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❖ **Bell, Philip - *Confronting Theory: The Psychology of Cultural Studies Intellect*, Bristol, 2010, pp.147 ISBN-13: 978-1841503172**

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We now recall with barely suppressed giggles the fact that late medieval scholars earnestly debated the number of angels who could be accommodated on the head of a pin. But what, one wonders, will future historians (if there are any), make of the current prosperity of the academic industry called Cultural Studies. Will they laugh or will they cry?

It will not, I trust, be regarded an offensive to say that Cultural Studies is controversial. Students find it distressing, teachers of practical subjects decry it as overly metaphysical, outsiders, if they are polite, classify it in the area of Nissam Taleb's "kinds of thought which people with jobs in the real world leave for weekends". If they are not polite then metaphors involving cow droppings may be deployed.

Yet we have to have it. Cultural Studies is added to academic programs as a sort of educational garlic that turns a fish stew into a bouillabaisse. Or perhaps to do justice to its demands for space and respect, as the slab of meat without which a steak sandwich would just be two slices of greasy bread. No profession is so demanding in its requirements of knowledge and thought that it can be taught without the inclusion of Cultural Studies to raise the intellectual tone of the proceedings.

The alternative is to be branded a "trade school", a term which is usually uttered by senior academics in the sort of tones that a Cardinal Archbishop would reserve for the name of a sexually transmitted disease. This theory parades as a theory of everything. Despite bruising encounters with the hard scientists – culminating in one of them penning a satirical take on science culture which a learned publication duly accepted - it purports to explain science, social science, art, biology. Everything. Indeed even such old categories are scorned.

Philip Bell has had enough. Psychology is the area that he knows best, and in this book he examines carefully and in detail what Cultural Studies has to say on the subject. He concludes: "it is frequently incoherent and/or has few, if any, empirical implications that students can evaluate" (in cover note).

Readers will have probably have gathered by now that in addressing this reviewer Bell is preaching to the choir, or indeed to the Vicar. Even for those who approve of the destination, though, parts of this book are heavy going. This is probably unavoidable. There is a lovely quote from John Searle on the last page: "It is much easier to refute a bad argument than to refute a truly dreadful argument" (140).

It is also, of course, necessary when trying to refute an argument to quote its proponents at some length. So we are treated to some prime specimens of cultural studies writing. Readers who are fussy about what passes through their eyeballs may wish we had been a bit less lucky in this area. Some of this stuff is so eye-watering that the author finds it necessary to note in his preface that "I have had to include occasional warnings to remind readers that I have not fabricated the texts I criticise"(11). One cringes at the thought of the oceans of turgid prose through which Bell has heroically trawled to verify his suspicions that there are no edible fish in it.

This is an earnest, careful and literate attempt to rescue Psychology from being torn into two pieces: the hard part becoming Science and the rest being absorbed into the Euro *Litcrit* world of Cultural Studies. I am not sure that it goes to the heart of the problem.

Cultural Studies' people spout nonsense about Psychology as they do about much else. But theirs is a closed system. As Bell says about one author: "The various terms she employs are all defined in terms of one another; they form a closed circle of postulates. Students have to accept the whole system, or remain estranged from the insights it purports to describe" (100).

The system is not subject to the usual rules for determining truth or falsehood. Massumi, we are told, "wants to initiate a 'conceptual contagion', rather than try to 'get it right' (whatever 'it' may be), the latter academic aim being an example of 'imperialist disciplinary aggression'" (119)

As Bertrand Russell observed about Nietzsche, when faced with a system which is logical in its own terms, we just have to decide to accept or reject it in one piece. The problem with having a whole academic industry working in this self-sufficient (self-satisfied?) way is that it deprives students of the first benefit of a proper university education: the habit of questioning things and comparing the arguments advanced for them. It is an alarming thought that this is the wave which is sweeping aside most of what used to be regarded as the humanities. Bell argues that this is disappointing for students, and leads people who wanted to think seriously about what it means to be human in the 21st century into disillusionment and cynicism.

What is to be done? Bell suggests that teachers inflicting cultural studies on their students should be required to teach also the realist theories which they denounce as old-fashioned and unilluminating. And let the students decide. I am not sure that that is good enough. Universities must be tolerant of diverse opinions, but there should be limits. Perhaps tolerance does not need to extend to having large numbers of people peddling stuff which their colleagues in other parts of the forest confidently identify as bilge.

Karl Popper said that Philosophy becomes degenerate unless it considers real questions from outside itself. Clausewitz said that Theory must be kept close to experience, which is its proper nourishment. If Cultural Studies had taken hold in other parts of the University – say Engineering, Medicine or Business – the consequences would now be manifest in collapsed bridges, dead patients and bankrupt companies.

Never mind. Outside observers of the Social Sciences believe that fashion rather than validity determines the success or failure of theories. And fashions change.

**About the reviewer**

Tim Hamlett is a semi-retired Professor in Journalism at Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong. In the UK, he worked as a journalist for a variety of publications, including the *Derby Evening Telegraph*, *Newcastle Journal* and *The Guardian*. In Hong Kong, he worked for the *Standard* and the *South China Morning Post*.