I understand it, is engaged in a kind of political intervention. I think some people assume too easily that, necessarily, all Cultural Studies is supposed to be the equivalent of or part of a social

movement, that it can be simply identified with or guarantees or slides into social activism. For example, every once when I go to some place to talk about Cultural Studies, I find some people who demand that I tell them my political life: what do I do politically and where is my proof that you are engaged. Well, I am engaged, and I don't think that judgments of my intellectual work should or can depend on what I do in the rest of my life. My political life is not necessarily their business.

### **The politics of Cultural Studies**

Cultural Studies is intellectual work and its politics have to be understood in relation to that work. Moreover, **Cultural Studies argues that politics have always to be understood and constructed in and in relation to a particular context.** Too often, people not only assume that know what it mean to be political, to intervene politically, they also assume that what is a valid intervention in one context is always valid in any context whatsoever. They fail to see that politics, and the possibilities, even the demands of political intervention, change in response to changing relations, institutions and logics of social power.

The politics of Cultural Studies always begins in its question – and that question is always, in some sense, what's going on? **Cultural Studies is an attempt to open up the field of political possibilities by offering the best analysis of the field of struggle that it can.** If bad stories make for bad politics, the point of Cultural Studies is to try to tell better stories. Cultural Studies is a political intervention because it tries to tell us a story about what's happening in the world, and to open up new ways of understanding the engagement with, the efforts to change and to change the directions, or the world.

At one point, in some context, maybe telling a better story depends on battling against the assumption that media fans are dopes and victims, or that kids are idiots, who don't understand themselves or their culture. It is a political intervention to suggest that politics has to start where people are, and it has to win them to a political project and a political identity. In other contexts, it may be necessary to engage with certain kind of ideologies and ideological practices, although the questions one asks of such ideological maps of meaning, representation and identification themselves depend on the context. In other words, the way in which intellectual work is political depends on the context it is responding to.

### **The context of the United State**

For my work, for some time now, it has been very important for me to try to tell a story of what has been happening in the United State in the past thirty years, with the rise of what I called the "New Right," but that means also figuring HOW to tell a better story. For example, we must start by acknowledging that the New Right is made up of a shifting and rather fragile alliance of various groups: some are very

explicitly conservative, either social or religious conservatives; some are very explicitly pro-capitalist (although that also includes a lot of serious differences); some are what we call, I don't know if the term means anything here, "libertarians" who are explicitly committed to individual rights and minimizing the size and power of government. (But libertarians are not necessarily conservative, and not necessarily pro-free market capitalist.). Then there are of course the global imperialists, the so-called neo-conservatives, who are willing to use military might to bring capitalism and western-style democracy to the rest of the world.

I thought that something is wrong because, over thirty years now, the Right seems to be winning more than it loses, and the other side—call it the left but in the U.S., it is as much about the liberal center as the progressive left, keeps losing ground. America has drifted more and more toward the Right. **As a Cultural Studies intellectual, my assumption is if you keep fighting battles and you keep losing (on all sorts of sites and fronts, including institutional and popular struggles), it must be that there is something wrong with the story you are telling, the story from which you are deriving political strategies.** Somehow, you don't understand the rules of the games, you are not playing the right game, you are not playing on the right field, etc. You don't understand what's happening well enough. What intellectuals contribute is to tell the story that would enable—in dialogue with political activists and other knowledge producers, not to sort of tell them what the truth is but to engage with them in dialogue—the formulation of better strategies for how to engage with the Right. For me, that's very important. It's more than important; it's crucial, and immediate.

But it's very important in the specific context of the U.S., to me, to see what's happening to America, what direction it's taking, and where it seems to be going. And we have to find a strategic way of telling the story and of intervening into it, so that we can win people (not back) to a new set of popular political possibilities. Among other things, that means that we have to find a way of speaking about the U.S. without allowing the Right to say that opponents—intellectual and activist—of the current formation and direction of the country actually hate America, so one need not listen to them. You have to find ways of talking about the U.S. as complexly as we need to talk about everything (because that's another commitment of Cultural Studies). **Nothing (well, perhaps it is better to say nearly nothing) is simply and purely one thing, one way, good or evil. It is only out of that analysis of the complexity that one can find new possibilities, of what is it coming, of the choices we have to and can make.**

E: That's what you were thinking about when you first met Cultural Studies?

L: No. Well, I mean, I've been thinking about, advocating and trying to do Cultural Studies for thirty-five years. This current concern started more recently. For a long time, I wrote about kids and popular music, what I called rock, but I used the term

very broadly to talk about youth culture rather than a particular musical genre. I was writing about it because I was convinced they were political possibilities in the culture of rock. This was a very different sense of political possibility and political responsibility, an outgrowth from my involvement in and fascination with the counterculture (including the anti-Vietnam war and civil rights movements) while I was in college during the second half of the 60s’.

### **The politics of music**

It was clear that the music was very important and I wanted to figure out why. There were lots of different groups in the counter-culture; many of them didn’t like each other. There were groups who have no explicit politics but were into drugs and psychedelics and meditation, and there were groups who were into organizing the Marxist revolution and who hated drugs because they thought drugs were a bourgeois, luxury or an ideological distraction. But the music held everyone together. I wanted to understand that. (By the way, some of the same divisions still continue to haunt the left, but we no longer have a common music.) It pushed me into a broader project of understanding how music works, why it is often so important in political struggles, and what the possibilities are for its political articulation. And of course, that lead me into even broader questions about the political power—and the importance—what I came eventually to describe as the affective power—of music and popular culture. **I wanted to know what the political possibilities were, and what were the conditions that seemed to enable political articulations in some circumstances but not in others.** So I spent fifteen or twenty years trying to answer that question, those questions. I think those questions were political but they were very different politics. They were about the conditions of possibility of politics, about the relations between systems of meaning (ideology) and the organizations of maps of mattering what I called “affect”). They were about in part how you mobilize people.

If you look at America today, over sixty percent of Americans no longer support the war, but they don’t do much about it. How do you get people motivated to stand up and do something, how do you mobilize people. Ah, music has that ability because it works affectively and I still believe that’s important. My research suggests that the fact that the New Right generally occupies the leading position depends on the dominance of affect in contemporary American politics.

### **Cultural Studies is not**

There are many different kinds of forms of political engagement that Cultural Studies has. **What I am opposed to is when Cultural Studies becomes another academic activity.** When you say, “Well, Gee! No one has written about a Cultural Studies approach to this TV show, so I will do it.” Well, then it becomes just like any other academic activity, and I get very nervous.

It doesn't mean Cultural Studies shouldn't be academic and shouldn't be rigorous, and shouldn't be the highest quality scholarship. But it means the questions that **Cultural Studies answers come out of not in academy but of people's lives in the real world.** The radical sociologist named C. Wright Mills, a very important critical thinker in the years after the second world war, wrote that when a graduate student came to him and asked 'What should I write my dissertation about?' He said, 'Well, what do you care about when you are not being a student? What matters to you in the real world?' Cultural Studies is similar to that. The world asks the questions, not your professor or your discipline.

E: Is there any relation between how your concerns have changed and some changes in youth culture or rock culture?

L: There is a connection. A biographical one. In some ways it goes back to an earlier book, *We gotta get out of this place*, in which, starting from a consideration of rock culture, I ended up talking about the complex relations between that culture and the culture of the then emerging New Right. My latest book, *Caught in the Crossfire*, was the unintended result of my effort to write an essay on rock culture in the 90s', on how youth culture and its relation to its music was changing. But I couldn't write it. The pieces did not seem to fit together into a good story. I found that the theoretical concepts and relations I had developed to talk about rock culture in earlier decades of youth culture did not seem to capture the dynamics and contradictions of 90s youth culture. So I did some research, started interviewing kids, and going to clubs where kids played and listened to music. Lots of kids said the same thing to me: "You don't understand us because you think being young is good, and we think being young sucks." People suggested that they were talking about adolescence, which is always a terrible time but I knew that this was not what the kids were saying about their world. So I began to research how contemporary America relates to, treats and speaks about its own kids, and how this has changes over the past 65 years. So I then started to rethink that what became the book.

Now I think in that process, two other thoughts entered in. One of the biggest problems in American politics is that, to a surprising extent, a large percentage of the people seem disinterested and uninvolved. Less than half of Americans vote in elections. It's very hard to get Americans to protest or even to think strategically even in the context of the changing directions of U.S. society. I thought maybe focusing on what these changes are doing to the kids would do it, would connect to people's mattering maps as it were, because Americans still think they treat their kids well and they do, for the most part, when taken individually. It's very common in American politics to hear people say, "We're doing it for the kids," or "we must do it for the kids". So I thought maybe if I could speak to people's concerns about children, I could get them engaged in political thinking.

The other thing I thought was that in some way I owed it to kids. I made my career,

and it has been relatively successful, in part through my writings about kids. I started out writing about my own generation, but I continued writing about younger generations. I thought that I sort of owed them something. I wrote an article once called “**Reflections of a disappointed popular music scholar**” It was my announcement that I was no longer writing about rock—in part because I was never writing about rock. I was always writing about the place and power of rock culture in articulating the politics of a particular context. But one of the things I said was how disappointed I was by the fact that people who had built their careers by writing about kids and kids’ culture felt no responsibility to become public spokespersons, like advocates, when kids were in trouble. That seems to me a significant problem with lots of academic work on rock music and youth culture.

E: Can you tell us what kind of action you take besides your writing work?

L: Ah, well, as I have said, the normal answer I gave to that question is it’s not relevant to my academic work. I am engaged in a variety political activities, but I am engaged in them as a citizen, a father, a Jew, etc. I am also engaged in lots of activities that are neither political nor intellectual. And I am engaged in other activities as an academic; I teach these arguments and stories. I have given lectures in public and I have been to radio’s talk shows in which I tried to bring forward questions of kids. On many national radio programs in which they wanted me to blame all of the problems kids have on the New Right and the Republicans, I have had to argue that it is not that simple and that unless we understand the situation in all of its complexity, we will not find both viable and successful strategies for social change. As a scholar I think that’s my responsibility--to produce knowledge and share it with the world and enter into the conversation.

There are a number of network around the world united in their concern over kids’ issues, trying to create kind of alliance around protecting and empowering kids. In some places, in Africa for example, it’s much worse than America. There are many places where very young kids have been forced to military service. So I am involved in some of those conversations. **I think the struggle over the future of America is an important struggle for the rest of the world, because what happens to America will likely have extraordinary impact on other parts of the world.** The same thing is probably true of China by the way. What direction China decides to go in will have a profound impact, will no doubt help to shape, what happens across the world. So although I am interested in it, I am glad to support these global issues, given that I haven’t found enough energy or time, I am convinced that as a scholar, I really need to focus on the United States, about the changing ways we treat our children and about why these changes are happening, why we allow them to happen. And I think once one begins to ask these questions, then inevitably I need to think the later set of economic, political, social and cultural changes taking place in America. Only then can we think about the society we want to become. Is this the way we want the rest of the world to see us? Is this the role we want to play in the rest of the world?

E: We read one of your papers called “Identity: Is that all there is?” It is very inspired. In it, you mentioned the story about how to understand the 90s’ rock music. Can you use this framework to figure out how you understand identity?

L: We’re talking about two different but related frameworks. I have been developing a kind of theoretical framework that tries to bring together, in Cultural Studies, to discourses: on the one side, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari and on the other side, of Stuart Hall and Gramsci. That has always been my project. I think the division within much of contemporary left politics, between so called autonomous, local politics, and state politics, is very interesting but problematic. As is the divide between a political conjuncturalism and a certain postmodern materialism.

### **The framework of rock culture**

The framework I developed for rock culture didn’t work like that; it did not operate on the same level of abstraction. It was a much more concrete framework in which I argued that rock is defined by certain kind of contexts, relations and effects. My argument was that the politics of rock were never about politics in a narrow sense. It was about not wanting to grow up to be like your parents because their lives were boring. Everyday life is necessarily boring, but you don’t recognize that. Hence, I wrote an article called “**I’d rather feel bad than I feel anything at all**”, and another called “**Another boring day in paradise**”.

That framework—which in its own way did try to bring Deleuze and Hall together--enabled me to say something interesting and I hope useful about rock culture by locating it in the particular contexts, and those contexts enabled me to understand how the music was working and what it was doing. But at a certain moment, it seemed to have lost its power; instead, there was empirical evidence that the music wasn’t working in the same way. I will give some examples: for kids in America by the 1990s’, their taste in music is much more eclectic and collective. If you go to a college party, you will hear people play country, pop, worldbeat, hard rock, etc. They play everything, but may not like everything. If you go and ask them, “Do you like that?” They may say, “No, but it’s okay because my friends like that.” This is a kind of tolerance, but you won’t find this in the 60s’ and 70’ because your identity was invested in your music taste. Similarly, intimacy seems to have been disconnected from sexuality and reattached to very strong friendship bonds, which stand in some ways opposed to dating.

These things were just symptoms not only that the music was working differently but that other significant features of their world had changes. Hence I had to go back to think about the different context. That’s why I interviewed kids and they said, “What’s different is being young isn’t very good.” I think there is another thing different. In 1980s and 90s, music doesn’t belong to kids any more. Your parents may probably

like the same music as you do. That's a problem. Music up until a certain moment had a special quality, now with ipods, and satellites and soundtracks, and computers and the web, music is not only integrated into capitalism (that doesn't interest me as much), but into everyday life so completely. You don't go out Saturday night to hear music as a special event, because you hear music every day.

Hence, the framework of understanding rock culture in America in the post-war years that I described as the "rock formation" was not working. But I would now say that if that was the "rock formation" then kids are not living inside that culture anymore. Music doesn't work in the same way, and I don't know how it works, but I can see reasons why it doesn't work in the same way because the context has changed. I still believe the theoretical framework that I laid down in the article you referred to, however, provides the broad framework for thinking through the contemporary cultural formations.

**E: Identity seems to be a non-issue for the new generation, how can we understand it?**

L: I don't know, you tell me. Beyond the research that fed into *Caught in the Crossfire*, I haven't done enough research on the place of identity in younger generations. Your very question is sort of data for that, isn't it? But I can give you an impression saying that, yes, I don't think kids are so obsessed with marking themselves as different and constructing identities for themselves, either in rock culture, using their music; or in a broader society. It's what some people glimpse sometimes as post-feminism. Some girls, especially younger girls, don't particularly see the need for feminism. They don't want to define themselves as feminists; they don't want to foreground such a political identity. They can do this of course because they're taking for granted the world that feminism has already helped to transform. I do not think post-feminism can simply be explained ideologically—that is the media present certain—particularly unattractive-- images of feminism and feminists, Even you look at the hip-pop culture in the late 70s' and the early 80s' when the music first breaks in America. There was a huge debate about the place of black and white: Could there be white performers of hip-pop? And could there be white fans of hip-pop? Those debates don't exist any more, and kids don't really think about it. That's partly because so much of the audience for hip-pop is white, but it's also because the kids just don't seem to worry about that--as the kids were saying when I talked to them, "Why you're worried about that shit? It's academic. It's your generation's thing, not ours." But that's an impression; and, to tell you the truth, it's not a kind of research I want to do.

### **The state of political culture in the U.S**

What I am more interested in is the state of political culture in the U.S., its relation to the popular and to kids. If you go back that article you mentioned, it points to a very real and deep split within the American "left." On the one side, the dominant group,



is what you might call a marxist or socialist or at least economic/class left. It controls the Left media including magazines like “The Nation” or “The Progressive.” It’s a group that Judith Butler and others have called “Left Conservatism”. They don’t like the name obviously, but these are people who say that the contemporary political struggle is all about class and capitalism, and all other questions--of culture and identity--are at worst distractions and at best secondary. Some of these peoples actually imagine that in the 1960s’, the socialist Left was about to win the revolution in America, but then it got distracted by all these other questions like identity and culture. Now personally, I think that is an absurd fantasy and a very peculiar reading of history.

This dominant group has also constructed itself in opposition to what it often calls the cultural left—which includes a wider range of very different and often contradictory (and often unfriendly) groups and positions of the progressive left. First, what I would call the Cultural Studies left (which is largely academic but not entirely) and includes people concerned with culture and discourse, with ideology and everyday life, with media and popular culture. Now some of these people are also involved in the second set of groups and positions—those concerned with what are often called identity politics. **Cultural Studies and identity politics are not the same but there are a lot of overlaps.** There are a lot of people who work on the identity doing it from a perspective of cultural theory, but not all. There are all sorts of identity based social movements that are nationalist, or essentialist, that do not care in the least about cultural theory, and are often as hostile to the academy and to theory as anyone on the right.

### **Move from identity**

You see the conflict. When you seem to be losing most if not all the time, you return to the kind of sense that it’s all about capitalism and class. The kind of retreat from that thinking that would give you a new stand. My position here, I mean I am obviously associated with the cultural politics side (although I too believe class and capitalism are crucial to any understanding of what’s going on), but I am less identified with identity politics. While the socialist left wants to argue that identity politics (feminism, etc.) has fractured the Left, and the Left can’t win because it’s too fractured, **my argument is that identity politics was correct and crucial to rethink the reduction of all politics to class/economics, and to criticize the limited perspective of the traditional in the contemporary world.** The Left cannot go back and pretend that such forward movement has not been crucial. And thus, we need to think about how to get beyond identity politics into new forms of politics and alliances. **We know where class politics leads; it ignores all the problems of any group that isn’t defined entirely by capitalism. Well, Marxism is absolutely crucial not because it’s right but because it gets you so far and then you need to ask how we go further.**

I think it is the same true of various forms of identity politics and identity theory and identity work, but in the present context, their argument I would like to make is that we have to go from identity politics back to the social formation. **I think in the best identity work, it starts with identity and ends up somewhere else, with better understanding of the social formation in all of the complexity.** Too much of American identity politics ended up being about individual identities, groups, rather than about the society. But now, we need to realize that the question was never about identity but about understanding the social formation, what Cultural Studies calls the conjuncture, and the specific ways it is structured by gender, race, sexuality, etc. For example in gender theory, you start with a question of how gender is constructed but you end up with the questions about how society itself functions in all of those places where gender and sexuality matters, not just in the family but the work place, the street. We live in the sexualized and gendered society. It's not about identity, not about women as group, it's about the society. That was what I try to begin to argue in that article, to find the way to think about identity, to move from identity into the questions of the society, and to get a way from individual and group identity.

E: Instead of “differences”, you prefer to talk about “others” when you are talking about identity in the article. How do you use it to see the social formation?

L: I think much of the theory of identity today has been overly shaped by the poststructuralist theories of negativity and difference, still largely influence by Hegel and Kant, and a certain reading of Heidegger. I think Derrida is one of these people you have to read and absorb because he is a brilliant philosopher and much of what he said about the way language functions is central to beginning to think about the limits of modern thinking. But I also think there are severe limits to his position. And I think **the logic of deconstruction through which all social relationships are reduced to difference is a problem.** I don't want to say there aren't differences; you can't understand what the “feminine” is without understanding its relation to the “masculine” and vice-versa. It is true, but it doesn't mean that is all there. It is similar to positions described as social constructionism--which I am not—that say that language constructs reality, including for example gender. So the only difference of male and female is constructed through the binary negativity, the logic of language. I don't believe that. I believe there are biological differences; I believe there are not just differences but otherness. English hasn't the way to say this because there are different kinds of differences. **One kind of difference is relational in a sense that you can only understand it by putting it next to this, but another kind of difference is that it has a positive identity, not defined only by the negativity, like woman is not man; it is defined by positivity which may be material, or historical, etc.** I do not believe language (or negativity, or difference) produces reality; I believe it is an active agent (one among many) in the constant reconfiguration of (or struggle to reconfigure) reality.

**The positivity of the other**

It is much more obvious if you want to talk about colonized or indigenous people, saying “I am sorry but being indigenous people in Latin America is only about your difference from the colonizer, about how you have been constructed as different by the colonizer. But the indigenous, the colonized, existed before the colonizer came in. They had a culture, history, and a system of social relationship that defined their reality. Yes, the colonizers come along and may try to deny it and destroy it, and largely try to construct the indigenous people only in terms of the difference. But that doesn’t mean we have to go along with the colonizer or that would be an adequate basis for analysis. I also think the kind of technologies of power that produce differences matter, and may produce different differences as it were. I want to hold on to some positivity of the other, which I think of as a very Foucauldian and Deleuzian notion, against Derrida. It has profound consequences.

One of the things I don’t like in some Cultural Studies works is the assumption that the dominant, the powerful, has strategies, while the subordinated, the oppressed only have what are called tactics, the ability to disrupt as it were. But I don’t know any oppressed people that are completely oppressed everywhere in their lives. Yes, this black person may be subordinated by racialized structures in relation to the white person; he or she may not have power, but the black man in relation to his black wife has power, and in relation to black kids, and so on. **The simple image is that somehow you can define the oppressed in simply negative terms-- the absence of power or strategy. That’s part of it, but it is always more complex, they always have positive things they bring to any context, and that is also what we have to understand.** So in that sense, I think there is a tendency out of identity politics, to see the world both as a social construction, language makes the world, and then forget the material reality, and to see power in purely negative terms of difference. There is no place for the positive to achieve anything so that’s what I think people like Foucault and Deleuze bring to the discussion.

[E: But you see your position as distinct from various versions of postmodernism?](#)

L: Yes. If we want to understand something—for example, how a newly invented alliance of various groups into a new conservatism has worked, we have to put the pieces together, that is the difficulty, and that is where post-modernism goes wrong. On the one hand, too many versions of progressive thought assumes in advance that it always knows the answer, that it knows what is going on, what the political stakes or struggles are. In a way, the world is just the same as it always has been, same old, same old. Been there, done that. On the other hand, too many postmodernisms in a way, decide that there can be no answer, that everything is so fragmented that there can be no coherent description, or that everything is so totally new and different that none of the categories we have available to us can be of any use. I think **Cultural Studies thinks you have to do two things: figure out what is old and what is new, and how they are affecting each other, and second, put the pieces together,**

**recognize and embrace the complexity but also understand that the complexity is always structured, always organized, however temporarily, by relations of power.** That's what Cultural Studies does. **One of things you realize when you do this is that you can put the pieces together in different ways, and that makes different pictures, and different pictures will tell you different stories and different stories offer different political possibilities.**

E: Can you use “other” to explain the relation between “youth” and “adult”?

L: I wouldn't want to call youth an “other”. You have to be careful of how you use the category because it's not about discovering the other. In a sense I want to say everyone is other. It's about emphasizing not only the difference, the negativity, but also the positivity of the relationships. There are positive characteristics of youth. I am not interested in merely finding their negativity that is different from adults. In the case of America in the politics of youth as I discussed in my book, one of the things happening is that more media present kids as if they were an “other.” You got stories like “it's okay, your kids are weird but it's because they have different brain structures.” They are another species, another biological stage or entity—and that would seem to justify all sorts of ways of treating them. They are increasingly stereotyped, the actions of one generalized to an entire generation, and there are few objections. These ways of talking about kids make me very nervous, because we don't treat other species very well. I don't want to say kids are others; rather kids are like us. That is what needs to be said in the present context. Because that's political question, it would be politically dangerous to use the vocabulary of otherness of kids.

E: You mentioned in your book “**Caught on the Crossfire**” that students are not interested in political things. Do you find any change in the campus now?

L: I don't think there is much of change. In the 60s', American campuses were characterized by about fifteen to twenty percent of students who were active in progressive politics; and we now know, probably slightly more students were active in conservative politics. Research suggests that in the 60s, there were more college students involved in the Right wing organizations than the Left wing. Then you have sixty to seventy percent of college students in America that have been relatively apolitical. I think that's not changed. There are still a lot of kids politically active, both on the left and the right. (In the adult population, it seems easier to mobilize people on the right these days.)

**What has changed are two things: one is the economy.** Students worry about their economic future, in ways that certainly my generation and some generations after that didn't. I didn't worry if I got arrested. It wouldn't mean that I didn't get a job, because there were so many jobs in the future. But now, there seem to be so few jobs. Moreover, this economic uncertainty has been magnified by the apparent collapse of the middle class, and the perception that one needs to be increasingly rich to be

comfortable, so I joke that there is more interest in majoring in what I call “pre-wealth”.

**The other thing I think that has changed is the whole discourse of politics of America**, as the country moves to the Right. I do not think one can imply dismiss this as manipulation, nor can one simply assume that in fact, the majority of Americans have actually become conservative (in ideological and emotional terms).

I don't like to talk about what's happening elsewhere, but I think a lot of what's happening in America is happening elsewhere, and is becoming more common. It won't happen in exactly the same way. I am also seeing some of what I describe happening to kids in the sense of society cutting back on the resource it is giving to kids and increasingly seeing its own children as a problem. I was very surprised to see a protest in the paper yesterday about children's poverty in Hong Kong.

E: We know that you have taught in a communications department for years, how do you see Cultural Studies articulated to communication?

L: Yes, you have to understand first of all how I got into the discipline of communication. I was at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in England, and after I left, I spent around two years traveling around Europe with a theater company. When I came back to America, I was living in New York, and decided to go back to graduate school. So I called up Stuart Hall, and said “Where do I go?” and he said, “The only person in the United States who is doing Cultural Studies as we know it is a guy named Jim Carey, teaching in the University of Illinois.” So I wrote to Jim, and said, “I want to come to work with you.” And he wrote back to me, saying, “Well, I am sorry but it's too late to apply.” So I told him that he had been recommended to me by Stuart Hall. Jim had met Richard Hoggart, the founder of the CCCS, and knew of Stuart Hall and the center. He knew they were doing something parallel to what he was trying to do, but he didn't know what in any detail what the Center was actually doing. Anyway, there was no email, so he called me up, “You were at the center of Birmingham?” I said, “Yes.” “Okay, give me a little while and I'll get you in.” So he did, and I drove to Illinois to go to graduate school.

I didn't know he was in the Department of Communication, and I hadn't applied really to it, but applied to Jim Carey. It was only when I arrived and went to his office that I noticed that he was the director of something called the Institute of Communication Research. I actually asked him, “What is the discipline communication?” Birmingham understood itself as kind of arguing against certain models of communication. I knew that. But there is a discipline called communication? I didn't know that. One of the reasons is because in the 70s', there were only two disciplines in the United States that had interest in Cultural Studies: Communication and Education. In both, it was a very small group, just a couple of people, like Jim,

trying to do something. Some of the Frankfurt school people were still around. In education, they were very interested in the early works in the 70s' like Paul Willis' "Learning to Labor". That was it. I spent a lot of effort to get the field of communication to accept Cultural Studies as a way of doing work, both narrowly in media studies but also more broadly in the academy. There were people in performance study, and in organizational study, but primarily in media study. By then, other disciplines had discovered Cultural Studies, especially English and anthropology. But English is so much more powerful as a discipline and so much larger—in terms of the number of professors for example, so it is much more powerful than communication studies. I think one of the worst things to happen to Cultural Studies was that the discipline of English discovered it, because it's a very insular discipline which both claimed to have discovered Cultural Studies even as it appropriated into its standard—over-textualized, over-normative--practices.

People outside of America think of me as a significant figure in Cultural Studies, but I don't know if I am in America, because most people in English ignore me. I am in Communication, and they don't ever read anything in Communication. So it's very different academic sociology. In some ways, I am much better known outside of America than I am in it.

[E: So is it coincident that you do research about pop music, even rock culture, in a communication department?](#)

L: Yes. When I started to work on popular music, everyone except Jim Carey said to me that it was a stupid thing to do. There is no field. No one does this and takes it seriously enough to do. How can you get a job? And who is going to publish this? You can't do it in university. (Of course, they said the same thing about my doing Cultural Studies, and about my work in the philosophy of communication and culture. So there was my entire career, all of my interests, defined as impossible). In the same way, people faced strong opposition to the study of films (and later, television). For film studies, the compromise was basically to study films as if they were literature. It studies the texts of the films, and also constituted them within an evaluative notion of an aesthetic tradition. Films could be studied because they were, the art of the twentieth century. They could not study trash, the popular, and of course, for the most part, that was what I wanted to study—what everyone else thinks is trash. You can't make pop music into art. The rest of the academy assumed that it hadn't any aesthetic value. When I began to do my work—no one took popular music seriously and no one was really studying it. And of course, Cultural Studies had not yet become established.

And I think that **one of the characteristics of Cultural Studies is that it tends to take up topics that no one else seems to have taken notice of, or seems to be interested in studying.** Someone asked Stuart Hall why he started to write about ideology, and he said, "in part because no one else on the Left was". That would be an

argument I had to make for popular music. Whether or not you think it's good, we now have generations listening to this. By the 1970s', it was one of the largest media industries in the world. Shouldn't we need to figure it out? But I had to make those arguments. When I first started to teach a class called "Popular music and youth cultures," it got very popular, enrolling hundreds of students. The university told me I couldn't teach it, because popular music wasn't a serious subject, wasn't worth teaching. So I had to write 25 pages to justify teaching popular music. I talked about the economics, and the industry, and about how important the music was to not only youth culture but also contemporary society. Finally the university agreed that there were good reasons why popular music might be taught in the university. But then they turned around, and said that I could not teach it because I liked the music too much. And I had to write another letter back to them that said I would accept their position only if they applied it as a universal principle in the university, so no one can teach anything that they like. Only the people who don't like Shakespeare get to teach Shakespeare. Eventually, they had to admit that it was a principle they could not apply in the university. So they let me teach it but I had to limit the numbers of students.

E: We are interested in the question you posed in the conference: how to protect and favor the institutional victories that we have made for the next generations? What do you think?

L: I don't know the answer. What I do know is part of the problem. There is a theory out there that suggests that much of contemporary social life and experience can be explained by realizing that we live in a "risk society." I always thought something was wrong about this notion, and it struck me this morning in the shower. **It's not that we live in the society, which has more risks than any other societies.** People who lived a thousand years ago had more risks than we do. **But we do live in a society dedicated to the avoidance of risks; we live in a society in which people think they shouldn't have any risks, so we want insurance for everything, and we want guarantees about the consequences of our actions (or the lack of consequences).**

### **Risks of institutional work**

When I did those things like teaching popular music or Cultural Studies and starting to write about it, and helped to institutionalize it (and participated in the creation of institutions to support such activities), I know I was taking a risk. There were no jobs in these areas; there were few places willing to publish essays on either Cultural Studies or popular music, to say nothing about Cultural Studies of popular music. No one really knew or understood what I was up to. People told me that I should play it safe and postpone doing the things I wanted to do until I had a job, and even tenure. I was putting my career at risk. But for me, there was no question—it was not only that this is what I wanted to do, what excited me, but also what I thought I had to do in the context of a broader project of trying to understand what was going on, and to find ways of intervening, as an intellectual and academic, to open up new political

possibilities.

I do not mean to sound like an old curmudgeon, or like someone nostalgic for braver generations. But I do think that the social context has changed in ways that make it more difficult for people to accept and even embrace risk. A lot of my students want my guarantee, “If I write the dissertation, tell me I am not taking any risk, that I will still get a good job.” And I say, “It might be that you are taking a risk, so what? If this is the dissertation you want to write, you have to write, then write it.”

**If you want to do the institutional work, you have to take risks.** Institutional work is always risk, risk that you put in five years of your life and it doesn't work, risk that you are piece off, and alienate other people in the university for one reason or another. I think it's getting harder for people to take on.

E: The last question. We know you edited a new book called “New Keywords” with Tony Bennett and Meagan Morris. We want to know what's the difference from the older one by Raymond Williams?

L: I don't think the agendas are different. I think for us as for Raymond it is about the fact that cultures matter, and that critical self-reflective discussions about the ways it matters, and where it matters, can only help public deliberation. So we wanted to bring the issues of culture that are at stake in many political debates to some explicit discussion and consciousness. I think it's much the same as Raymond was trying to do with the original “Keywords”. Obviously, lots of changes have occurred in terms of what those debates are, and we try to be little more multinational to have at least three countries in the discussion. But interestingly **Raymond Williams was deeply committed to pedagogy, not just in the classes but also as public pedagogy. And the three of us are deeply committed to that process, that public pedagogy.** For us, it is an important statement, and it is important to write the book to speak outside the academy. We also decided that we could not write the book on our own, so unlike Raymond's book, ours is written by many different invited people. Maybe that is a statement about or a reflection of the proliferation of knowledge and the professionalization of expertise in our times. I do not know. It just seemed like the right way to do it.