Cultural studies
‘Inspirational guidebooks with consequences’

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Chris Barker’s teaching and research is centred on cultural studies theory and media studies. In the past he has published on global television, identities and representations. This review article covers three of his recent books that deal with cultural studies theory in general. The oldest one (1999 but reprinted in 2001) is Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice. It was well received as an introductory primer. The next and more recent book Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates (2002) is described as ‘a sequel’ and ‘teaching complement’ to the introduction. In Making Sense, he turns his attention to the central problems facing the future of cultural studies. Between these two works, he published another book (with Dariusz Galasinski) titled Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis: A Dialogue on Language and Identity (2001). This book tries to show how critical discourse analysis can be used as a methodology to support cultural studies. Obviously, the three books are interrelated, reference one another and overlap somewhat. However, what is interesting is that considered together, the three works present an interesting overview of Barker’s ideas about cultural studies and a comprehensive statement on the state of the art of the field of cultural studies in general.
Introducing cultural studies

Let us first look at the reprinted (but not revised) Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice, one of the many introductions to cultural studies. It would appear that cultural studies is like a never-ending story or at least an ever-expanding discipline, even expanding in the past with authors who are not necessarily readily identified as belonging to the ‘cultural studies turn’. If we consider the term ‘turn’ much more generally and the related ‘linguistic, communicative, social, ethnographical, anthropological, and cultural’ turns that characterize social and human sciences today, then we can consider figures such as Barthes, Giddens, Habermas, Wittgenstein and Rorty to be part of the cultural studies turn. This move does not only change the past of what we consider the body of work of cultural studies, it also influences future developments.

Barker aims to cover different aspects of, and perspectives on, cultural studies. He is well-informed and his talent for summarizing the debate is obvious and impressive. The book is so comprehensive and rich with information that it is not worthwhile to plead for more information or signal missing links – even though there are authors some of us will miss. Why some authors and ideas are not mentioned (for example Giroux) and why others are highlighted (for example Rorty) becomes clearer once one reads the other two books, because Barker does not remain a guide on the side.

The introduction provides an excellent set of summaries of and a guide to the rich set of debates in cultural studies. The paradox is that while the summaries can be quite helpful, they can bewilder students. Motivating students implies focusing more on examples to illustrate and open up the theoretical discussion.

We should bear in mind also that the subject matter lends itself readily to visual presentation to communicate concepts that might otherwise remain abstract and impenetrable. It is possible that Barker’s focus on language is part of the problem; he seems much less interested in visual cultural studies than he is in the traditional written variety. As Alice (in Wonderland) wondered, what is the use of a book without pictures and conversation? This question is certainly relevant for an introduction to cultural studies. It would have been wonderful if this book had taken into account the visual turn not only in theory but also in the design of the book.

Barker’s introduction has the intrinsic quality for becoming one of the best introductory primers, but we cannot help thinking this is the kind of book one reads after one has read widely (and probably also wildly). Rather than an initial introduction, this book works best as a further introduction, one that helps the reader to structure their thoughts and reflections on earlier and simpler introductions to cultural studies.

We all probably know the oft-quoted sneer of Newman: ‘Aesthetics is...
for art what ornithology is for the birds’ (quoted in Danto 1986: 8) Well, let us hope that cultural studies can become a tool for practice, for designing better teaching and learning ... and designing a better life. Therefore, the two new books are a welcome sequel to the introduction. Indeed, *Making Sense* seeks to influence that debate.

### Making sense of cultural studies

In *Making Sense* Barker is aware of the fact that he is writing for a dual audience and inevitably needs a double coding: on the one hand his book is an introduction (explaining to informed students about debates in the field), and on the other hand, it seeks to influence that debate, arguing with and against the professional academics ‘whose interest lies with the problems as problems’ (2002: 2). We suppose that most readers of this review belong to the community of ‘professional problematizers’, but also feel some sympathy for the community of ‘problem solvers’.

Regardless, Barker is trying to do more than discuss ‘the problems as problems’; he situates the problems of cultural studies in society but he does not want to be involved in concrete political practice (although he does appear to be in favour of a kind of applied cultural studies, an issue we will touch upon later in this review).

The kind of pragmatism he embraces can be described as an applied philosophy of social action. Barker suggests that ‘cultural studies can be encouraged to take a pragmatist turn’ (2002: 1). He introduces pragmatism as an interesting philosophy for cultural studies but he also practises what he preaches by describing a series of concepts from cultural studies as tools for acting in the world. Their meaning lies in their usage. So he replaces the question ‘What is cultural studies?’ with ‘How do we talk about cultural studies, and for what purposes?’ (2002: 2). This move is similar to the one made by Nelson Goodman (although not cited) who replaced the central question ‘What is art?’ with ‘When is art?’ (Goodman, 1986). This move can be described as a general strategy that Barker employs in the attempt to recast problems in a way that shift the emphasis from the metaphysical representationalist question to the more pragmatic: ‘How do we talk about X?’

Our language is not dictated simply by nature but also shaped by human interests. Truth and knowledge are more made than found. And our quest is always a function of the history and tradition of a community. This privileging of construction over objective description is central in the philosophy of Richard Rorty, who wants us to abandon the idea that one can say how things really are. What we call ‘truth’ is merely the product of inter-subjective consensus. Language does not accurately represent the world but is a tool for achieving our purposes (elaborated in Chapters 2 and 5).

So Barker agrees with Rorty in stressing that we should be constantly...
interested in reconstructing language, in revising vocabularies. Barker also introduces Wittgenstein as a founding father of the kind of cultural studies that he has in mind. The concept of the ‘language game’ is a central concept in Barker’s theory. He describes cultural studies as ‘a language-game that revolves around the theoretical terms developed and deployed by persons calling their work cultural studies’ (2002: 12). Such an institutional definition frees us from our search for an essence or universal definition of cultural studies, but it still confronts us with an important question. What is the purpose of the game? What is cultural studies for and about?

Most cultural studies scholars would probably agree with Barker that the purposes of cultural studies are analytic, pedagogic and political. But as far as pedagogy and politics are concerned, some of the leading cultural studies practitioners openly state the political mission of their work. Some move cultural studies into critical pedagogy (or vice versa) as a tool in the struggle for radical democracy.

Barker pleads for more modesty, arguing that cultural studies should be restricted to intellectual clarification and legitimization. This does not imply that he has no ambitions for cultural studies. On the contrary, he even describes cultural studies as ‘a symbolic guide or map of meaning and significance in the cosmos’ (2002: 5). The cosmos seems a bit overdone — we prefer ‘inspirational guidebooks with consequences’ (2002: 5). Barker argues that storytellers have had an important role in human history, ‘but we should avoid confusing the power and agency of the King with the play of the Fool (who tells the best stories)’ (2002: 5). So, cultural studies can be a potential tool for intervention in the social world, but it is not a form of direct political activity.

How does that work? Barker seems profoundly influenced by Rorty’s central idea that if the world and our identity are not constant, we are obliged to ‘redescribe’ it constantly. We have to unlearn what we have been taught. So the focus of cultural studies should be on redescription and redefinition. Again, this can be compared with Wittgenstein’s (1957) language game (‘the character of the question itself that constitutes part of the problem’) and the tactic of ‘therapeutic redefinition’ by which problems are dissolved through adopting a ‘new way of seeing’.

The problem with the influence of Rorty is that you can use his work to defend the status quo (which seems contradictory to the critical mission of cultural studies). However, Rorty’s usefulness is that one can also use him to deconstruct that status quo. Barker chooses the latter perspective, suggesting that Rorty’s work is a valuable addition to the cultural studies repertoire. Because pragmatism does not of necessity support any particular political project, Barker can free himself from any of Rorty’s more conservative programmatic suggestions. Rorty even attacks what he describes as ‘radical cultural studies elitism’ because of the desire to do the ‘impossible’ and as result refusing any actual participation.
Cultural studies scholars are well placed to correct Rorty’s work (with their concern for the province of power in social life). Along this line of thinking, Barker points out that the contemporary vocabulary of cultural studies suggests that it is concerned with culture ‘as constituted by the meanings and representations generated by human signifying practices, and the relations of power and its consequences that are inherent in such representations’ (2002: 7). The focus is on a commitment to what cultural studies writers have called ‘the cultural politics of difference’ (Hall, 1990: 224). The pragmatic perspective takes our attention away from the search for universal truth towards the giving of reasons as justification. Giving reasons is a social practice embedded in tradition and community. It is part of the ongoing ‘conversation’ of humanity. The metaphor of conversation suggests an engagement in self-reflexive inquiry about our or other people’s reasons (theory) for action (practice). The major aim is to become aware of other ways in which we can talk about a particular topic. Since we have a variety of purposes, we develop a variety of languages, vocabularies, discourses, language games, literacies, cultures, etc. Hopefully we thereby also avoid speaking with a sense of fundamentalist certainty how the world is or should be. This pragmatic perspective renders contingent that which seems ‘natural’.

Barker focuses on the importance of ‘language games’ (Wittgenstein) and ‘vocabularies’ (Rorty) for redescribing cultural studies. Is this new? On the one hand, it is not because cultural studies has always been interested in how representations are constructed in language and on how meaning is produced symbolically through signifying practices. On the other hand, there are some corrections. Barker criticizes the way in which cultural studies has relied on structuralism and poststructuralism, (over)stressing that language is an autonomous system with its own rules rather than the tool that human beings use to coordinate their actions and achieve their purposes. Barker also criticizes the way some cultural studies scholars have elaborated in obscure textualism – a certain deconstructive textualism along with the tone of methodological and political ‘purity’ has led some cultural studies writers into ‘obscurity’. Barker complains that in this kind of discourse, ‘the speaking and acting subject is lost from view’ (2002: 15).

What Barker suggests is that cultural studies needs to restore the balance by doing research of texts and subject positions or ‘the utterances of persons in social contexts, thereby giving our attention to the relation between language and action’ (2002: 15). For Barker, crucial aspects of ‘culture’ can be understood in terms of performances. So he pleads for an ethnographical approach which offers the possibility of contact with ‘the everyday lives of those extraordinary people in whose interests our politics are said to be forged’ (2002: 197).

His argumentation avoids any form of fundamentalism (and that is the major quality of this excellent book). Barker stresses ethnography by way of contrast with the textual politics and revolutionary rhetoric that have
predominated in cultural studies. In the end he also pleads for a kaleidoscope of concepts, methods and political strategies in cultural studies.

**Cultural studies and discourse analysis**

We now turn our attention to the third book, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis: A Dialogue on Language and Identity*. In this book Barker links theoretical insights from (his kind of) cultural studies with the practice of (his brand of) critical discourse analysis.

Barker argues that cultural studies needs a methodology and that discourse analysis provides the analytical tool for researching how language constructs our identity. By introducing discourse analysis into cultural studies he hopes to solve certain problems existing in cultural studies, or at least to study these problems. For Barker, solving problems is more than an abstract playing with words: he aims at new descriptions, new languages with which to cope with the world; this should have specific consequences.

Apart from stressing the importance of discourse analysis, Barker also suggests some major themes for cultural studies. He introduces evolutionary psychology as a major inspiring discipline because he is convinced that we have underestimated the importance of emotions in our lives: ‘Truth, knowledge, personal relationships, communication ethics, behaviour and politics all have an affective dimension’ (2004: 137). Meaning making should be addressed in an evolutionary context.

Why is this perspective so important? Barker argues that in most western societies we live in post-scarcity situations. Only few people are poor in an absolute sense. The problems we face in the West are increasingly psychological rather than material. They are related to stress and frustration, a feeling of estrangement versus a feeling of belonging – feelings that mark western culture. The black hole of meaninglessness that makes people cancel out and resist meaning.

It is within this perspective that Giddens (another major influence in Barker’s work) has identified a relative shift from the emancipatory politics of inequality from the past towards the life-politics of meaningfulness. According to Giddens, this reflexively organized project of the self can be seen as a ‘narrative’, which must be shaped and reshaped in an ever-changing context. Barker suggests a similar shift for cultural studies. If we understand Barker correctly, this does not mean that emancipation is no longer important, but rather that the whole emancipatory project should be embedded in new (post)modern forms of life that have given rise to a new kind of politics and inevitably a new kind of cultural studies.

In the first chapters of *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis* Barker summarizes his ideas about the central role of language in cultural
analysis. His focus on language implies an introduction of discourse analysis as a kind of obvious and natural methodology for cultural studies. Indeed, both disciplines share common theoretical perspectives and practical issues.

In the past, linguistically-oriented discourse analysis has already inspired many cultural studies researchers, for example, in the study of ideology as symbolic practice, the study of the discursive construction of (ethnic, political, consumer) identities, institutions, etc. But cultural studies has also inspired discourse analysis, as Stef Slembrouck (nd) wrote:

The focus on the multiple, fragmented identities—theme in cultural studies deserves mention in its own right because it provides an important theoretical correction to certain prevailing assumptions within sociolinguistic research.

Will a turn to discourse analysis be rewarding for cultural studies? The question remains open. If we study how meaning is socially and rhetorically constructed and negotiated, discourse analysis indeed can provide us with interesting skills and tools. The dialogue in itself is interesting, the results promising, but the solutions do not always live up to our ‘great expectations’ in Barker and Galasinski’s book. Of course they realize that a lot of work remains to be done. Their own examples of good practice are interesting but not that surprising (the focus is on the discursive construction of Australian masculinity and Polish ethnicity/identity). We tried to use the book in our courses and the students were enthusiastic about the introductory chapter, but were more or less disappointed because it is not completely clear how the methodology is used in analysing the scripts. We also became aware there is a kind of paradox in combining the objectivity in discourse analysis and the subjectivity in cultural studies.

**Conclusion**

In a sense, this review has not been completely fair, since it has been necessarily selective in terms of the topics and issues addressed. There are so many other aspects of the books on which we could have focused but were unable to within the space of a brief review article. However, we hope that there is a certain fairness in the ways in which we have attempted to reconstruct some major thoughts in Barker’s interesting books.

One last point we wish to make is that Barker is to be complimented for the breadth and depth of knowledge of several disciplines reflected in his work (economics, biology, psychology, linguistics, etc), for his style, for his pedagogical treatment of this very complex material (for example, the end-of-chapter summaries make this book a very useful tool for teaching and discussions). At the same time we appreciate the (liberal) irony and
the tolerance with which he reconstructs the debate – especially in his most interesting book: *Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates*. And that is exactly what he does.

**References**


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