

CULTURAL STUDIES IN SEARCH OF A METHOD, OR LOOKING FOR CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS

Lawrence Grossberg

Abstract: Conjunctural analysis is a conversation across many fields, discourses, knowledges and institutions, a conversation one seeks to advance by humbly offering the best contributions one can. Too often, a conjuncture is simply treated as a context defined by some boundary, often but not necessarily a given space and period of time. This article attempts to uncover some of the concepts and assumptions that have driven the author's own efforts as part of a broader collaborative effort, and that have, over the course of more than four decades, constituted his passion for cultural studies. The article offers some theorising on the conjunctural analysis to open up and continue the important conversation, and hopefully to move the possibilities of political analysis a bit further on.

Keywords: conjunctural analysis, radical contextuality, war of position, problem space, organic crisis

The specificity of cultural studies lies in its commitment to conjunctural analysis as an always ongoing and incomplete project, but its strength lies in its recognition that the project is always, necessarily, a collaborative one, even when we are not thinking about the larger, collective conversation. Conjunctural analysis is a conversation across many fields, discourses, knowledges and institutions, a conversation one seeks to advance by humbly offering the best contributions one can. For the past twenty-five years, I have devoted a good part of my political and intellectual energies to contributing to such a collaborative project, an evolving conjunctural analysis, of the contemporary U.S.¹ The first (*We gotta get out of this place*, 1992) used popular culture, especially music, as a way into the 'settlement' represented by Reaganism and the New Right, while the second (*Caught in the crossfire*, 2005) used the changing state and status of children and youth as a way into the re-configuration of the New Right under G.W. Bush.² Yet such efforts were never more necessary than in the past five years, especially given the failure of an effective progressive opposition, despite its numbers and vitality (*We all want to change the world*, 2015, began with this paradox) and the success of, but more importantly, the chaos surrounding and enabling, a resurgent populist nationalism and reactionary conservatism.³

Each time I think I am getting the conjunctural story right, the terms of the conjuncture shift, and my theoretical and empirical tools are sharpened.

1. This essay draws on the appendix of my *Under the cover of chaos: Trump and the battle for the American right*, London, Pluto, 2018, together with some of my earlier work: 'Wrestling with the angels of cultural studies' in David Morley and Julian Henriques (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Conversations, projects and legacies*, London, Goldsmiths University Press, 2017, pp117-126; 'Making culture matter, making culture political' in Cecile Sandten, Claudia Gualtieri and Roberto Pedretti (eds.), *Crisis, risks and new regionalisms*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017. (I am indebted to Jennifer Slack, John Clarke and Carolyn Hardin for their insightful criticisms and suggestions).

2. Lawrence Grossberg, *We gotta get out of this place*, London, Routledge, 1992; *Caught in the crossfire*, Boulder, Paradigm, 2005.

3. Lawrence Grossberg Online. https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-book/we_all_want_to_change_the_world.pdf

Using Althusser's concept of the structure in dominance, I might say that in Reaganism, the emergent New Right was defined by a struggle for dominance between the economic (neoliberalism) and ideological (social conservatism) levels.⁴ For G.W. Bush, the economic was clearly dominant and for Trump, I would suggest that the political is dominant but also because it has rearticulated and been rearticulated by the culture wars of the 1960s.

4. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London, Penguin, 1969. (Hereafter *For Marx*).

The current context of the U.S. – leaving unaddressed important questions about both the temporal boundaries of that context, its constitutive relations to other 'places', and its similarities to developments in other parts of the world – is just the sort of state of affairs that called cultural studies, as conjunctural analysis, into existence. Everything seems to be in flux, or better, everything presents itself as a possible site of contradiction and struggle. The economies – at each instance of production, distribution and consumption, and in each sector – are not only unstable but going through transformative changes; the institutions of political power are failing or being challenged and made to fail by competing forces; social relations are in disarray and the structures of social differences have become, once again, the touchstones of highly charged struggles over collective identities and individual rights; and every dimension of culture – its forms and technologies – have exploded such that, on the one hand, it is no longer clear how it is working or what affordances are at play, and on the other hand, the divide between 'two cultures', two national imaginaries, has overwhelmed any sense of national belonging and political negotiation. The result is – well, it all seems to be going to hell in a handbasket, and no-one seems to be able to make sense of it, to offer a compelling diagnosis of what's going on, to say nothing of what to do about it. All of which is made evident by a rather obvious but inexplicable paradox: U.S. society seems to be more polarised than it has been at any time for at least a century. And yet, the dispersal of political responses and alliances has reconfigured the traditionally stable identifications of 'left' and 'right'. This paradox has two further dimensions: first, many of the people (primarily on the right) who vote for the most extreme candidates do so out of frustration with the inability of 'the establishment' to actually accomplish anything or to address 'their' problems, but their candidates inevitably further the polarisation and chaos that makes state politics ineffective. And second, many people who distrust established political institutions seem willing to place greater trust in the ability of corporations to address the needs of the public good.

Cultural studies emerged in response to just such contexts, where we don't know what is going on, or even what questions to ask, because the many struggles and contradictions don't seem to offer up a coherent narrative. The result is that we don't yet know what theories, concepts and methods may enable us to find useful answers, and to tell better stories. Profound changes with high stakes are taking place, and we cannot fuse the many struggles, contradiction and crises together into a neat, predefined totality or narrative. It is such contexts that call for conjunctural analysis. (And, if I may add a

personal note, if cultural studies cannot respond to the contemporary context, then I am not sure it has a reason to exist). It is this matter – conjunctural analysis – that I hope to clarify here.

There is one other – almost too obvious to mention – dimension of what defines cultural studies: the firm belief that culture matters. Culture is what makes the materiality of life lived and experienced. It provides the maps that organise the chaos and bring vitality to the material. It consists, at the very least, of competing operations of the construction and distribution – of meaning, feeling, belonging, mattering, subjectification, value, wealth, authority, differentiations, agency, representation, labour, control, responsibility, embodiment, and care, as well as assumptions about the nature of change, individuality, humanity, nature, knowledge, etc. It is more than common sense; it is the taken-for-granted and the ground of assurance that makes our actions possible. It is what makes reality lived. But it is most certainly neither accidental nor inevitable, nor the directly determined effect of other elements, even as it exists only in its relations to other operations and struggles.

Culture – in all its multiplicities – maps the ways we live with, within and against the material (economic, political and social) spaces of the different contexts, worlds and realities of our personal and collective lives. It describes how people live their everyday lives, their common-sense understandings of the world, the logics of judgment and calculation by which they confront the choices they are offered, and the organisations of affective possibilities and limits that shape the energetics, cohesiveness and textures of their lives. Culture is not a supplement to the ‘more real’ dimensions of politics and economics, it is co-constitutive of these dimensions.

But as I was writing my latest effort at conjunctural analysis – *Under the cover of chaos* – I realised that I did not have, and I could not find anywhere in the literature of cultural studies, a well-theorised understanding of how conjunctural analysis is to be done, and how a conjuncture is defined or constituted, at least for cultural studies as I attempt to practice it.⁵ Too often, a conjuncture is simply treated as a context defined by some boundary, often but not necessarily a given space and period of time. This is what I want to talk about here, not by offering an ‘authoritative’ or definitive answer to the question, but by uncovering some of the concepts and assumptions that have driven my own efforts as part of a broader collaborative effort, and that have, over the course of more than four decades, constituted my passion for cultural studies. I offer the following theorising on conjunctural analysis to open up and continue the conversation, and to move the possibilities of our political analysis a bit further on.

The concept of the conjuncture has a long history in Marxist theory, especially in the work of Lenin, Gramsci and Althusser; in this complex history, its meaning varies, sometimes referring to the surface phenomena as opposed to the structural essences, at other times to a specific historical context, and at still others to the occasional event as opposed to organic

5. Lawrence Grossberg, *Under the cover of chaos: Trump and the battle for the American right*. London, Pluto, 2018. (Hereafter *Under the cover of chaos*).

forces.⁶ But I do not want to pose either a genealogical or an exegetical question: What did Lenin, or Gramsci, or Althusser mean by it? Instead, I am interested in how it functions in cultural studies where there is something of a sense of uncertainty if not mystery surrounding it. Just as Hall, working almost always collaboratively, ‘transplanted’ the seeds that Gramsci had sown to find the tools needed to understand the emergence of what he called ‘Thatcherism’, I want to take some theoretical and analytical concepts and extend them, to think about how we can open them up to enable us to deal with these dangerous times. I want to ‘keep on theorising’, not because we are seeking the ‘right’ reading of Gramsci or Hall (or to ferret out exactly how they used them) but because we are trying to use their efforts to nurture concepts that may enable better, richer, more rigorous and more enabling analyses. In order to do this, I want to unpack and re-configure some key concepts from Gramsci and Hall that I have used, to deconstruct some of the all too often assumed relations and equivalences among them, in an effort to move cultural studies a bit further as a contemporary project. Theory is, after all, to be used, not worshipped.

I am interested in how one does cultural studies, when even the most commonly cited discussions of the methodology of conjunctural analysis as defining cultural studies are, surprisingly, neither as explicit nor as self-reflective as one might wish. Hall tells us, quite explicitly, that it does make a difference. For example, in discussing *Policing the Crisis*, he suggests that

If you’d just taken race as a black issue, you’d have seen the impact of law and order policies on the local communities, but you’d have never seen the degree to which the race and crime issue was a prism for a much larger social crisis. You wouldn’t have looked at the larger picture. You’d have written a black text, but you wouldn’t have written a cultural studies text because you wouldn’t have seen this articulation up to the politicians, into the institutional judiciary, down to the popular mood of the people, into the politics, as well as into the community, into black poverty and into discrimination.⁷

Yet, despite the attention it has received over the years, few people have commented on the fact that *Policing the Crisis* (*PTC*), perhaps the most commonly cited example of conjunctural analysis, succeeds despite the fact that it is surprisingly partial and incomplete.

Equally unremarked is how *PTC* managed to become the exemplar of cultural studies, given its more humble beginnings. After all, it started as a modest effort to examine a specific local criminal act and its treatment in the press and the courts, leading it to follow its obviously racialised construction – in the press, the courts and eventually, the popular imagination and common sense – as part of a broader class of racialised violence under the sign of ‘mugging’. Did they know in advance that this single event would

6. Juha Koivisto and Mikko Lahtinen, ‘Conjuncture, political-historical’. *Historical Materialism* 20.1, 2012, pp267-277.

7. Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Composition: Stuart Hall on Ethnicity and the Discursive Turn’, *Journal of Composition and Theory*, 18, 2, 1998, p192. Stuart Hall, Tony Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, John and Brian Roberts, *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*, London, Macmillan, 1978, p192. (Hereafter *PTC*).

lead them into broader struggles over race, and then into new articulations and discourses of racism? Probably not. And could they even have imagined that by uncovering these shifts in the fields of racialisation, they would begin to map the emergence of an organic crisis and a hegemonic struggle? Most certainly not. And was there any chance that they imagined that they would end up ‘predicting’ the popular and political success of a new ‘law and order’ conservative formation? Inconceivable!

So how do we understand the specificity of conjunctural analysis as a ‘method’? And how does one go about doing such political-intellectual labour? To begin with, one has to accept three basic premises that go against the deepest hubris of the academy. First, that every attempt will at best be partial and incomplete. In one sense, by traditional academic standards, it will always be a failure. But then, a conjunctural analysis is not a goal but a practice, a process, a critical analytic. Second, in the effort to do more than one can possibly do, conjunctural analysis must always be a collective effort. You would even be well-advised to try to make it collaborative but since the institutional constraints of the academy often make this difficult, one has to imagine one’s work as a contribution, perhaps a small one, to an ongoing conversation. And as such, your ‘gift’ may be unnecessary; it may be taken up and inflected or used in ways you had not intended; it may even be shown to be wrong. But that does not mean it has not contributed to the conversation, to the project of conjunctural analysis. And third, in the face of complexity, you have to start somewhere. Where one begins is something of a guess, or perhaps even an accident (determined by factors of passion, or assumed expertise, or immediate visibility). There are no guarantees where any particular starting point will lead you, how far or deep into the conjuncture it will take you, how much of the conjuncture it will make visible or hearable to one’s analysis. It may lead you to the heart of the matter – for example, to the emergent hegemonic struggle that Hall dubbed ‘Thatcherism’, to notions of the law and order society, and of authoritarian populism or it may lead you to a dead-end. More likely, it will direct you to some temporary conclusions, although you may not quite know what they are telling you about the larger contexts of struggle and change. This is a not uncommon dilemma for intellectuals: they know something, but they don’t know what they know.

My description of conjunctural analysis will proceed in two stages. First, I will propose that conjunctural analysis involves a strategic political choice – to work at a particular ‘level of abstraction’. Conjunctures define an effective site – perhaps the most effective site – for political intervention aimed at redirecting the tides of social change, and perhaps the most propitious level at which intellectual and political analysis converge. This is the level of the social formation as some sort of totality, however fragile and temporary. It is located between the specificity of the moment and the long *duree* of the epoch.⁸ Cultural studies need not deny the value of intellectual and political work at these or other levels of abstraction, but it does assert that work at

8. Vocabularies can be confusing here: Gramsci distinguished ‘organic forces’ from more ephemeral and short-term conjunctural events, but he also used conjuncture in the more robust sense I am offering here. See https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-chapter/Gramsci_MaintenanceofHegemony_0.pdf

the level of the conjuncture enables one to make visible/hearable some important things and to open up possibilities for struggle and change, not available at the other levels.

Second, I will propose that conjunctural analysis involves constructing the relations among (articulating) three relatively discrete analytical/critical practices (and their resulting constructions): the first treats the conjuncture as a complex context viewed politically as a war of positions. The second maps the multiple ‘problematics’ that cut across those various positions to construct a certain kind of ‘problem space’.⁹ And the third attempts to question whether and in what ways that problem space is given its own sense of unity through what Gramsci called ‘an organic crisis’. These three sets of practices or levels of analysis – all operating on the conjuncture – do not define a linear sequence, nor are the relations among them guaranteed in advance in any way. In fact, part of the driving force of conjunctural analysis is to accept that the answers to all three efforts can never be defined in advance, whether through theoretical or political assumptions/certainties. I think this complicated critical practice is what Hall had in mind when he talked about his ‘own kind of conjunctural thinking’.¹⁰

Here is my effort to figure this project:

Figure 1

A MODEL/METHOD OF CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS						
Moment	Overdetermined event	The production and organisation of the various dimensions of experience, interpretations, feelings, acts of judgment, possibilities and constraints on action, etc. that constitute the conditions of possibility of a specific event, distributed among multiple, fragmented constituencies				
CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS	War of positions: Articulations of the old and the new, interacting across levels	social relations/cultural identities/coalitions				
		economic formations and structures of identification and differentiation				
		political relations, distributions, formations (e.g., hegemony), apparatuses, etc.				
		Cultural—discursive and ideological—struggles Affective landscapes/structures of feeling/mattering maps				
	Problem space	problematics				
Organic Crisis?	Sites of lived crises Including modes of engagement and consent					
Epoch	Dominant Diagrams/Logics					
	Emergent Diagrams/Logics					

9. David Scott, *Conscripts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004. I am using Scott’s term differently than I believe he intends, and I might add, differently than I have used it before. I think I have read it before as equivalent to the organic crisis but here, I am distinguishing it from the organic crisis, partly to allow for multiple problematics within a problem space.

10. Cited in Helen Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall*, London, Sage, 2004.

However one marks the difference among the moment, the conjuncture and the epoch (and there are always complex relations among them), each defines and organises a context, both materially and expressively. Moreover, any event can be analysed at any of these levels; as I have said, it is matter of strategic judgment. One might see the relations among the three levels in Marxist terms, as a movement from the concrete to the abstract, or in Heidegger's terms, from the ontic to the (more) ontological. How one differentiates and identifies the 'levels' of the moment, the conjuncture and the epoch is a matter of analytic and political choice. But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there is a continuum, a movement from the concrete (ontical) moment to the increasingly abstract (ontological) epoch.

Approaching social change at a more specific (or more concrete) level of abstraction – the moment – threatens the political intellectual with the chaos of the overdetermined world. The moment describes how any particular event is constituted – overdetermined by both a materially organised socio-political terrain and a set of cultural practices and structures that constitute the ways in which different groups of people live the material (economic, social, political and cultural) conditions of their existence. While this is perhaps the most common and immediate response to significant political challenges, it is, in many ways, the least effective, both intellectually (because it is always overwhelmed) and politically (because it is always short-term). Hence, for example, the near impossibility of questions such as why Trump won the 2016 election if it is posed at the level of the moment, although it can be posed as a conjunctural and even an epochal question as well.

I want to spend a little more time here describing what it means to approach social change at higher levels of abstraction, as epochs, although we should recognise that the epoch is itself a multiple and complex construct. Epochal thinking has become increasingly common among some intellectuals and activists, but even more importantly from my perspective, as I shall suggest at the end of this paper, I think that the contemporary conjuncture demands that we take certain epochal challenges into account.

The epoch is the context of the longest duration – often measured in centuries and even, in some cases, millennia. It describes the more ontological and/or 'transcendental' conditions of existence. The terms 'ontology' is thrown around a lot these days, often with many different and often unspecified meanings, ranging from an unacknowledged essentialism, to questions about particular modes of being or existing in/with the world, to claims about the very nature of existence or reality.

Epochal thinking points us to the 'tectonic shifts' in the fundamental conditions of possibility, the fundamental modes of existence and ways of being, the fundamental nature of relations, structures and organisations, materialities and agencies. It constructs the constitutive conditions of

possibility of particular sorts of social formations, particular ways of being, particulate set of experiences and practices. At the level of human existence as multiple modes of being-in-the-world, these diagrams and logics are both material and discursive, embodied in institutions and apparatuses; they certainly cannot be reduced to a matter of ideas. It is here that the tectonic struggles over the nature and destiny of societies and histories are fought out and it is here that the very possibilities of imagination and transformation are determined. The heterogeneous struggles over and within an epoch constitute and express deep instabilities in conditions of our very way of being, threats to our ability to continue living within our realities.

In fact, we might distinguish three ‘layers’ of epochal thought: first, social ontologies, akin to Gramsci’s organic forces and Foucault’s diagrams (*dispositifs*), including for example, forms of governance (subjectivation and freedom), economies of value, organisations of spatiality and historicity, etc. Second, historical ontologies or logics, akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s abstract machines, or Heidegger’s epochs of being.¹¹ These logics both define the different strata of existence (inorganic, organic, sentient, intelligent), and the fundamental organisations of the strata, producing the ever-changing possibilities of relations and organisations of materialities and expressivities, of times and spaces, of human and non-human realities, of individualities and collectivities, of the forms of effecting and even controlling the behaviour of others, etc. Both social and historical ontologies are material and empirical, although the forms of their materialities and empiricities will be different from the other levels of abstraction. Such analyses may be vital to the task of conjunctural analysis. There is a possible third form of ‘ontological’ investigation, a ‘cosmological’ ontology, which claims – almost entirely on speculative (or ‘scientific’) grounds, to describe the true nature of existence. I am wary of such speculative ontologies, not on Kantian grounds – although I probably do agree that we cannot know reality in itself – but because such theories strike me as new universalisms. Thus, whatever the value of such speculation, I do not think they are particularly useful for the tasks of critical analysis in general, or cultural studies in particular.

The epoch calls for its own kind of analysis – diagrammatic and ontological – that maps the heterogeneous logics, organisations and apparatuses constituting the very possibilities (and limits) of our ways of being in the world. One need not assume that these diagrams are hidden below the surfaces of experience, the result of some sinister conspiracy or of necessarily repressed forces, available only to a select few. Still, denying that they are hidden does not mean that they are always and already immediately available to anyone who looks at the world; they may take specific kinds of work to be made visible, hearable, etc.

Epochal thinking often, by necessity, silences the complexities of the conjuncture, making it all too easy to read historical change along a single vector (e.g., capitalism, biopolitics, coloniality and racism, patriarchy).

11. I am well aware that Deleuze and Guattari identify Foucault’s *dispositif* with abstract machines. I find it useful to distinguish them.

Further at this level of abstraction, human agency or better, intentionality, is often severely limited, and as a result, instead of offering political strategies, they most commonly offer an ethics that assumes value in living according to the nature of reality as it is described within a particular speculative ontology.

CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS AND RADICAL CONTEXTUALITY

Cultural studies as conjunctural analysis locates itself in the space between the moment and the epoch. Before describing the three analytics that comprise it, I want to make two general observations about the way cultural studies understands the conjuncture as a context. The first, which will hopefully be fleshed out in my description of the analytics, is that cultural studies always analyses its context – a conjuncture – as a field of power.¹² A conjuncture is always a description/construction of a context as an unstable balance in the field of forces (embodied in structures of and struggles over power), some of which are specific to the conjuncture, and some are more organic or tendential forces that extend across conjunctures; some are new, some are old, and some are re-articulations of the old with the new.¹³ This is one way of describing the complexity of the conjuncture. This commitment to politicising the conjuncture in the first instance is defined by cultural studies' project itself: to offer better knowledges, better understandings or narratives of the conjuncture in order to provide resources for changing the world.

The second observation is that cultural studies practices what I have called a 'radical contextuality' committed to recognising the complexity of the conjuncture as a field of forces.

Cultural studies treats everything as relationally constituted, and every context as defined by the continual making, unmaking and remaking of relations. Nothing can be grasped apart from its context, and it is only within a context that its existence and effects are specified. The result is that cultural studies is not only anti-essentialist but also anti-anti-essentialist (to use Gilroy's felicitous phrase), and the only possible objects of study are contexts themselves.¹⁴ And while some critics have accused cultural studies of relativism and of falling into Mannheim's trap – that relativism cannot be true since its very assertion contradict its denial of Truth – cultural studies is not relativist! It is anti-universalist while claiming that realities (truths) do exist but only as and within specific contexts. But radical contextuality goes one step further, recognising the contingency and instability of any element or relation within a conjuncture. Relations then are never necessary ('no guarantees' as Hall often said), but they are, nevertheless, real – they have real effects. The 'identity' and effects of any element, relation or context are always both a result of the ongoing articulations of relations and assemblages, and their re-articulation in intellectual labour, and the

12. Cultural studies does not deny that there are other important ways of understanding contexts.

13. Williams' oft-cited distinction between dominant, emergent and residual may be a useful starting point for thinking about these complex relations, but it can also make the task seem easier than it actually needs to be. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978.

14. This anti-anti-essentialism has important implications for matters of what is commonly called 'identity politics' and struggles over social justice. See my discussion in *Under the cover of chaos* which draws heavily upon the work of, among others, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. See also Paul Gilroy, *Against race: Imagining political culture beyond the colour line*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000.

two are in indeed inseparable. One can only embrace the uncertainty and approach it with care.

As Williams put it in his early, second book, 'while we may, in the study of a past period, separate out particular aspects of life, and treat them as if they were self-contained, it is obvious that this is only how they may be studied, not how they were experienced. We examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole'.¹⁵ This vision of cultural studies was embodied in Williams often repeated call for a study of the relations among all the elements in a whole way of life, an impossible task if ever there was one.

Let me offer an allegorical anecdote for radical contextualism as a constructionist project. When my son was little, he loved Lego. We would buy him sets – and sometimes, only sometimes, he would build what the image on the cover presented as the 'proper' assemblage. More often (and always after he had built was he was 'supposed' to, I suppose we could think of it as the dominant narrative), he took the pieces and distributed them into some complex organisation that I never actually understood. And then, the real challenge, the real fun, began, as he forged new relations and constructed new assemblages. The pieces were defined by the place, the work they did, in whatever it was he assembled. And no doubt, the assemblages took on, to some extent, a life of their own. The more pieces he incorporated, the more the function of all the pieces changed, and the more whatever it was he was creating changed. The result was that his creation was constantly changing, to the point where it was no longer clear that he was in control; it was making and re-making itself.¹⁶

As the study of contexts, cultural studies refuses all forms of reductions, whether they assume that any single context or event is all about one thing only, or that everything is, in the last instance, about the same thing. A context cannot be described as a fixed, seamless totality where everything is neatly slotted into place as a result of some ultimately simple principle of determination. One cannot see the world in a grain of sand! And perhaps more importantly, one cannot organise the world according to the simple binaries that we have inherited, either in theory or common sense. The world is not simply divided between the old and the new, not only because what is old continues to exist and what is new is always shaped by its emergence from the old and therefore, is usually not so absolutely new, but also because the difference between the old and the new is itself a construction and a struggle within each context. At the same time, cultural studies cannot give in to the radical deconstructive impulse to abandon any claim to unity, totality or fixity. Relations are 'fixed,' but always and only temporarily, always open to change. Contexts are constructed as unities, but they are always unstable and their boundaries porous to varying degrees. Every event, relation or structure is, simultaneously, a condensation or

15. Raymond Williams, *Preface to film*, London, Film Drama, 1954, p21.

16. If we take this far enough, we end up with Deleuze and Guattari's machinic production.

fusion on the one hand, and a rupture or displacement on the other; everything is both a movement into something different, and a movement of containment.

Additionally, radical contextuality suggests that both theory and politics can only be understood and judged in relation to a context. The question is never what the right theory is, but what theories will help us better constitute and understand this particular context. The aim is never merely to bring self-assured political questions and positions, defined in advance by their own certainty, to the context, but to engage with the context, to (re-) map the complexities of how and where the struggles of power and difference are being staged and articulated. Such work is, still, driven in both the first and last instance, by the political passions of such intellectual projects and by the recognition of the vital role of theory. But the politics of cultural studies are never guaranteed. No doubt people who join the project have a vision of a better future, a better world. But I do not think that cultural studies has any necessary politics inscribed into its practices. Instead, it seeks to open up other political possibilities, to offer new practices that might change the current directions of history, to stage new vectors from the present to an essentially uncertain (but one hopes better) future.

There are a number of critical practices of radical contextuality, which have, in various instances, been taken up by different formations of cultural studies including a feminist commitment to the specificity of differences as performative, Foucault's analysis of *dispositifs* and discursive apparatuses, pragmatism's sense of situated knowledges and actions, and Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the production of the actual. And while these all have had an impact on cultural studies, it is often Marx's practice of historical specificity that has most profoundly shaped the way contexts are understood in cultural studies: as, on the one hand, a social formation, and on the other, a conjuncture. A social formation is defined by the fact that it is populated at least in part by people who exist in organised and repetitive social, political, economic and cultural relations, which are themselves embodied in and expressions of multiple interrelated and contradictory institutions (if only of custom, habit and tradition), and who generally have or attempt to have some sense of shared identity or common belonging.

Treating a social formation as a conjuncture describes cultural studies' way of 'living with' the complexity of the context; it defines a specific set of analytical demands, what Hall called 'the discipline of the conjuncture', to theorise and analyse the concrete complexity of a social formation.¹⁷ I believe the political power of cultural studies, and its emergence after the Second World War in many places – and perhaps its emergence is other times and places as well – depends not merely on its practice of contextuality but also on its commitment to conjunctural complexity. Every conjuncture is defined by the multiplicities and differences, across many domains and planes, as well as by the ever-changing and competing attempts to organise

17. Stuart Hall, *The hard road to renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left*, London, Verso, 1988, p162.

these complexities into particular structures, relations, unities and even totalities, however fragile and temporary they may be.

But it is not the conjuncture as an object of study that defines cultural studies, for there are no doubt other forms of political analysis that operate at this level of analysis. It is what cultural studies does at this level, the practice of conjunctural analysis – as a specific analytic project – that I want to elucidate here. And to that end, I want to move slowly, distinguishing three concepts or analytic practices: war of positions, problem space, and organic crisis. While these terms are often assumed to be necessarily related, even equivalent, I want to disarticulate them, to allow for a variety of historical and political diagnoses.¹⁸ I want to open up the possible ways these three powerful concepts might be related to each other in the analysis of particular social formations, although all I can do here is to offer one way of deploying them together, one that I believe is useful for the present. I will argue that a conjuncture is constituted at the indeterminate point where a war of positions demands to be understood as a problem space that might be, might have to be, articulated to/as an organic crisis. It is at the intersection of these three analytics where a hegemonic struggle might – but also might not – emerge.¹⁹

In the most common (empiricist?) narratives of the history of British cultural studies, this turn to conjunctural analysis and politics first explicitly appeared in the collaborative work that resulted in *Policing the Crisis*, often held up as the example par excellence of (British) cultural studies. (Of course, the fact that it ‘predicted’ the rise of Thatcherism helps here!). But it was not alone, and it was followed by such extraordinary works as *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982), *Women Take Issue* (1978) and *Education Limited* (1991) as well as the body of individual contributions by numerous individual scholars, including Stuart’s own essays collected in *The Hard Road to Renewal* (1988), as well as the work of Paul Gilroy, John Clarke, Angela McRobbie, etc. More recently, the project has been differently enacted in *The Kilburn Manifesto* (2014). These efforts to understand the rise of a new conservative/pro-capitalist formation, the emergence of new forms of political struggle, including the ways it deployed matters of difference – of race, sex and gender, depended explicitly on a significant transplanting of Gramscian concepts as contextually specific – of hegemony, organic crisis and conjuncture – into this new context. They also introduced other important concepts such as authoritarian populism, regressive modernization, and law and order society. This is perhaps why the history of the Birmingham Centre is widely read as an ongoing experimentation to produce cultural studies. But this understanding of cultural studies as conjunctural analysis can also be read backward, into the earlier work of the Centre, such as *Resistance through Ritual*. Other important sources of conjunctural analyses can be seen in Hall et al (2015), and Hall (2017a and b), as well as the many works of Doreen Massey.²⁰

18. I have to admit that I have myself often treated them as equivalent, especially the problem space and the organic crisis.

19. I would argue that in Hall’s and others’ analyses, they are articulated in the context of Thatcherism, Blairism, etc., but never assumed to be equivalent.

20. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Race and Politics Group): *The empire strikes back: race and racism in 70s Britain*. London, Hutchinson, 1982. Education Group, *Education Limited*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1991. *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the Left*, London, Verso, 1988, p162. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, *Resistance through ritual*, London, Hutchinson, 1976; Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin (eds.) *After neoliberalism: the Kilburn Manifesto*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2015. https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/free-book/after_neoliberalism_complete_0.pdf; Stuart Hall, *The fateful triangle: race, ethnicity, nation*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2017; Stuart Hall: *Selected political writings*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2017.

21. These questions, about the contextuality of cultural studies and the nature of the conjuncture were some of the last discussions I had with Stuart, and he was clearly working on them for what will hopefully be the second volume of his 'autobiography'.

THE CONJUNCTURE AS A WAR OF POSITION ²¹

A war of positions is the first political face of cultural studies' attempt to describe the articulated complexity of a conjuncture. In wars of positions, the political landscape of a social formation is composed as a multiplicity of shifting alliances organised around many different political differences, issues or struggles. If a war of manoeuvre imagines political struggle as a winner take all battle between two relatively homogeneous (even if the product of alliance) – armies or camps facing off across a single, fundamental frontier, a war of positions sees struggles dispersed across the full range of social positions, relations and institutions; at each site, one or more politically invested groups attempts to assemble site-specific, heterogeneous alliances. A war of positions sees many groups, each with its own politics, moving closer to and further away from others, across various temporal and spatial scales. It sees multiple sites of struggle around which different temporary coalitions are built, different values and visions struggled over, different battle lines drawn, and different weapons deployed (to carry the metaphor to its conclusion). Such a decentred politics is based on the recognition that people care about different issues and use different logics and values to think about them and evaluate the options. At each of these sites, different groups will have different investments, stretching from apathy to weak concern, to a willingness to compromise, to all-out war, as well as different modes of involvement and engagement. At each site, temporary victories, often compromised, are sought. To some extent, the politics of most advanced-liberal/non-authoritarian social formation, commonly involve wars of positions.

Contrary to the way some people read key works in cultural studies, I do not think that a war of positions necessarily gives rise to or entails that there is also a hegemonic politics. Hegemony has at least two senses. The most common use sees hegemony as a form and process of power opposed to the direct use of force; hegemony is domination through the construction of ideological consensus, getting people to agree with the world view of the dominant classes. As such, hegemony is a necessary dimension of all 'democratic' politics. But a second, narrower sense is concerned with hegemonic struggles and sees them as rather rare occurrence.²² It refers to a political struggle led by a 'ruling bloc' (itself an articulated unity of different interests and social positions) to win the consent of the population that would allow it to take the reins of leadership. It is not an attempt to win agreement or achieve consensus – about anything other than the reins of leadership. The ruling bloc takes advantage of and organises the war of position by entering into a series of negotiations and even compromises (over some of its visions and policies) with various constituencies in order to win their allegiance at particular sites. The society is reorganised as a series of concentric circles mapping out the proximity of various groups to the ruling bloc at the centre as an unequal but very real distribution of power. Different groups can move around as well as across the

22. While I think that Stuart Hall and many of my friends and colleagues in cultural studies would agree with my distinction between these two uses of hegemony and agree as well that it is the latter that is taken up in cultural studies, I think they might well object to my radical separation of the war of positions, hegemonic struggle and an organic crisis.

rings, closer to and further away from the ruling bloc, as well as other groups, and thus, the structural agencies of power.²³ A hegemonic struggle, then, involves a struggle to reorganise the social and reconstruct and redistribute 'the people' around a singular but heterogeneous social bloc. It is often tied to a particular social-political project/vision, which will bring me, shortly, to the concept of an organic crisis.

A map of the war of positions constructs the conjuncture as the product of the articulation of material and affective forces, structures, contradictions and struggles, operating on and across all the social 'levels' of determination (e.g., the economic, the political, the cultural, the social, etc.). Within this map, power expresses itself in the complexity of political articulations – not only in systems of identity and difference (class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, coloniality, generation, age, etc.) but in the assemblages of power that produce them, and in systems of the unequal distributions of value in all its forms. It is simultaneously constituted as multiplicities and articulated unities. In fact, all conjunctures have multiple forms of articulated unity, multiple articulations of a unity-in-difference. Such unities may appear, however illusory or temporarily, to be permanently settled; others to be characterised by more 'passive revolutions'.²⁴ But always underlying such articulated unities is an ongoing war of positions, with a differentiated and dispersed set of contradictions, struggles and uncertainties, across a range of proximities and intensities.

THE CONJUNCTURE AS PROBLEM SPACE

But we cannot stop there. Every conjuncture is the product of an accumulation of multiple contexts, lines of force, determination, resistances, and contradictions, each with different temporalities and spatialities, always fractured and conflictual, along multiple axes and scales. But there are also always relations and condensations among these, fusions of differences, temporary structural balances and stabilities, constituting and deconstructing all sorts of structures. There are, as I have repeatedly said, always articulated unities.

Thus, it is necessary to consider the other forms of 'unity' that constitute a conjuncture. Beyond a war of positions, a conjuncture can be understood – constructed-mapped – as a 'problem space' 'the outcome of an historical interruption and conceptual reconfiguration in which one field of arguments is displaced by another'.²⁵ A problem space offers a different, often quite minimal, kind of unity; in fact, its unity may be difficult to construct and significantly less determining than the specific set of what I have called problematics, which are 'less...generators of new propositions than ... generators of new questions and demands'. That is, a problematic poses a challenge rather than an answer; it signals a different organisation of the lived crises of the war of positions, but now often unremarked and even unnoticed. It is not that they are hidden; quite the contrary, they are there on the surface

23. John Clarke suggests that a hegemonic struggle might be seen as one 'in which one temporality' seeks to become 'accepted not just as dominant but as normal, subordinating or 'even suppressing other temporalities in the process'. John Clarke, 'Finding a place in conjuncture: A dialogue with Doreen' in Marion Werner, Jamie Peck, Rebecca Lave, and Brett Christophers (eds), *Doreen Massey: Critical Dialogues*, London, Agenda Publishing, 2018. (Hereafter *Finding Place*).

24. If there is a war of positions and problem space that is not or cannot be or that is not allowed to be constructed as an organic crisis, the result is an overwhelming sense of chaos.

25. David Scott, *Concepts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2004.

of everyday life as it were, but the connections, the articulations that connect them have not been made visible or hearable as yet.

As a problem space, the conjuncture appears as a set of transversal vectors, marking the distributions of certain problematics that operate across and are dispersed among the sites of the war of positions. A problematic is a conceptual knot, an unresolvable choice, an unaskable question that animates particular struggles. Every problematic weaves its way through economic, political, cultural and social relations in unpredictable and nonlinear ways. These vectors do not follow straight lines that neatly transect the space of the conjuncture; rather they appear as plot lines meandering all over the space-time of the conjuncture, like an ever-changing spider web. A problem space is a map of the problematics, of the deep and wide-spread instabilities and uncertainties that are constantly reconfiguring the conjuncture as a site of contestation, defining both the limits and the possibilities of consent, adaptation and resistance; they shape the felt challenges of political change in people's lives. Such problematics unsettle, displace and even challenge our cherished common sense assumptions and logics that had always seemed unquestionable, across not only particular sites but also social domains.

I think that cultural studies itself has often been shaped by the particular problematic to which it finds itself having to respond. Through its history, it has – at least implicitly although often quite explicitly – identified a series of problematics that have allowed it to enter onto and map the contemporary culture: an epistemological problematic of the very nature and status of the empirical and experiential; a materialist problematic of the nature of social and cultural transformation; a philosophical-anthropological problematic of subjectivity and agency, and the very possibility of resistance; a political problematic of state power and hegemony; and an historical-ontological problematic of periodisation and ways of being in the world.²⁶

To offer examples from the contemporary problem space: I have argued that it is articulated with a widely dispersed and somewhat disaggregated 'problematic of commensuration,' across virtually every domain, albeit constructed in different ways, by and along different temporalities or timelines. This problematic links a series of crises of values that point to the collapse at worst, the uncertainty at best, of most if not all of our commensurating machines. We seem to be living in the midst of, or at least facing the threat, of the impossibility of valuation and commensuration; across all dimensions of human activity, from religion and politics to knowledge and economics, there is at least the appearance of a growing inability to find any common ground or logic upon which one can constitute, measure, compare and possibly adjudicate (or compromise) differences. These multiple crises are calling the very possibility of commensuration into question. Sometimes they mark the failure or collapse of, or the struggle against, some existing commensuration machine (such as the universal equivalent, or the critique of euro-centric value systems or hierarchies of privilege). Sometimes, a crisis

26. Lawrence Grossberg, 'Modernity and Commensuration: A reading of a contemporary (economic) crisis', *Cultural Studies*, 24-3, 2010, pp295-332.

of commensuration appears at the site where we are publicly called upon to meet demands of commensuration for which we have no apparatus, such as when we have to confront the challenge of ontological pluralism and radical alterity. A second example of a contemporary problematic involves temporality itself, making time itself into a question that cannot be ignored, nor can it be answered. Whether we consider the changing temporalities of economic calculation, the apocalyptic rhetoric of increasingly fundamentalist religions and politics, the material effects of digital technologies, etc. the very existence of and relations among the past, present and future is at best uncertain. The Jamaican anthropologist David Scott, certainly one of the most brilliant practitioners of cultural studies, describes ‘an uncanny sense of divergence between the experience of time and the expectations of history’ in the contemporary world. He argues, paradoxically, that this ‘ruin of time’ is the denial of the very ‘temporal structure of critique,’ rendering any effort to renew the project of critique difficult at best.²⁷

27. David Scott, *Omens of adversity: Tragedy, time, memory, justice*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2014, p7.

THE CONJUNCTURE AS ORGANIC CRISIS

Still, the project of conjunctural analysis involves a third practice of articulating the conjuncture, by raising the question of whether and how the war of position and the map of a problem space are themselves taken up in a broader struggle to produce a more powerful, overarching and singular forms of unity, involving the construction of an organic crisis. Such a struggle includes both the various competing efforts to offer such a narrative and those projects that stand against any such effort. Here conjunctural analysis argues that the conjuncture is itself constituted by and as an organic crisis, i.e., as a struggle ‘over a new reality’. I have to admit that this is where the specificity of conjunctural analysis and even a conjuncture gets rather uncertain, for there is no guarantee that every war of position, every problem space will call for the struggle over an organic crisis, or that such a crisis can be constructed. In fact, the existence of such struggles may be rather rare. But I do think that cultural studies as conjunctural analysis is most concerned with – and to an extent brought into being to address such contexts, when the complexity of the war of positions and the mappings of the problem space are themselves mobilised to reorganise the politics of a social formation as ‘the complex historically specific terrain of a crisis which affects – but in uneven ways – a specific national-social formation as a whole’.²⁸

28. Stuart Hall, *The hard road to renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the Left*, London, Verso, 1988, p127.

Consider the following from Raymond Williams’ discursive history of ‘the country and the city’. Williams sees the purported rural/urban divide in the current context, and also in previous contexts, not as a divide but as a unity, that is, as different types of responses, different manifestations or forms of expression, to a common but evolving problematic: ‘We must not limit ourselves to their contrasts but go on to see their interrelations and through these the real shape of the underlying crisis. ...The point is not to

29. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975.

30. This notion of conjuncture as constituted by the struggle over an organic crisis might be compared with Althusser's notion of a ruptural unity, which, he asserts, is the condition of a revolutionary experience, where 'there must be an accumulation of 'circumstances' and 'currents' so that whatever their origin and sense (and many of them will *necessarily* be paradoxically foreign to the revolution in origin and sense, or even its 'direct opponents'), they 'fuse' into a *ruptural unity*... a 'single national crisis'.

31. Organic crises, especially when even proposed settlements appear to be scarce, are often marked by crises of knowledge and intensive (re)turns to and inventions of theoretical positions.

disprove or devalue either kind of feeling. It is to see the real change that is being written about'.²⁹

It is this sense of a struggle to articulate a singular unity that defines the third element or practice of conjunctural analysis. The struggle over an organic crisis present the various crises of the war of positions and the problematics of the problem space as somehow (in some as yet undefined way) inextricably linked, as part of one larger meta-crisis or 'meta-struggle' (*For Marx*, p86).³⁰ And it is this complex relation between a war of positions, a problem space and a struggle over an organic crisis that makes it so important to distinguish between a struggle, its expressions and experiences as a crisis, and its responses. The question of an organic crisis foregrounds the primacy of a struggle to construct (or to fight against the construction of) and respond to a unifying, singularising political struggle. Consequently, the presence of such a struggle has a peculiar temporality and is defined less by a spatial boundary than by the narratives of crises.

The result is the social formation itself seems to be experiencing an identity crisis; its sense of unity – however fractured and thin it may have been – is no longer obvious or shared. An organic crisis calls into question the very identity and purpose of the politically organised social formation (e.g. a nation-state), the defining values of a society, the priorities and organisations of social life. It problematises the forms of belonging by which 'the people' is constructed as a unity-in-difference. It destabilises the most taken-for-granted terms of 'reality' itself, especially of political possibility and struggle.

But an organic crisis is neither objectively given nor merely subjectively experienced; it is constructed, the result of discursive and political struggles and competing narratives not only to understand the particular crises, but more importantly, to construct their relations to one another across social-institutional and phenomenological-psychological dimensions, articulating the different temporalities of the war of positions into a tense unity. Cultural studies completes its conjunctural analysis by entering into the struggle over whether and how to construct an organic crisis (and thus a conjunctural unity). As John Clarke puts in, in the context of multiple forces and temporalities: 'It is precisely in the conjunctural *entangling* of different dynamics that we can find the conditions in which these different dynamics and their distinctive temporalities come together in complex articulations as they groom, condition, interrupt and unsettle one another. What I wish to underline, however, is the importance of thinking of this presence of temporalities as taking the form of active and intense condensation rather than a passive or indifferent co-existence' (*Finding Place*, p203).

The struggle over an organic crisis signals that the driving questions of a social formation have been transformed as a result not of a singular and sudden historical rupture but of both the material and discursive changes and struggles to transform the ways people understand their lives and the challenges they face.³¹ An organic crisis constitutes the conjuncture as the

imposition of a new unity on a new problem space.

Speaking analogically (not always a good intellectual strategy), an organic crisis might be seen as somewhat akin to what Thomas Kuhn described as a 'revolutionary' paradigm shift as opposed to normal science (operating within a taken for granted paradigm, which defines both the big picture and the ordinary practice of knowledge production; i.e., in the case of cultural studies, conjuncturalism as radical contextuality; we focus on the bits and pieces, filling in the often-crucial absences and invisibilities, and we often treat them in relative isolation, without having to figure out how they fit into the larger puzzle (or at least assuming that the process is additive rather than disruptive), without prioritising the relationalities and the totalities. In times of revolutionary science, we are forced to focus on the big picture. What do we know? What do we know we don't know? What don't we know we don't know? Where do we go to find the expertise we don't have? How do we figure the questions that are calling out in silence? How do we reach outside our comfort zone to do the research and to create the conversations across all sorts of borders that are necessary?

The final element of a conjunctural analysis/politics then involves struggles over, first, the very existence of an organic crisis; second, the nature of the crisis, and finally, what society can and must do and become as it works through the crisis. Such politics are characterised by competing diagnoses or narratives (or the active refusal of such efforts) of the organic crisis, and a proposed response that would in some way reconstitute the unity of the social formation and re-establish some sense of equilibrium, some sense of identification and direction, amidst the experienced chaos and failure of social reality. If such a vision is to win any purchase, it must be able, like a fractal, to be effectively expressed in every crisis (of the problem space) it claims to resolve. Conjunctural analysis offers an account of the relations between an organic crisis and the various narratives of it (as well as the settlements they propose), including those offered by intellectuals and activists, media and politicians.

Now we can see that the famous body of work around Thatcherism combined the notion of an organic crisis with that of a hegemonic struggle: the hegemonic bloc's ability to establish its position of leadership depended upon its ability to win people's consent at a more abstract and fundamental level, by trying to simultaneously construct and offer solutions to an organic crisis, which then enabled it to reconstruct the balance of forces. The ruling bloc ('Thatcherism') presented itself as having the best – or even the only viable – understanding of what has gone wrong, and the only viable redefinition and redirection of the nation. It was on this basis that it claimed to deserve the power to lead the nation, even if people disagreed with many of the particulars of its program.

Let me, finally, acknowledge that this conception of a conjuncture poses a certain paradox at the heart of cultural studies itself: namely, if cultural studies as a unique project is ultimately called into existence as a response

to the possible emergence or articulation of an organic crisis out of a war of positions and a problem space, one has to ask if its intellectual and political utility is limited to such conditions. If one can imagine – as difficult as it might be – a social revolution organised in some way other than through an organic crisis, if one can imagine – as difficult as it might be – the end of an organic crisis (I assume both have happened in the past, an organic crisis emerges and society moves on, or a society has its crises and contradictions, but there is no effort to articulate a singular organic crisis), one can imagine a context in which conjunctural analysis might not demand to be completed (through the interaction among all three practices), nor might it be the most appropriate way of approaching the intellectual and political challenges of its time. This makes cultural studies itself provisional, not necessarily always the most productive analytic, not necessarily always the most useful strategic resource. And this is, I believe, as it should be, for it demands that cultural studies as a project stand against the universalist logic it opposes in its practice. Back to the conjuncture!

SPECIFYING THE CONJUNCTURE

But this still leaves unanswered the question of how one identifies a conjuncture. How do we differentiate conjunctures? How do we know that we have entered into another conjuncture? This question actually condenses a number of different issues. Part of the difficulty is a continuing problematic for any constructionist practices. After all, the conjuncture both exists beyond the efforts of intellectual and political struggle – there are real crises, both material and experienced, with real relations – AND the conjuncture as a totality has to be constructed, fabricated and narrated by intellectual and political labours. There is no theory that enables one to distinguish between a conjunctural shift – the emergence of a war of positions, problem space or organic crisis – and a new achieved settlement claiming to resolve the crisis. Each of the three practices that make up conjunctural analysis constructs the conjuncture in its own terms and these may, in different conjunctures, interact with each other in specific ways. There is no theory that would tell one in advance how to specify a conjuncture, no theory that would tell one whether the very concept of an organic crisis is a useful one for a particular context, or even how one goes about specifying the organic crisis.

Let me just talk here, for a moment, about the question of an organic crisis. Are we talking about a single organic crisis, or a singular crisis that is morphing over time (perhaps as the result of various settlements), or a number of different (perhaps even overlapping) organic crises that are stitched together politically and discursively? For example, in my own work, I have generally written as though the United States has been caught in the same organic crisis since the 1960s, with different temporary settlements offered along the way but none capable of finally resolving the crisis or able to offer an

effective popular vision of a non-crisis defined future. It is, in my own terms, a continuing struggle to define 'the coming modernity' of the United States. Hall, on the other hand, saw the equation differently; his use of conjuncture was more fractured and multiple, identifying it with many (but not all) of the political 'settlements' which were able to capture political leadership: Thatcherism, Blairism, the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition. While we agreed that each of these settlements offered different narratives of the organic crisis and different visions of the necessary solutions, we disagreed about the degree to which they transformed the nature of the organic crisis and hence, about the boundaries of the conjunctures.

To what extent does any significant effort to respond to the organic crisis reconstitute it? At what point does an organic crisis change enough that one is operating in a new problem space? How does one judge whether a new or even a proposed settlement reconfigures the problem space enough to constitute a new conjuncture? How does one theorise the relation between a crisis and the various settlements that might be taken up in political and popular imaginations? After all, sometimes, a settlement might actually bring the organic crisis to an end; other times, a settlement might temporarily realign forces successfully enough to at least push the crisis into the background; and at still other times, the settlement may not bring the crisis to a close, but it may rearticulate the crisis in significant ways, so that the problem space has clearly changed. As a result, it is not always clear if and when a conjuncture has a beginning and an end. How does one approach conjunctural work if the organic crisis extends over many decades, as seems to be the case in much of the North Atlantic world over the past sixty years? This is not, by the way, the same as claiming that we live in an age of perpetual crisis, or that the very notion of crisis has become meaningless. Of course, since a conjuncture is articulated at the intersection of the three practices (war of positions, problem space and organic crisis), the same questions could and must be raised about the other two analytic practices.

But I have glossed over the most common way of identifying and differentiating conjunctures – geographically, where (and my own work stands as a somewhat embarrassing example), no doubt for the best of reasons, both the social formation and the conjuncture are understood largely in terms of nation-states. This can (and too often has) lead us away from the complex spatial relations that cut across and constitute any specific national 'place' (as well as the nation as a people). As Doreen Massey constantly reminded us, places, including the nation, are relational entities, 'always in open-ended process. They are in that sense 'events''. (Massey cited in John Clarke *Finding Place*). Clarke continues this theme, that a 'nation' always defines 'a terrain that combines and condenses multiple sites – the local...the national...the regional...and the global, whilst recognising that all of these are folded into one another' (*Finding Place*, p205).

Yet it would be a mistake to abandon the importance of nation-states as

constitutive of conjunctures and give in to the illusion of a radically new, singular, global order, or surrender to the seductive charms of 'the local'. The concept of the conjuncture should allow us to see the complexity and contingency of the nation-state, as an articulation of multiple contexts, usually under the sign of a particular regime (or regimes) of euro-modernity. Both the nation and the nation-state are 'given specific salience and significance conjuncturally by the ways in which the contradictions, forces and dynamics have been articulated in and around the nation and nation-state' (*Finding Place*, p206).³² Thus, on the one hand the nation-state continues to assert itself as a dominant modality and trope of social contextuality. Yet it is also an impossible form – a doubling tied together by an 'unstable hyphen'.³³ While some suggest that the current crisis is the undoing of that hyphen, I agree with Clarke's suggestions that such views of a break in the history of the nation-state assign too much solidity to its past incarnations, and that we are better off seeing it as 'a partial and unsettling dislocation' of an always loose and contingent articulation that has to be constantly worked upon and maintained.

A conjuncture must always be seen as the result of a complex and fragile set of articulations, which requires various labours attempting – and always partly failing – to maintain its ever-changing shape and density. It is, in the last instance, a complex articulation of multiple overlapping, shared, interacting and sometimes even contradictory contexts – perhaps even multiple conjunctures – connected by the specificities of the movements and interactions of a variety of forces that extend in and across varied spatial and temporal configurations and ranges. Contemporary struggles over and around the nation-state are part of the broader struggles to constitute the conjuncture and the organic crisis. We cannot afford to dismiss it, but neither can we assume that the conjuncture is sufficiently captured by the nation-state. It is possible that there are multiple conjunctural struggles taking place, interacting, reinforcing and contradictory struggles to fuse and narrate overlapping organic crises: perhaps one looks (back?) to the nation-state, while another looks across more active transit spaces through which, for examples, struggles over the future of modernity call larger geographical histories into question.

We also need a more nuanced understanding of the relation between a hegemonic state-centred-effort to establish a particular settlement (providing a moment of relative stability and consent) and the broader politics of conjunctural struggle. A settlement, in defining the organic crisis, attempts to define a field of possibles – in both imaginative and strategic terms, defining and limiting the practices of communication, negotiation, resistance and opposition. As a result, a 'settlement' always involves the various counter-forces and movements. But the politics of a conjuncture is not exhausted by the effort to find and establish a new settlement; they are characterised by numerous, ongoing struggles in and across any number of sectors and sites,

32. Among the many 'conclusions' on which John Clarke and I agree, although he is always more eloquent about them: (1) Nationalism...needs to be understood as a conjuncturally specific formation rather than a generic political disposition. (2) The various articulations of popular sovereignty (as various populisms) and nationalisms are not simply or entirely the rejection of liberal individualism, but yet more reconfigurations of its complexities and contradictions. (3) These 'illiberal nationalisms' should not be taken as simply reflections (rather than articulations) of the affects and experiences of various constituencies 'since reflection metaphors collapse the politics of selection, silencing, voicing and ventriloquism that are at stake in processes of articulation'.

33. Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the making of modern India*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1998, p1.

including struggles that challenge the definition of an organic crisis, and the constraints of any field of possibles instantiated in it, but also more focused and more dispersed strategies of political action and social transformation. Hence, the question of what is old and what is new, what has worked under what conditions, and what has not, becomes a vital part of the effort to challenge the existing efforts to install a new settlement.

CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE METHOD OF CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS

So, what might a conjunctural analysis look like? What is a method appropriate to the conjuncture? Conjunctural analysis is a multidimensional task, in which one has to work in the multiple spaces between, trying to identify and map out the complicated articulations, operating in both directions, among the three levels of the moment, the conjuncture and the epoch on the one hand, and among the three dimensions, practices or maps of the conjuncture – the war of positions, the problem space and the organic crisis on the other. Each level and each dimension is an expression of/response to – an articulation of relations among – elements of the levels on either side and the constructions that co-constitute it, but there is no direct/simple correspondence among them.

In terms of mapping the conjuncture itself, one might think of conjunctural analysis as a rigorous investigation, which is always partly an experimentation, with efforts to map and construct the conjuncture as a number of different forms of interrelated and overlapping contexts, each with its own spatial and temporal scales. Each map demands that we pose particular questions, although the questions bleed into all the maps: first, historical specificity, constructed from the identification of the enduring effects of the old, the emergence of the new, and the effects of their articulations; second, the unstable balance in the field of forces within a problem space; and third, the possible construction of an organic crisis. Working at each level demands both conceptual and empirical work, although what counts as ‘empirical,’ what counts as evidence and as warranted analytical claims, changes as one moves across the levels of conjunctural analysis.

And this leads me to a certain confusion when people – myself included – talk about conjunctural analysis. I have often said that the point of cultural studies is to tell better stories, where ‘better’ is measured by both the willingness to grapple with empirical complexities, and the ability to open up possible ways of moving forward toward a more humane world. It may be useful, then, to somewhat artificially distinguish maps and stories. This is not a structuralist distinction between the synchronic and history, nor an epistemic distinction between complexity and narrative. Maps tells us where we are but in so doing, they can also tell us how we got here and how we get out of here. That is, they tell us how we get from point A to point B. That is, such mappings must understand reality as always in process, as a contingent

34. See Lawrence Grossberg and Bryan Behrenshausen, 'Cultural studies and Deleuze-Guattari, Part 2: from affect to conjunctures', *Cultural Studies*, 30:6, 2016, pp1001-1028.

35. For example, the inflated responses to Deleuze's suggestion of a 'control society' often succumb to decontextualized ontological appeals, rather than seeing it as a technological refinement of what Foucault called 'securitization' now applied not to populations but to individuals. Not surprisingly, many critics then go looking for homologies or allegories of control, and asserting the existence of 'popular spaces' which enable on to be in control in the midst of a society that overwhelmingly and increasingly controls us. Such arguments obscure their repetition of older arguments about culture and resistance. Cultural studies has long argued that such moments of reversal and empowerment are a common element of the 'popular'; and just as importantly, it has argued that such acts of 'resistance' usually remain within the symbolic (or imaginary). They are crucial elements in any counter-hegemonic struggle, but they are also not sufficient unless and until they are articulated to other forms of political struggles.

struggle over articulations. The point is not merely to map an outcome (where we are) but to understand how we got here, how we are sustained here, and how we might get out of here. It is this focus on struggle and process – the dialectic between maps and stories in the constant recalibration of contingency and actuality – that enables cultural studies to move from pessimism to optimism.³⁴ We might think of stories as forms of public pedagogy, telling us, for example, why one might one to get out of here, and why one might want to get to point B rather than, say, point C or remain where we are. In the terms I will use, the effect of maps is epistemic (even though they include affective elements), while the effect of stories is affective (even if they include epistemic elements). Thus we need both better maps and better stories to complete conjunctural analysis! This relation between the academic and the popular, between research and public pedagogy, is what cultural studies tries to offer.

As I have suggested, one might start by offering a dense description of a war of position. We might imagine the effort to realise a war of position as the construction of two interacting Venn-like maps that begin to take account of the relations among the elements in the social formation. First, what might be called a structural-materialist map of the social formation, of the complex relations, contradictions and institutions within and across the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions. This is no doubt the most comfortable route for many academics, despite its obvious interdisciplinary demands, precisely because we can find ways of staying within the secure borders of our own disciplinary objects, often pushing the relative autonomy of each instance to the illusory instance of absolute autonomy. And when we do leave our comfortable spaces, it is often to comment on taken for granted productions of socio-cultural differences, and emergent strategies of power (e.g., biopower, ontopower), while our disciplinary gaze means that we all too often continue to apply the same decontextualised logics to them.³⁵

Such retreats into disciplinarity mistakenly assume that we can simply add disciplinary knowledges together and come up with a totality that is greater than the sum of its part. I fear that that is not how it works, and that we need to take the challenges of interdisciplinarity more seriously, not only in terms of a conversation across disciplines, but also as the prerequisite for such a conversation. That is, each discipline has to become an interdisciplinary formation, reinserting its object back into the complexity of relations in which it is embedded. Only by articulating the relations amongst the disciplinary objects, making visible the ways disciplines rip their objects from their contexts, can we make visible the ways each domain provides conditions of and resistances to the others, each partly constructs and deconstructs the others. This is where the necessary incompleteness of any conjunctural analysis has to be assumed and incorporated into one's account. The ideal result of such a structural-materialist map would be a hybrid topography of the distributions and structures of material relations and determinations, the construction of

a war of positions.

But this is not the end of the story of a war of positions. If every event in the materialist-structural map is overdetermined, it is further inflected by a second dimension, reconstructed in a second map of the conjunctural 'affective landscape'. As any event is articulated again – affectively, its meaning, experience and effects will be different in different affective landscapes (e.g., Trump's lies vs G.W. Bush's lies). Affect defines the various organizations of intensity and feeling that give texture and a sense of lived unity to our lives. An affective landscape is the space within which some experiences, behaviours, choices and emotions become possible, some 'feel' inevitable and obvious and still others are impossible or unimaginable. It defines what is allowed and what forbidden. And it is where the struggle to make new and emergent experiences liveable and knowable is carried out. To use an inadequate metaphor, an affective landscape is like a fog in which one can only see and move at the tempos and in the directions allowed by the specific distributions, directions and densities of the fog itself. But it is not simply the background against which human sociality and agency are enacted; it is their active condition and expression, saturating and determining the limits and possibilities, the rhythms and patterns of social experience. Affective landscapes are what hold the world (or perhaps more accurately, worlds) together by constituting senses of unity and sanity.

The affective landscape is also a key determinant of how history – the conjunctural stories we are telling – can be changed. Political possibility lies somewhere in the space between understanding how people feel and imagining how they might feel, and it depends on figuring out how such feelings are made, organised and changed. Do we know what people feel today? What matters to them? What they care about, and what they are willing to fight for? Do we understand their rage, fears, uncertainties, anxieties, hopes, desires? In any conjuncture, there may be multiple, overlapping – reinforcing and even contradictory – affective landscapes, some residual and disappearing, some mainstream, and some emerging and still precarious. Moreover, any affective landscape can be articulated to a variety of political positions, allowing it to function simultaneously as dominant, oppositional, or alternative.

Every affective landscape is itself a complicated assemblage comprised of structures of feeling, which are the components and expressions of an affective landscape, translating it into moods, emotions, pleasures and desires, pains and sufferings, maps of what matters, defining the forms and sites of investment and caring, of attachment, attraction and distancing. Structures of feeling define ecologies of belonging and possibilities of mobility. Each structure of feeling is itself a point of articulation between what is already known and experienced, and the emergence of new experiences that cannot yet be expressed and therefore remains unknown. If an affective landscape is a configuration of structures of feeling, then any structure of feeling can belong, even simultaneously, to different landscapes; and any landscape may

be configured, even simultaneously, in different ways (i.e., the relations of structures of feeling within a landscape – their proximity, interpenetration and mutual determination – may vary at different social sites and for different constituencies).

Moreover, structures of feeling are articulated to political positions and possibilities through the construction of mattering maps, which define what and how things are made to matter, and where people put their energies. Such mattering maps are, I believe, cultural-political constructions constituting the frontline of the struggle today. Both the opposition and the right struggle to shape and are shaped by mattering maps and the ways they inflect common sense, taken for granted certainties without knowing how they have come about. The deep struggle involves the articulations of what matters, of what people care about, where they put their energies and attention, and how these ‘mattering maps’ organise their experience of their lives. Mattering maps, for example, may tell us whether knowledge, truth, lies, or hypocrisies matter; mattering maps tell us whether differences matter, which differences matter, and how they matter.

Conjunctural analysis demands that one construct these two maps – a material-structural map and an affective map – simultaneously, as both relatively autonomous and as always articulated. It must tell us how such lived organisations are made, remade and re-organised, often strategically but always contingently and without guaranteed success. Many forms of critical work, quite valuable in their own right, treat these as separable and often offer one as a sufficient diagnosis. Structuralist-materialist maps are the most common on the left. More recently, the second kind of map – albeit commonly reduced to phenomenological and/or subjective matters of experience and feeling-- have become increasingly visible and even (politically) dominant. This changing priority makes sense given that we seem, increasingly, to be fighting a ‘politics of feeling,’ but I fear that too often, such stories end up enabling political struggles that reduce political antagonism to a matter of personal feelings. In conjunctural analysis, and the politics that follows from it, you have to mobilise feelings, not make them autonomous, determining, or more materialist, more ontological, or more real than the other kinds of effects and relations that constitute the everyday life of social and political relations.

All too often, analysts presuppose forms of correspondence and equivalence between the two maps. Those focused on the first assume that the ways such material conditions are lived is somehow guaranteed in advance, and transparently given in the structure itself, while those focused on the second assume that experiences and feelings can be read transparently off people’s expressions and actions, which can then be read back onto assumptions about the material conditions that produce them. Conjunctural analysis tells a more complicated story, articulating the structural and the phenomenological, the material and the affective, in order to understand how social and political relations, forms of domination

and resistance, are constituted as a war of positions. By articulating these maps, mediated through questions of power and politics, conjunctural analysis constructs or figures the war of positions as a map of the ways people experience, care about and organise the sites of concern and struggle over and against an organisation of comfort and complacency. As difficult as this may sound, I think mapping the war of positions is the easiest of the cartographic tasks comprising conjunctural analysis because its starting point – what is old and what is new – is often readily and empirically available, although, as Hall says, ‘The method thus retains the concrete empirical reference as a privileged and undissolved ‘moment’ within a theoretical analysis without thereby making it ‘empiricist’: the concrete analysis of a concrete situation’.³⁶

The second (albeit not necessarily in temporal terms) task comprising conjunctural analysis – the construction of a problem space – demands a different, more cartographic set of analytical practices. I do think that this is, in some ways, the most difficult part of the project of cultural studies, in part because I think it is the most experimental. It aims to describe a web-like, non-linear distributions of multiple crises, cutting across the fractures in the infrastructure of the social formation, constituting the lived reality of a ‘problem space’. It aims to find the problematics that connect various crises and struggles, often operating below both our common-sense and our critical radars. It attempts to offer a map of rhizomatic filaments traversing the material, social and affective spaces of the social formation and everyday life, by trying to identify some key empirical crises as nodes at which these filaments are affectively cathected and materially expressed. For example, my own work on the problematic of commensuration began as I tried to unpack the ‘derivatives crisis’ of 2008; similarly, my discussion of the problematic of temporality began as I tried to unpack the strange (not merely contradictory) place of appeals to the future in the rhetoric of various New Right fractions; but of course, in cultural studies, unpacking does not mean simply deconstructing but rather, deconstructing and reconstructing, that is to say, locating an event relationally and contextually. The practice of mapping a problem space demands one experiment, seek out the connections where one might not have expected to find them, in order to ‘uncover’ the problematic.

Finally, the effort to see whether and if so, how, a struggle over an organic crisis is being waged involves still other – more hermeneutic even narrative methods, for the question is, what are the stories being told that are attempting to provide a grand story about what is going on. They may not always present themselves in such terms (hence, a hermeneutics of some suspicion is called for), but they will attempt to articulate a variety of struggles and problematics, and they will offer themselves as obviously superior to whatever competing narratives are on offer.

Let me conclude by simply referring, without much elaboration, to

36. Stuart Hall, ‘Marx’s notes on method: a reading of the “1857 Introduction”’, *Cultural Studies* 17, no.2, 2003, p128.

my own most recent attempt – *Under the Cover of Chaos* - to contribute to a conjunctural analysis of the contemporary U.S., to better understand what's going on and to enable better strategies for moving the country in more progressive and humane directions. Figure 2 summarises (extends and hopefully improves upon) my efforts to elucidate some of the changing balances of the field of forces, of the old and the new, the problem space and organic crisis.

Consider the war of positions: obviously, the list could be expanded and extended. But the surprising thing is that, with a few exceptions, many of these sites of struggle are not especially new. Many have been around at least since the 1980s, some significantly longer, although a few have emerged in the last decade or two, or even in the past few years. However, the ways they are understood and expressed, their prominence and provenance, the intensities and importance with which they present themselves, their place in the organisation of concerns, and in fact, their power (whether ideological or affective) to configure the social formation may well have changed. That is to say, what is new is how the war of position is lived – why it can feel so different today although its materiality has not changed as much as we sometimes assume. This points us to another constitutive dimension of the conjuncture, if only because the empirical sites of the war of position are widely and differentially distributed and experienced for different constituencies whose identity often depends upon their place within the war of positions. Thus, each site can serve a variety of (tactical) functions since they matter in different ways to different constituencies and coalitions.

My own researches focused on a small fragment of a map of the war of positions:³⁷ first in the realms of (conservative) political ideologies and organisations, and second, in the cultural-affective landscapes that constitute what one might call the energetics and densities of everyday life.

Moving down the figure – although this is not necessarily the order of analysis, I have identified four vectors constituting the contemporary problem space, four problematics that cut across all the domains of social existence: problematics of commensuration (the impossibility of calculating comparative value); mediation (the irrelevance of mediation either through the fetishism of immediacy or the denial of relationality, expressed in, e.g., spectacularisation, baroque multiplicities [parataxis], hyper-personalisation), authority (questioning all forms of differentiated valuation, hierarchical organisation, expertise, etc.), and control (the imbrication of power into the fabrics of existence at all levels). The first two problematics have resulted in the increasing displacement of politics and economics into cultural battles. The net result of these problematics points us to the increasing productivity of chaos in the organisation of the conjuncture.

I am struck by the varied temporalities of these problematics: commensuration extends back to the late 1960s but blossoms in the 1970s

37. To summarise, I would offer the following sites as constituting some of the contemporary war of positions (in the U.S.): economic matters such as job loss (globalisation, automation) and insecurity, debt, economic inequality, taxation, regulation versus free market (e.g., health care, corporate sovereignty, energy and climate change, etc.); political matters such as government overreach and/or failure, minority entitlements and protections (immigration, race, gender, sexuality, ability) and national identity, the contradictions between rights, liberty and freedom; in cultural matters such as education-truth-knowledge (versus?) religion (religious freedom, abortion, etc.), ethics of science (genetics, bio-engineering, artificial intelligence); cultural matters such as privacy, surveillance, and hyper-exposure to messages and information; military matters such as international affairs and the threat of nuclear war.

THE CONTEMPORARY CONJUNCTURE					
W A R O F P O S I T I O N S	Interacting levels of conjunctural specificity (what's old and what's new)				
	**Politics and Post-war conservatism	Assemblage of postwar conservatisms: multiple racisms, nationalisms, etc.			
		History of 'New Right'			
		History and multiplicity of Reactionary conservatism			
	Politics and Post-war progressivism	Formations and fractures (with liberal center, around issues); forms of unity and alliances; multiple strategies and practices; debates—horizontal/countercultural/ prefigurative vs vertical/state/regulatory; identity/social justice vs redistributive justice (systems of constraint) vs alternative economies; Channels of protest and change (legislation, judiciary, extra-state), etc. Definitions of subjugation and question of 'political correctness'			
	Economics	Contradictions and relations among: fractions (finance, real estate and construction, energy and extraction, information technology, military, manufacturing, agriculture, media/entertainment/marketing, service; Regulatory regimes (taxes, trade, monetary and fiscal policy), including the changing role of the central bank (from price-maker to price taker) and the resulting changing nature of money and debt; Emergent trends (automation, 'sharing economies,' value-chains, changing corporate cultures) and the changing relations/contradictions between national and global regimes and economies; History of crises and the changing forms of corporate political engagement; changing status, forms and agencies—sovereignty-- of business/corporation			
	Culture	Struggles over and across cultural identities and cultural valuations; new cultural technologies of production and distribution (proliferation), appropriation and exchange—including but not limited to computation and social media; competing economies of truth, representation and relativism; redistributions of public and private; the multiplication of semiotic and enunciative practices			
	**Affective landscapes	Organisation of redemptive nihilism (compared to organisation of optimism of 1960s and organisations of pessimism and passive nihilism of 1980s and 1990s			
		Affective autonomy→		Anxiety/hyper-activism	Temporal dislocation /alienation
		hyperinflation	Victimage→ culture of cruelty: humiliation, rage		
**A reconfigured problem space Expressed as the uncertain re-distribution of political difference	Crises of commensuration Primacy of culture as affect (nation, identity)	Crises of mediation and relationality Primacy of (im)mediation and constructionism:	Crisis of authority (e.g., knowledge) Primacy of horizontality against expertise	Crises of control Primacy of the quotidianisation and dividuation of power	
An emerging organic crisis? A rejection of modernity? A crisis of sovereignty and individuation (and a new nation-corporate imaginary)?					
**Designates topics discussed in detail in <i>Caught in the Crossfire</i> . Other dimensions, including discussions of post-war progressivism and economics are simply alluded to.					

Figure 2

and 1980s; mediation and control as problematics are, I think, more recent, depending as they do on technological and cultural developments, and both have become dominant problematics only in the past decades. The problematic of authority, especially in matters of knowledge, has a much longer history and may even begin to approach epochal questions (challenging the dominance of particular modes of reason established in the Enlightenment). There are no doubt others – temporality (as mentioned above), translation (as the essentialisation of difference), etc. It may even be fair to say that the conjunctural problematic of authority is itself articulated by a more epochal crisis of epistemology.

38. I want to thank Carolyn Hardin, Andrew Davis and Megan Wood for the many conversations that have helped me think this through. Their work suggests that the emerging organic crisis is a crisis of sovereignty, at the intersection of corporate sovereignty (built on what Hardin calls corporatism, an argument raised against theories of neoliberalism) and a significantly reconfigured fascist assemblage.

Finally, I have identified the struggle to make visible (construct) the organic crisis. In my previous contributions to a conjunctural analysis, I have concluded that the organic crisis could be defined as a struggle of what it means to be modern, over the coming ‘American modernity’. I have seen the history of the U.S. after the 1950s in terms of the contradiction between the emerging normalisation of post-war liberal capitalism and the proliferation of attacks on it from both the lefts and the right. But given the rise of reactionary conservatism and populist nationalism, alongside the growing claims of corporate sovereignty, I now suspect – at least it is my best guess – that the organic crisis of modernity is being reconstituted around or re-centred on the very nature of individuation and the locus of sovereignty.³⁸ I do not yet know whether this means that we are entering a new conjuncture. So the conversation continues.

39. I am wary of any effort to condense these ontological forces into a singular euro-modernity or ‘Western’ ontology or ‘Enlightenment’ (as its expression in thought). Such ontological stories often re-inscribe binary and homogeneous identities (‘modernity’, Western thought) rather than multiplicities in struggle. Apart from wanting to see these not as a single or simple totality but multiple articulations to produce changing fractured unities as sites of contestation, I am, further, uncomfortable with the assumed relation between ‘places’ and ideas/diagrams.

CONCLUSION

But this analysis does not sufficiently acknowledge that the present conjuncture does seem to be more threatening and more threatened than previous contexts of uncertainty and settlement, even if we thought they bespoke the end of the world as we knew it. The current organic crisis (or the refusal to allow such a crisis to be constructed) does feel like the fractures and fissures cut more deeply into and resonate more widely in the fabric not only of human life but of reality itself. Of course, every conjuncture is determined in part by the epoch within which it is located, but we need to consider that the current context may be unique and uniquely challenging precisely because we face, simultaneously, a conjunctural politics (I leave open the question of whether it is being articulated as an organic crisis) and what appears to be significant epochal instabilities, struggles and shifts across any number of the constitutive diagrams that have defined our taken for granted reality and the limits of our imagination for anywhere from a century to the long *durees* of multiple modernities.

I do see epochal transformations (crisis? crises? – that are the result of many different agencies and attacks) that may enable us to re-assert or invent other modernities (post/modernities, anti-Enlightenment modernities,

indigenous modernities, decolonised modernities).³⁹ While it would be an exaggeration to say that the entire edifice of The European Enlightenment or of the dominant forms of euro-modernity has collapsed or been overthrown – or that it could be overthrown in some simple revolution, it does seem that it is slowly crumbling under the weight of its own failures and contradictions, both in the long and short terms, and the pressure of many attacks from many directions, especially since the 1950s. The irony/paradox is that many of those who position themselves as opposed to this still dominant epochal ontology (including especially humanism,⁴⁰ binarism – between the human and the non-human, culture and nature, self and other – and universalism), and who call for a new ontological infrastructure, often give humanity a privileged role in constituting other ways of being in the world.

It may be that the conjunctural and the epochal have become so interconnected, so inter-determining, that they appear as expressions of one another (e.g., an epochal crisis of the political nomos is expressed as a crisis of governance and a resurgence of nationalism). But still, the nature of epochal changes and conjunctural crises, however closely connected, have to remain separated for they demand and depend upon distinct forms of analysis, (strategic) intervention and struggle. At least some of the conflicts within contemporary progressive politics and critical analysis involve whether one’s primary concern, visions and actions are concerned with epochal or conjunctural politics. At the same time, if we are indeed in the midst of epochal transitions, this would have profound and constitutive impacts on the nature of the organic crisis (and the problem space) we face. It might suggest, for example, at the very least, that the very conditions of possibility of hegemonic politics are being transformed.⁴¹

This may well require us to rethink the very practice of conjunctural analysis. But this does not mean that we can abandon conjunctural studies, for we cannot intervene at this epochal level (whether we could ever do so intentionally is an open question) without working through the conjunctural crises and formations that stand in our way as it were: the growth of authoritarian illiberalism (e.g., Trump) with its vitriolic nationalism and its threat to the rule of law; reactionary conservatism and its threat to democracy; the New Right and its corporate neoliberalism; and the hegemony of a liberal capitalism (embodied in the Democratic party). That means that conjunctural struggles are all the more important as the conditions of possibility of successfully facing the epochal challenges. Pessimism of the intellect indeed!

If we are to fare better in the conjunctural struggles, and at the same time, imagine humane and life-affirming responses to the epochal shifts, we need to know what it means to imagine the possibility of multiple ways of being, and how we might go about finding a new conjunctural settlement that would make these imaginations possible and real.

40. ‘Humanism’ is too often presented assuming an equivalence among subjectivity as self-consciousness, reason as the capacity to have knowledge of and represent reality; agency (especially of social construction), and anthropocentrism as the privileged value of the human.

41. For a discussion of these diagrammatic questions see Lawrence Grossberg, Carolyn Hardin and Michael Palm, ‘Contributions to a conjunctural theory of value’. *Rethinking Marxism*, 26, 3, 2014, pp306-335.

As Raymond Williams put it:

The task of a successful socialist movement will be one of feeling and imagination quite as much as one of fact and organisation. Not imagination or feeling in their weak senses – ‘imagining the future’ (which is a waste of time) or ‘the emotional side of things’. On the contrary, we have to learn and to teach each other the connections between a political and economic formation, a cultural and educational formation, and, perhaps hardest of all, the formations of feeling and relationship which are our immediate resources in any struggle’.⁴⁰

42. Raymond Williams, *Resources of hope*, London, Verso, 1989.