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# Cultural Studies Revisited and Renewed: An Interview with Professor John Storey<sup>①</sup>

Zhang Cong Zhao Bing

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**Abstract:** In this interview, Professor John Storey, one of the most renowned scholars in the field of cultural studies, not only revisits the history of cultural studies by investigating some of its key issues, but also shares his latest book *Radical Utopianism and Cultural Studies* in which he looks at the concept of utopianism from a cultural studies perspective and argues that radical utopianism can awaken the political promise of cultural studies. In doing so, he revisits the founding fathers of cultural studies and points to a radical utopia by defamiliarizing the naturalness of the here and now.

**Keywords:** cultural studies; aesthetics; theory; radical utopianism

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**标 题:** 文化研究的回望与重访: 约翰·斯道雷教授访谈

**摘 要:** 作为文化研究领域最知名的学者之一,约翰·斯道雷教授在访谈中通过探究一些关键问题回顾了文化研究的历史,并分享了他的新作《激进乌托邦主义和文化研究》。在这本书中,斯道雷教授从文化研究的角度审视了乌托邦主义的古老概念,并指出,激进乌托邦主义或可唤醒文化研究的政治承诺。由此,他不仅重访了英国文化研究的三位奠基人及其理论,而且通过对“此时此刻”的陌生化,指向了未来的激进乌托邦。

**关键词:** 文化研究; 美学; 理论; 激进乌托邦主义

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## Judgment and “Useless Knowledge”

**Zhang:** Professor Storey, thank you very much for taking this interview. To start with, a key question concerning cultural studies is how it relates to literary

studies. We all know for a fact that literary studies is important for cultural studies, but in what way?

**Prof. Storey:** It is important in the sense that it draws the attention to the fact that Stuart Hall started as a literary scholar, so did Hoggart and Raymond Williams. My first degree is also

literature. I suppose what connects literary studies to cultural studies is a focus on signification, or what and how things mean. Literary studies teaches you a sophistication around details, around how things work. But if you are a particular type of literary scholar, a type we are, you don't stay there. You become more historical and contextual. You can argue that one of the things why the founding fathers found cultural studies is that literary studies not only opens up historically and sociologically, but also broadens the issues you want to look at. For example, you may start with Henry James, and before you know, you are thinking Henry James was like this, but what about this particular pop song? It has similar aesthetic qualities, at least partly, but you may want to make a judgment more sophisticated than that. Then you realize both Henry James and this pop song work in similar ways; they produce meanings in particular ways. Thus you begin to form an interest in pop culture and that is what happened to Hoggart and Williams. Williams was a professor of drama and he never stopped doing drama, but doing drama took him into television and communication.

To wrap up, as a literary scholar, the first concern is the production of meaning. One may limit himself to certain objects or meanings only produced by the text. He starts there, but cultural studies refuses to stop there. There is a very close relationship between literary studies and cultural studies. It is hard to imagine cultural studies without literary studies. When you encounter cultural studies in certain contexts, whether it is media studies or communication studies, it often looks quite different and less interesting.

**Zhang:** Right. You just mentioned a very interesting term: judgment. This leads us to F. R. Leavis whom we cannot afford to miss in any discussion about literature and literary theory. In his book *The Great Tradition*, F. R. Leavis makes judgments about different novelists in order to position them in a hierarchy, with major authors like Jane Austen on the top and minor ones at the bottom. And he insists on the standard or benchmark through which different authors are judged. My question is, how does cultural

studies take aesthetic judgment and standards? As we know, with cultural studies, culture expands from its aesthetic sense to a broader anthropological sense.

**Prof. Storey:** The question to us is why you need somebody to tell you this is the best and this is the worst. What's the purpose of those lists? Cultural studies does not think you can't make judgments about things, but what it insists upon is those questions are always contextual; they always depend on what you mean, better for what. Take Shakespeare for example. In English culture, Shakespeare is regarded as the very top of the cultural pyramid. I have no problem with that at all, but when Shakespeare was writing plays with his contemporaries, his audience was absolutely mini-scaled, fractional and mixed. So he thought he was playing to what we think now is a popular audience. And from the beginning up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he disappeared and reemerged. And by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his plays were on the bill with acrobats, with melodramas. They have been edited, they have been changed and we know that it is only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that you get a kind of academic grabbing of Shakespeare. And Shakespeare changes from plays to be performed for an audience to words on a page. The idea that Shakespeare is poetry is a very late 19<sup>th</sup> century idea and from then on we have a version of Shakespeare we now recognize. What that says is not a judgment of Shakespeare, whether he is good, bad or best, but a history where Shakespeare is different in different contexts. The problem with Leavisism is that it claims to be making objective judgments, that somehow one author is better for all time. In contrast, cultural studies asks a different set of questions, historical questions, contextual questions. Pierre Bourdieu has an argument. It is not as simple as this, but something along this line is that the previous ruling class, the aristocracy, they justify their rule in terms of bully. They were special people. What does the bourgeois do in terms of culture? They grab Shakespeare; they grab culture and say this is ours. And they evaluate it in a particular way. But their evaluation is contextual,

historical and has a politics to it.

In conclusion, if your focus is an aesthetic one, if you say all the things you want to work on is words on the page, then you may reach a conclusion that the sonnets are the best poetry ever written or whatever. But what cultural studies says is that itself does not tell you anything you need to know about Shakespeare or even the most interesting thing you want to know about Shakespeare.

**Zhang:** Interesting. How about cultural studies and aesthetics then? Do you think it is possible to integrate, let's say, Nietzsche and Heidegger into cultural studies?

**Prof. Storey:** No. Tony Bennett, a very famous scholar in cultural studies, published an essay "Really Useless 'Knowledge': A Political Critique of Aesthetics" in the 1980s. His argument is that aesthetics is for cultural studies a dead end because it traps you in the text; it traps you in the question of textuality and formalism and stops you from moving to contextuality. Aesthetics becomes a purely textual exercise. In history, the aesthetic is just a way of seeing and it doesn't have to be textual. It can be contextual. You can see rivers or forests aesthetically. But Bennett's point is that the tradition in Europe becomes purely textual and so it traps you in formalism. Once you are trapped there, history and contextuality are lost. That's why he puts the phrase "really useless knowledge" there. I think there is something in there, but I am ambivalent because you can read stuff about aesthetic analysis, and it's quite interesting because it tells you something about the materiality. It is like what Roland Barthes says about formalism. If you press formalism enough, you would end up in a historical context. The person I mentioned before, Pierre Macherey, is a kind of formalist. I personally enjoy reading someone deconstructing a text in his way, but I do take Bennett's point if you think about the aesthetic in the strict textual sense, not in the traditional sense of a way of looking.

Another reason is that from Hoggart on, cultural studies has had a very strong notion of consumption, the notion that people make meaning or culture from

what they encounter. But the idea of aesthetics is always seen as a formalist position, and as such, it follows that meaning is in the text and always imposed on people, thus making the notion of consumption irrelevant.

Of course, aesthetics is not only associated with formalism, but I believe Heidegger or phenomenology has no real place in cultural studies. There is a connected discipline which often blurs into cultural studies, namely media studies where Heidegger's work on everyday life does have some influence, but strictly speaking, in cultural studies I can't think anyone who integrates Heidegger. One of the problems with Heidegger is that in the UK he has the shadow of being a fascist and even in Germany, he is still regarded as being far-right.

## Theory and Resistance

**Zhang:** Contextualization and consumption are very important notions for cultural studies. I couldn't agree more. Actually, it is meaning-making in a particular context that makes agency and resistance possible. Speaking of this, I wonder what you think sets cultural studies apart from the Frankfurt School besides the difference that one sees ordinary people as cultural dopes while the other does not.

**Prof. Storey:** Yes, you are right. The fundamental difference is that the Frankfurt School in general — not everyone, Benjamin doesn't do it, Marcuse sometimes doesn't do it — is the idea that somehow working people are in a kind of iron grip of conformity; there is no way out; there is no resistance. And cultural studies from Hoggart on will not accept that. That's the first thing. The other thing which is less important is that the language of Adorno is unremittingly difficult and theoretically elitist when translated into English. There are two bits to his language. He is incredibly sophisticated when talking about Marxism or Marxism through Freudianism, his language very sophisticated and difficult to follow, but once he steps away from sophistication and enters into the everyday, it doesn't sound very good. In

contrast, Benjamin who never leaves the everyday is much more sophisticated. Marcuse who is my favorite of all of them is the most sophisticated because Marcuse recognizes it's not so simple as Adorno thinks. Adorno thinks power is absolutely top-down and we are trapped, while Marcuse is not sure. He could reread Freud to make space, as I have demonstrated in my new book. I must admit that Adorno irritates me enormously. One of my cultural heroes is Brecht, but Adorno thought he was crude and basically an idiot, a buffoon, a clown. I am always skeptical about Adorno and find him problematic.

**Zhang:** Related to bottom-up resistance versus top-down power, Professor Xu Delin points out that you have a "hegemony complex", by which he means you are trying to bridge the gap between culturalism and structuralism with hegemony. Do you agree?

**Prof. Storey:** Although cultural studies changes and moves different positions, I still think that hegemony is the central concept when you try to understand culture. What Xu Delin is probably getting at is that one of the things hegemony does is that it brings together the tradition of structuralism and the tradition of culturalism. There are two chapters you should look at if you are trying to find the two sources for cultural studies. One is Chapter 3 of *The Long Revolution* by Raymond Williams which is culturalist. The other is *Myths Today*, the last chapter of *Mythologies* by Roland Barthes which is structuralist. And what hegemony does is suggesting that structuralism on its own is inadequate, culturalism on its own is inadequate. Why? Because if you are a culturalist, what you focus on is the notion of culture as something made by people; it's about agency, how you make things. Richard Hoggart, for example, is a culturalist. He has the idea that working-class people go to the seaside and they produce culture, which I think is true. But what a structuralist would say is "hold on a minute, Richard, they go to the seaside, and they encounter a whole set of institutions, things that are there for profit. Although your position identifies the agency part, it doesn't identify the structure part".

What hegemony does is sort of saying culture is an encounter between structures which preexist any agency. In light of hegemony, both structure and agency are important. What is important is to understand the relationship between the two. In some cases, structure is more important; in other cases, agency is more important. But you never have agency without structure or structure without agency. And hegemony brings them together in terms of the phrase Gramsci uses, compromise equilibrium, the notion that it's always the two together.

**Zhang:** There is a cultural turn in Marxism. Some argue that Gramsci is the first one who fits in the cultural turn of Marxism and Althusser is the second. Do you agree?

**Prof. Storey:** I agree except that the best of Althusser's idea is a reworking of Gramsci. Althusser has this distinction of the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus. This is a sophisticated reworking of Gramsci's notion of consensus versus coercion, the two elements of hegemony. And consensus is always underpinned by coercion. What Althusser does is to talk about ideological state apparatus which is consensus, and the repressive state apparatus which is coercion. I like Althusser because he is an interesting character, but I think much of his idea is just a reworking of Gramsci because Gramsci is so difficult to pin down. It is very easy to rework his ideas. One person I really like is Pierre Macherey, a colleague of Althusser. He reworks several of Althusser's ideas and applies them to literature in a very interesting way. The problem with Althusser is that in spite of all his gesturing towards Gramsci, I don't think he allows the space for resistance or failure of power.

**Zhang:** How do you understand the relationship between Althusser's cultural Marxism and Raymond Williams's cultural materialism then?

**Prof. Storey:** I think Williams has an unacknowledged dialogue with Althusser because when Williams was formulating *Marxism and Literature* and Thompson was writing *The Poverty of Theory*, Althusser was the dominant western

Marxist. I think Williams and Thompson are anxious or concerned about the fact that Althusser has no space for resistance. He is too top-down and the system never fails. The problem is, if the system never fails, how can you possibly overcome the system? How can you resist the system? Williams is implicit while Thompson is much more explicit in arguing with Althusser. Stuart Hall totally embraces Althusser in a way Williams and Thompson don't. Hall buys into Althusser in a big way. Williams never does and Thompson absolutely doesn't. But Althusser is unbelievably influential in the 70s. But for all his interesting ideas, my problem is if you think Gramsci's notion of incorporation and resistance, with Althusser what you have is mostly incorporation and you have very little resistance. The same problem lies with Foucault.

### The Return of Class and the Return to Political Economy?

**Zhao:** But some people argue that cultural studies' turn to Gramsci, or theory in general in the 1970s, somehow weakens its political character. Put in another way, do you believe culturalism is more political than structuralism?

**Prof. Storey:** No. I have never been convinced by the argument that before Gramsci or the theoretical turn, cultural studies is very political in some pure sense. I think cultural studies is always academic. Hoggart in a way represents the pre-Gramsci position, and he is at best a right-wing socialist. He is extremely anti-Marxist and not interested in being political. His politics is a kind of academic politics about expanding a way of thinking about culture. That of course is political, but it is not political with a capital P; it is political in the sense that any discipline can be political. And in England, when we say something is political, we mean left-wing. Some people like Larry Grossberg like to pretend there is a political movement and he is doing something more than teaching a subject in the university, but if you want to do so you need to

join a political party which is completely different from lecturing in universities.

**Zhao:** Allow me to clarify the question a little bit. You know, for culturalists like Hoggart and Williams, class is a big concern. But as CCCS (the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies) took its theoretical turn in the 1970s, class seemed to have given way to race, gender and the resistance of styles. That's perhaps why it is argued that cultural studies was less political after the theoretical turn.

**Prof. Storey:** That's true, if you look at it that way. Cultural studies is primarily concerned with class. This has something to do with the fact that Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart were unusual for academics and professors in the 1950s and early 60s, as they both came from working-class background. And they were bothered about class. It is also true that until fairly recently, maybe the last ten years or less, class disappeared. But as Freud puts it, you get the return of the repressed. What has been pushed aside suddenly starts to come back. Class took a while to come back, but it has certainly come back now.

One of the reasons it has come back is probably the financial crisis in 2008 where class suddenly became much more visible. In some sense it's a return to Hoggart and early Williams, but it is a return which I think is much more Marxist. And I think that the return to class is one reason why there is a return to Hoggart. Hoggart in the first half of the book *The Uses of Literacy* is definitely insisting before Williams did theoretically that the working class has a culture. He is focused on it, not necessarily in a political way, but he is focused on it. That's why people now are reevaluating Hoggart and thinking maybe he wasn't quite an apolitical character.

**Zhao:** If class is back, does it entail a return to Marx's political economy in order to reactivate cultural studies, as some argue?

**Prof. Storey:** No. I worry about those claims because what they often made and they have been making this over the years is that cultural studies should stop concerning itself with culture and instead concern itself with some crude notion of base and

superstructure. I think the strength of cultural studies is that it draws out Marxism, that what is happening here is much more than a reflex of material conditions. That is a strength. You know, Paul Smith and a whole bunch of them in the UK want cultural studies to reconnect with political economy, and they don't mean reconnect, they mean collapse back into, although it was never there in the first place. But what they say is stop talking about what Judith Butler calls "the merely cultural". And I think what cultural studies does is to discover something in Marxism which those people don't see.

Political economy, insofar as it exists in the UK at all, is not revolutionary at all. It spends more time dismissing ordinary people, the very agent of revolution. There is some sort of elitist high who think they understand what is going on. I get no problem with political economy, but I see political economy as a version of structure and it's important to connect it with agency. But if they want cultural studies to collapse all forms of agency into structure, then you are back to 1950's sociology. I don't think that was Marxism; I think Marxism is much more sophisticated than that. For me, if Marxism were around today, he would be interested in what Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and even Richard Hoggart was writing because he knew it is something more about the reflex of the economic. Class struggle implies agency, and to have class struggle, you need resistance outside the structure. Otherwise there is no class struggle. If Marx meant the ruling ideas were the only ideas and they were imposed on people, we can't have class struggle then. What they really mean is shut up and stop talking about culture and culture is irrelevant.

### **Radical Utopianism: Awakening Cultural Studies' Political Promise**

**Zhang:** So far much of our conversation has been about agency, structure and resistance. Is this also what you had in mind when you wrote your new book *Radical Utopianism and Cultural Studies*? In this book, you look at the concept of utopianism from a cultural

studies perspective and argue that radical utopianism can awaken the political promise of cultural studies.

**Prof. Storey:** Yes. This is my 13th book, but I have thought about writing it since I was an undergraduate. My BA dissertation was originally about Gerrard and Winstanley and the Diggers which you will see in the fourth chapter of this book, but for some reason I changed to Pierre Macherey. So in writing this book, I feel I am returning to something I have never left. You are absolutely right about what the book is about. And the reasons why I write it is because firstly, radical utopianism was an important concept for two of the founding fathers of cultural studies, E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams. Unfortunately, its impact on cultural studies was almost non-existent. Another reason or aim is to renew the aspect of the political promise of cultural studies by encouraging it to become more utopian and embrace what Thompson called "utopian courage". Therefore, although utopian studies have made very fruitful use of the radical utopianism developed by Thompson and Williams, I think it is now time that this work also found a productive place in the "post-discipline" they helped create.

So basically, this is a book about resistance. And I think resistance is what is needed in cultural studies today. Interestingly, contrary to the common myth, cultural studies has a lot to say about our complicity with power and a lot less about the possibilities of resistance to its impact. Here I have to make a confession. You know, in my book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2018), for example, I write endlessly about different concepts of domination, but I have much less to say about how incorporation into the prevailing structures of power is often resisted. In this book, I want to present radical utopianism as a form of resistance.

**Zhang:** Beautiful idea. The question is, how? As we know, utopia basically means a happy place that exists nowhere and the very word utopianism connotes impossible. Understood in this way, how does radical utopianism empower resistance? This must be a complicated question, but can you elaborate on it?

**Prof. Storey:** Well, I think you hit the nail. To do this, it is first necessary to strip utopia and utopian of their negative connotations like unrealistic, impractical and impossible, etc. Here I think Valentin Volosinov is very helpful. According to Volosinov, the making of meaning is always entangled in the “multi-accentuality” of the sign. He argues that meaning is determined by the social context in which it is articulated. That is, rather than being inscribed with a single meaning, a sign can be *made to signify* different things, in different contexts, with different political effects. Therefore, the sign is always a potential site of differently oriented social interests and is often in practice an arena of struggle. Those with power seek to make the sign uni-accentual; to make what is potentially multi-accentual appear as if it could only ever be uni-accentual.

**Zhang:** And this is what happens to the word utopia?

**Prof. Storey:** Exactly. If you look at the history of the word utopia, you will see it began meaning simply what Thomas More seems to have intended, a happy place that currently exists nowhere. This was in 1516 when the book was first published. Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it slowly acquired additional meanings like unrealistic and impractical, meanings that are not sanctioned by the narrative of More’s book. Why this change? I think a particular politics of reading is at work here. This is not simply an issue of semantic difference, a simple question of interpreting the sign differently. Rather, it is a significant part of a power struggle over who can claim the power and authority to define social reality, to make the sign signify in particular ways. This is important because meanings regulate and organize our conduct and practices; they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed. That’s why Stuart Hall argues that meanings are what those who wish to govern and regulate the conduct and ideas of others seek to structure and shape.

For me, there are two types of utopianism: blueprint utopianism (models of the “future”) and radical utopianism which works through

defamiliarization. That is, the making strange of what currently exists in order to dislodge its taken-for-grantedness and in so doing make possible the production of utopian desire.

**Zhang:** According to your book, is it the second type that offers a challenge to our complicity with power?

**Prof. Storey:** Yes, right.

**Zhang:** And by “utopian desire” you mean?

**Prof. Storey:** Utopian desire is not a desire for a particular happy place. It is a desire with the capacity to break open the ideological spaces of the here and now.

**Zhang:** And you argue that his very sense of desire goes back to William Morris.

**Prof. Storey:** Right. Morris writes of the teaching of desire and political organization as the two main components necessary to bring about radical change. According to him, we need to educate people into desiring change before organizing then into claiming it. Although Morris is writing about socialism, I think what he says applies to radical utopianism more generally. If you just have educated desire without political organization, you will end up in frustration. If you have political organization without educated desire, any action will be empty and short-lived. This idea is similar to what Ernst Bloch calls “educated hope”. Educated hope represents the transformation of daydreaming into “anticipatory consciousness” and then into the possibility of action.

**Zhang:** So everything has to begin with our perception, our consciousness. That’s the root problem, and the radicality of radical utopianism lies not in what the ideal society, or blueprint utopia is like, but in changing human consciousness. I mean, if we go to the etymology of radical, it is derived from Late Latin *radicalis*, meaning “of or having roots.”

**Prof. Storey:** Exactly.

**Zhang:** Words like daydream and desire are reminiscent of Freud’s psychoanalysis. How does your theory of radical utopianism integrate psychoanalysis?

**Prof. Storey:** Well, Ernst Bloch’s “educated hope” is actually a reworking of Freud’s psychoanalysis



to explore what desire lacks. What this means is that Bloch sees in daydreams not only something that is stale but something provocative. And this provocative part has hoping at its core, and it is teachable.

I think this interpretation of Freud's desire is interesting and useful, but I want to suggest that we can do something similar with Lacan as well, especially in terms of his concept of "lack". Perhaps we can start with Lacan's three registers of reality, the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Now our development is a move from the "full" world of the Real to the "empty" world of the Symbolic. The Imaginary represents our unsuccessful attempt to make what is "empty" feel "full" again. The transition from the Real to the Symbolic is so traumatic that we spend the rest of our lives trying to return, trying to get back to the "fullness" of the Real. Desire exists in the impossibility of closing the gap between self and other, to make good that which we "lack". We long for a time when we existed in "nature", where everything was simply itself, before the mediations of the Symbolic. In other words, our life narratives are governed by the desire to find that which we lack, which is, according to Lacan, ourselves whole again. With each new identification, we will attempt to return to a time before "lack", to find ourselves in what is not ourselves. Each identification will be an attempt to fill the space of "lack", and each time we will fail.

In Lacan's narrative, "lack" is an ahistorical desire for reunion with the Real. But what radical utopianism seeks is not a return to a mythical moment of plenitude but a search for the "no place" that is truly the "happy place". Lack, understood this way, is a historically situated utopian desire for a better future. The "completeness" that is missing is not (or not just) psychological, it is social, pointing to our fundamental need for society and social relationships.

**Zhao:** Interesting. I think you are offering us a utopian reading of Lacan's lack by giving it a sociological explanation. This is quite similar to what Herbert Marcuse does in *Eros and Civilization*. Actually, you draw heavily on Marcuse in the new book.

**Prof. Storey:** Yes.

**Zhao:** How does Marcuse fit in radical utopianism?

**Prof. Storey:** As I just said, the key to radical utopianism is to strip it of its negative connotations in the first place. Marcuse is important for radical utopianism because he makes a good example of defamiliarizing the here and now for a better world. Although he refuses to offer a blueprint of what the new society might be like, he does believe a new world, a world of non-alienated labor is possible. And I think this is made possible by historicizing Freud. According to Freud, repression is universal and necessary for civilization. Marcuse, however, argues that repression is historical and always entangled in relations of power. It changes with different forms of social organization. Marcuse calls these different versions of repression the "performance principle", which he describes as "the prevailing historical form of the reality principle". Under capitalism, for example, there is not only basic repression but also surplus-repression consisting of the restrictions necessitated by social domination. . .

**Zhao:** Surplus-repression? It sounds very similar to Marx's surplus-value.

**Prof. Storey:** Right. I think Marcuse coined this term in the similar fashion to surplus-value. Surplus, as we know, means extra, additional. So surplus-repression means additional controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association. In this way, then, Marcuse translates Freud's "biological" categories into historical ones. What Freud presents as a psyche necessity, the repression and renunciation of the pleasure principle, is really a series of changing historical examples of the use of the reality principle to ensure forms of domination. As Marcuse said dialectically: "The 'unhistorical' character of the Freudian concepts thus contains the elements of its opposite; their historical substance must be recaptured . . . by unfolding their own content."

Once Freud's argument is made historical, it becomes possible to envisage a future non-repressive civilization. Under capitalism, surplus-repression

demonstrates itself not only in the world of work but also into that of consumption. Therefore, a new society where surplus-repression is removed is a civilization with non-alienated labor, when the working day is shortened so that everybody has the energy for the attainment of objectives set by the free play of their faculties. In other words, we could both work less and determine our own needs and satisfactions. And for Marcuse, the form these satisfactions may take is the making of art, and fantasy more generally. Marcuse sees art and fantasy more generally as a means of utopian defamiliarization. It reveals both what we are capable of and what is lacking and blocked in capitalist everyday life. In this sense, it offers an implicit critique of capitalist society, an alternative, utopian vision. It has taken over the utopian function of religion; to keep alive the human desire for a better world beyond the confines of the here and now.

**Zhao:** But Marcuse's art refers to authentic art or higher culture because he believes they embody the oppositional, alien and transcendental elements, right? And culture industries including pop culture just deprive authentic culture of its critical function, its mode of negation because of their relentless search for profit and cultural predictability?

**Prof. Storey:** Right. But I think we can find the fantasy he values outside the category of art. I think it can be found in many forms of popular culture, which also has the capacity to defamiliarize existing social relations and anticipate another way of doing things. Actually, Marcuse himself comes very close to this expanded idea of fantasy in his discussion of the American counterculture. He saw a radical utopian force in the political activities of the counterculture. He believes that the rebels in the movement link liberation with the dissolution of ordinary and orderly perception. Even if this dissolution is short-lived, it anticipates, in a distorted manner, an exigency of the social liberation. In other words, the revolution must be at the same time a revolution in perception which will accompany the material and intellectual reconstruction of society.

**Zhao:** Yeah, again, as we said above, everything has to begin with our consciousness, our perception. Well, speaking of perception, I couldn't help thinking about the Haight-Ashbury counterculture you gave as an historic example of radical utopianism. As far as we know, LSD or acid is central to this counterculture. And the other essential element of it is the opposition to America's war in Vietnam.

**Prof. Storey:** That's right.

**Zhao:** Some argue these two were very separate wings of the counterculture. In other words, taking LSD is simply about lifestyle, like getting dressed in a particular way, having long hair or liking a certain kind of music. There is nothing political about it. You don't have to take drugs to oppose to the war. Do you agree?

**Prof. Storey:** No. It is commonplace for accounts to present them as distinctly separate, as if one were political and the other simply about lifestyle, but I would say to do so is very misleading. The truth is that they were frequently indistinguishable, and both shared a new type of politics.

**Zhao:** Why and how?

**Prof. Storey:** Well, if you look at the counterculture's most famous slogan "Make Love Not War", you understand it. And the war they most wanted to unmake was America's war in Vietnam. In this regard I tend to agree with Gene Anthony who names America's war in Vietnam as central to any understanding of the counterculture. Here I don't want to sound like propagating taking LSD, but if Aldous Huxley and many others are to be believed, LSD works like a switch that turns off the brain-filter and enables us to experience an enormous flood of sensory material. In Huxley's words, it enables us to experience "the unfathomable mystery of pure being" and "Love as the primary and fundamental cosmic fact". And I think it is the love that is one of the key ideas of this counterculture. Timothy Leary uses different language but makes much the same argument as Huxley. He describes LSD as a "visionary chemical" that produces a "psychedelic liberation" from "routine reality" and the "reality of ordinary

waking life". To paraphrase, LSD challenges all the usual categories through which we routinely translate experience and so things no longer seemed self-evident and obvious. In this way, it breaks open the ideological closed spaces of a constructed reality.

Besides, these ideas do not stop being ideas. Instead, they were performed, expressed, and lived in one way or another. Take the Diggers. In order to create a society liberated from capitalism, in order not to be incorporated into the mainstream society, they built a politics around the idea of free. They encouraged people to think outside the common sense of consumer society. Of course, this was difficult. And the Diggers's solution was to ask people to begin assuming "freedom", to act out the future in the present. The logic here is quite similar to "fake it till you make it", because they knew if you don't act out, you would never start. They themselves were engaged in such a prefigurative politics: they gave away food for free, built a free store and provided free shelter. It is important to notice that what they did were not acts of charity. Their aim was radical change. It was a utopian project founded on the teaching of desire. They asked people to desire more, desire better and desire differently.

**Zhao:** But they failed, eventually.

**Prof. Storey:** Yeah, they were defeated by commodification and organized hostility. The Haight-Ashbury counterculture was over, as soon as people began to make money out of it, as soon as the media came with their shallow and sensational coverage of this culture where sex and drugs were exaggerated out of proportion. But it developed an alternative to American capitalism and war and remains a utopian object of desire.

**Zhao:** And the desire for alternatives to capitalism doesn't end there. Actually, you discuss Paul Mason's bestseller *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* as another possible alternative, although you refuse to offer a blueprint utopia.

**Prof. Storey:** That's right.

**Zhao:** Given the increasingly visible impact of information technology on every aspect of our life, it

is worth examining his argument in relation to radical utopianism here. In summary, Paul Mason argues that capitalism has reached the limits of its capacity to adapt, and post-capitalism, as an alternative, can deliver a future substantially better than the one capitalism will be offering by the mid-twenty-first century. And the way capitalism is transformed into post-capitalism is through information technology which ultimately will erode the link between labor and value altogether, the foundation of capitalism. How do you find his argument?

**Prof. Storey:** Well, I am inspired by his vision, but there is something that I find problematic. For example, who will really drive the evolution from capitalism to postcapitalism? And why will those with power, who now benefit from capitalism, not resist the change? Mason's response to this is less than convincing. He is confident that regulations can do it and governments will do it out of rationality and justice, switching off the neoliberal privatization machine. But why would the state suddenly want to stop supporting neo-liberalism, especially when we think of how those who run the state are often inextricably intertwined with those who benefit from this particular version of capitalism? You may say the government will have to do it because if they do not, a number of significant economic forecasts predict disaster. But the forecasting accuracy of economic commentators is rarely more reliable than that of astrologers. Besides, perceived self-interest would be enough to mean that such forecasts would be ignored.

Throughout the book, Mason uses the term "utopian" in a conventional way to signify unrealistic and impossible, but his own project is very reminiscent of the blueprints of the Utopian Socialists which I describe briefly in Chapter 2. Just as Marx and Engels are dialectical about Utopian Socialism, I think there is both something positive and negative about Mason's postcapitalism. We have talked about the negative side, the problematic part, but what is positive about it is that it opens up the possibility of the production of utopian desire. In other words, the

real power of Mason's book is not contained in a blueprint for a better future, in this case, postcapitalism, but in how its discussion and depiction of the future undermines the "inevitability" and "naturalness" of capitalism at present. It reminds us again that capitalism, as a mode of production, has a beginning, a middle and an end.

**Zhao:** How about President Trump then? He claims to make America great again. Is he utopian?

**Prof. Storey:** During the course of writing this book, I was asked a number of times the same question. It took me a while to figure out how to answer it. My response, which I will outline here, is that it was utopian but not in the sense I have used the term for most of this book. It deployed a very particular form of utopianism, what Zygmunt Bauman calls "retrotopia" and what I will call utopian nostalgia. Utopian nostalgia is fundamentally different from radical utopianism in that it locates the "happy place" in the past. Using the slogan Make America Great Again, Trump's campaign mobilized the political power of nostalgia. But, as with radical utopianism, the present is the real critical focus. The past, like the future or elsewhere, is used to articulate the uncertainties and disruptions of the here and now -- in other words, appropriate the past in order to reorganize the present.

For Trump, this "happy place" is to be found before the 1960s, when white male workers had secure jobs and pre-feminist women ran spotless homes, black people were untroubled by civil rights, rebellious youth did not exist, heterosexuality was an absolute norm, and foreigners were mostly found in colonies or in less civilized parts of the world. Capitalism was working for "everyone" and "everyone" knew their place. But it was also a time when racism, homophobia, and misogyny were acceptable; and when sexual assaults on women was little more than the harmless topic of locker-room banter. To return to such a time is nothing but a reactionary political fantasy, it should not in any way blur our recognition of the suffering experienced by some of the people who voted for Trump. It is not

that their suffering is not real, my point is that it is used for cynical political gain without any real prospect of it being ameliorated. Moreover, the causes of distress identified are just a smokescreen for the real cause of neo-liberal capitalism which has concentrated a disproportionately large wealth in the hands of a few, President Trump himself included.

**Zhao:** Great. I guess that's it. Thank you for presenting to us this beautiful idea of radical utopianism. In doing this, you not only return us to the founding fathers of cultural studies, but also point to a radical utopia in the future by defamiliarizing the naturalness of the here and now.

#### Notes

① John Storey is Emeritus Professor of Cultural Studies at the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sunderland, UK. He has published extensively in cultural studies, with the latest *Radical Utopianism and Cultural Studies* his 13th book. His work has been translated into Chinese, Dutch, German, Greek, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Polish, Portuguese (Brazil and Portugal), Russian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish and Ukrainian. He is also on the editorial/advisory boards in Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK, and USA, and has been a Visiting Professor at many universities.

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