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An interview with Tony Bennett

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On Cultural Studies, the Disciplinary Mixer and the Usefulness of Cultural Research: An Interview with Tony Bennett
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On 27 May 2006, we met Tony Bennett. He was in for a 3-day international symposium entitled "Cultural Studies and Institution", beginning on 26 May 2006 in Lingnan University, Hong Kong. On the first day of the conference, Bennett, the Professor of Sociology at the Open University, UK and a Director of the Economic and Social Science Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC), presented a paper about the relations between institutional and cultural practices and some findings of the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project that he and a team of co-researchers at the Open University and the University of Manchester have been conducting – a project drawing on the work of Bourdieu to examine the relations between cultural practices and inequalities in contemporary Britain. With the tight conference programme, we arranged to interview Bennett over lunch and tea breaks on 27th May.

We have come to know about Bennett's concern about culture and society from his book Culture: A Reformer's Science (Allen and Unwin 1998). In the book, he describes work in cultural studies as having "interdisciplinary concern" and cultural studies as "supply[ing] an intellectual field in which perspectives from different disciplines might (selectively) be drawn on in examining particular relations of culture and power" (1998:27). In our interview, Bennett talked about his experience at the Open University and about how cultural studies functions as a 'disciplinary mixer' that mixes with different disciplines in many different ways in the university and in Britain.

Bennett also shared with us his views about the usefulness of cultural researches and how the relations between culture and society have become his enduring concern.

Q: Can you share with us your experience at the Open University and your teaching in the Cultural Studies department there?

A: It's a long experience but, in fact, the Open University does not have a Cultural Studies department. I work in the Department of Sociology. I used to work in the same department in the late 1970s and early 1980s and then went back to work there in 1998, again at the Department of Sociology. Cultural studies has, however, always been a significant component of the research and teaching of the Department of Sociology. I think the first time this was manifested was in a course produced in the University in the mid-1970s called Media, Communications and Society. And then we went on to produce a course called Popular Culture. This became quite famous and it was widely used both internationally and within Britain. An awful lot of the people who subsequently went on to develop teaching and research careers in cultural studies taught on that course. **Work in cultural studies obviously carried on as a major area of work at the Open University when Stuart Hall was appointed Professor of Sociology in the early 1980s. The course Culture, Media and Identities that Hall chaired has had a major influence on cultural studies internationally.** Then, in the late 1990s, Jessica Evans coordinated the production of a master's programme in Cultural and Media Studies and we are still teaching that. In our undergraduate teaching, cultural studies is taught side by side with sociology.

That's a long answer to your question, but **the key point is that sociology and cultural studies have always been taught side-by-side at the Open University. One of the most distinctive aspects of British cultural studies is that it has always had a close relationship with Sociology as well as with English and Literary Studies.** That's not true in many other countries. It's probably not true in Hong Kong; I don't know, but my guess is that it isn't. It's certainly not true in the United States where there's very little connection between sociology and cultural studies. There has been some intellectual traffic between cultural studies and sociology in Australia, but my experience was that this was less true than in Britain where, apart from being taught in cultural studies departments, cultural studies is also taught in English departments and in a good number of sociology departments.

Q: The disciplinary boundaries are pretty flexible and you don't really have to claim that you are doing cultural studies.

A: **Cultural studies has always been a pretty open and flexible intellectual tradition – it's best thought of as a 'disciplinary mixer'.** But sociology too, particularly in Britain, has been open to contributions from cultural studies and media studies. This is not true of all sociology departments to the same degree. But there are now very few sociology departments in the UK which don't teach courses on topics like culture and the media, or culture and identity. And the concerns associated with the 'cultural turn' have also meant that there has been a large set of shared theoretical territory between cultural studies and sociology.

A: The Open University is very different from most other universities in organizing its teaching through a fairly small number of courses, each of which has very large student enrolments. This is particularly true of what are called our Foundation courses – the courses we expect students to do when first entering the Open University. The Foundation course offered by the Faculty of Social Sciences is one that is taught by all the social science disciplines – sociology, cultural studies, geography, psychology, economics, social policy and politics – working together. So it's a very interdisciplinary course and it attracts very large numbers of students – as many as 15000 and more in some years – from all parts of the UK.

It's when students have completed these Foundation courses and go on to what we call second- and third-level courses that they have the opportunity to study the courses offered by the Sociology Department and, as I have indicated, these have a significant cultural studies component too. At the 2nd level, we currently teach a course called Sociology and Society. The first book in the course is called Understanding Everyday life and it introduces students to sociological and cultural perspectives on everyday life. Other aspects of the course have a strong concern with the cultural aspects of social change: what is the role of the internet in driving social change? and what is the role of cultural globalization in processes of social change? – these are some of the questions we address. At the 3rd level, there's a course called Culture, Media and Identity that we have been teaching since the mid-1990s. This introduces students to a broad range of questions in cultural studies: to debates about culture and identity, debates about culture and social regulation, debates about culture and policy, and debates about the relationship between the practices of collecting institutions like museums and the regulation of social life, for example. And we have just introduced a new second-level course called Understanding Media that looks at media production, media texts and media audiences. We are now in the process of making another course which is going to be called Making Social Worlds that will develop a constructivist perspective on the organisation of social life. One major part of that course will be organized under the topic of 'conduct'. We will be looking at different accounts of the ways in which forms of social conduct and social behaviour can be explained.

A: Foucault will come in there. (laughter) Yes, you spotted the connection there. (laughter) There will be a lot of concern with what Foucault called the 'conduct of conduct'. One of the topics I'll be writing about in this part of the course is 'habit': habit as a form of social conduct, habit as routine, as repetition, and habit as a barrier to progress and social change – all questions that have played a pivotal role in the development of modern social and political thought. We will also be looking at various aspects of the history of policing where conduct becomes a problem of police, not just policemen, but police, in the Foucaultian sense, as an important precursor of, and as preparing the ground for, the later development of what Foucault called governmentality or governmental power.

A: A lot of us in the Sociology Department at the Open University, together with colleagues from the University of Manchester, have been involved in developing a research center whose topic is the relations between culture and social change. The Centre is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which is the body that funds social science research in the United Kingdom, and, provided it passes its mid-term review successfully, it will be funded for 10 years. It's called CRESC – the Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change. It's a big interdisciplinary centre with lots of people coming together from different disciplines to look at different aspects of the relations between culture and social change. We have a number of cultural historians, a lot of sociologists, a good number of anthropologists, people in cultural studies, geographers, media studies people and people with business analysis background who are interested in questions of cultural production.

CRESC is developing a wide range of different projects. We have 4 research themes. I am mainly involved in two of them. One is called Culture, Government and Citizenship: The Formations and Transformations of Liberal Government. This looks at Foucault's concerns with how people come to be involved in governing themselves, with particular areas of work focusing on the organization of city space and public architecture in relation to notions of government, and the role of aesthetics as an early form of liberal government, and the contemporary role of museums in governing differences. A second research theme looks at the role of the media in bringing about changes in broader social and economic life. This is convened by Marie Gillespie and is concerned with questions of media and diasporas, cultural industries, governance and the regulation of media, and questions of audience practices. Another research theme focuses on questions of cultural economy, and my colleague Paul du Gay is closely involved in that. The fourth theme is convened by Mike Savage from the University of Manchester. Its concern is with the role of cultural and political values in social change. While most of our research is focused on Britain, we also have important projects that have a more international focus – Penny Harvy, an anthropologist from the University of Manchester, is conducting a major project on a road building programme in Peru, for example. Some of the research fellows in the Centre also specialize in research methods. We are just about to appoint a fellow in the area of visual culture to look at "visual evidence" to see what it can tell us about the processes and mechanisms of social change.

Q: How useful are all these researches at the centre?

A: Absolutely useful! (laughter)

Q: I'm asking about the usefulness of culture with respect to the contemporary British society. It is interesting for me that we can take up Foucault's critical approach of governance, but what if the government takes up all these techniques to reinforce whatever you called suppression or self-discipline? It seems to me it's always a dilemma of how all these research findings are to be used and how these researches can intervene in the society.

A: CRESC is not funded to produce work that is meant to be directly useful for the government as such. Our funding is meant to make it possible for us to do new and original research whether or not it has any immediate or direct practical or policy application. The processes through which research gets connected to different sections of society and how it is used are complicated. Our purpose is to produce thorough, well-grounded, theoretically probing research in and across the four research themes I outlined earlier. And there are then many different ways in which that research might be taken up and used. **For research to be useful is not just a question of its being useful to the government; its primary and most important use might be in relation to teaching practice.** Or, and a project we are planning to develop on social movements is a case in point, it might be primarily of interest and use to other agents than governmental ones: social movement activists and the institutions of civil society, for example. Quite a lot of the work we do is also historical and theoretical: work on the history of the relationship between liberal government and the role of culture, for example, which involve what might seem to be quite abstract and obtuse debates in aesthetics.

Having said that, we are also interested in producing research that will be of interest to state-agencies and quasi-state agencies in the cultural sector. And we work with these through the Centre's advisory committee. This includes representatives from the UK's Department of Culture, Media and Sport – which is responsible for all government spending on the arts, culture, and sport - the British Film Institute, and the Office of National Statistics. These organizations have all been interested in the findings arising out a large project on Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion that brings the theoretical concerns of Pierre Bourdieu's work to bear on an examination of the relationships between cultural tastes and activities and social inequalities. One of the things I will do when I get back to the Open University next week is to finalize a report that the team for this project has been working on. The report will be called "Media Cultures: The Social Organization of Media Practices in UK". We are writing this for the British Film Institute and they will publish it on their websites. It will make available for the first time ever in Britain a detailed analysis of people's TV and film viewing preferences and practices, analyzing these in relation to questions of class, gender and ethnicity in ways that have never been done before in Britain. Of course, it will be for other people to judge how useful this report is, and to decide where and how best to use it. It will be for the Film Institute to interpret the findings as they want for their own purposes. But the report will also make available a body of information that, we hope, will be widely used in teaching and will give students evidence about the media and audience practices in Britain that isn't available at the moment.

I think the uses of research are very many and it's a mistake to think that the use has to be immediate and practical. For some kinds of research, yes, this is fine. But for other kinds, you really want to affect and change the conceptual underpinnings of the way research is conducted. In the presentation I gave yesterday, I indicated my interest in carrying across into cultural studies some of the approaches to institutions that have been developed in the intellectual tradition of science studies. This should help people who are interested in questions of cultural analysis by suggesting some new tools they might use for this purpose. That's a different kind of usefulness again.

Q: In Hong Kong and globally, I can see that there is a cultural turn in the business and commercial sector. They know that culture can be useful. The usefulness of culture that they presume is not always the same as that by cultural studies people. We are always concerned with the questions of negotiation. So I guess it is important to understand our usefulness.

A: That's a good point. I agree with what you are saying. **For intellectuals and teachers and so on, you've got to be reasonably clear about some of the ways your work might be taken up and used. That does mean questions of negotiation.** That's right. **We are intellectuals, but being academics and cultural studies scholars in the university doesn't mean that we can't learn from and shouldn't listen to other people, and especially so-called bureaucrats. I don't, like many people in cultural studies, think that bureaucrats and bureaucracy are wicked.** (laughter) **Our worlds are unimaginable without them. But that doesn't mean an unthinking acceptance of particular bureaucratic procedures or programmes either. I think negotiation is fine as you have to learn from intellectuals in other positions.** And I think it's important to have a good idea about the kind of uses you want your work to have even though, of course, you can't ultimately control how you work will be used.

The work on cultural statistics or conceptual work on the theoretical coordinates that I have done with organizations like the Australia Council, indigenous arts organizations in Australia, the Council of Europe and, in Britain, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport has been on issues that interest and concern me - like multi-cultural policies, cultural diversity and access and equity issues in culture and the arts – and that are, I think, an inescapable aspect of the forms policy calculation that are typical of liberal-democratic polities. As such, how such calculations are posed, the nature of the statistical data they have to work with, the intellectual frameworks that govern how such data are interpreted and translated into policy programmes: these are all things that matter and that should be of compelling concern to cultural analysts. I have, as it happens, never worked with a commercial sector cultural organization but, while calculations here are obviously based on different considerations, it is also often the case that general societal objectives cannot be achieved without taking into account the kinds of information such organizations need if, for example, they are to modify the reach of the their marketing activities in ways that might offset any tendency to sharply defined ethnic market segmentation. Interesting and important interfaces can be produced between the intellectuals and the commercial sectors of the cultural industries. It depends. There are some kinds of work you may want to be careful about, but it depends. But what you can't do is to control how our work is used. Once its produced, it's out there and may be used in ways you had not envisaged or do not like. The data on cultural practices we have produced in developing the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project demonstrates that there are the systematic connections between culture and inequality in Britain. We have been interested in the potential of this to question some of the conceptual frameworks in which cultural policies are posed, particularly those posed in terms of the logic of 'social exclusion'. But we don't expect that this will result in any sudden or dramatic changes of policy. And we can't prevent our findings, once they are published, from being used in all sorts of way by audience marketing companies serving private commercial interests. But nor can we rule out in advance the possibility

that such uses might produce more equitable cultural outcomes of a kind that we would want to support and nourish.

Q: Can you share your experiences dealing with government and bureaucrats or the policy making process?

A: I've been doing this mainly through developing research centre and working with people from cultural policy and industry organizations who have played advisory roles in relation to those centres or with whom either I or other colleagues have developed research partnerships. From these advisory roles will come different sorts of collaboration with governmental bodies in the cultural sector. In the case of the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project that I talked about yesterday, it was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, but one of the reasons it was prepared to fund this inquiry was because the research team had developed the proposal in partnership with the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport, the Office of National Statistics, the British Film Institute and the UK' four national Arts Councils. These were all partners in the application for research funding and what this said to the ESRC was: look, if the research team get your support for this, we will be very interested in their findings and we are prepared to work with them to help them develop their research in ways that are relevant to our concerns. At various points in the process, many members of these organizations advised us, and we learned a lot from this. None of them ever tried to interfere with the research process. They have come to conferences with us and shared ideas – they all come from university backgrounds in the humanities or social sciences, and the value to us of the advice of other intellectuals working in more applied contexts has been invaluable. We have been enriched by working with them, and they have also been very helpful in arranging publications or seminars which allow us to disseminate our research findings to people who, if we only published in academic journals or books, would never hear about our work. Of course, they won't agree with everything we say and we won't agree with everything they say. (laughter) Lots of people will be critical about the work and that's a reasonable outcome in an open society that depends on the production and circulation of knowledge as part of the complex process of discussion through which decisions are eventually made.

One does, of course, need to be aware that government organizations are subject to political pressure. And you do need to think carefully about who has the final say in relation to what you write, and be very careful about signing away any right to intellectual autonomy. These are the things that you need to be clear about. The other side to it, as the issues in which questions of culture are involved become increasingly pressing in both policy and political terms, is that **there is no way in which a critical cultural studies will ever contribute significantly to the ways in which these are, however imperfectly, worked out and resolved, without developing ways of working and dialoging with mainstream governmental and economic organizations.**

Q: Yesterday, in the conference, Professor Wang Xiao-ming talked about the use of Cultural Studies department in Shanghai with a purpose of helping rural students. Prof Wang noticed that some students from the rural face pressure when coming to the urban area. He uses cultural studies

A: The situation between the two places isn't really comparable. What Xiao Ming was talking about yesterday was a Cultural Studies department recruiting its students directly. The Open University does not recruit students directly into the Department of Sociology as such, or any other Department. Students join the Open University to make up their own Bachelor of Arts in whatever way they want. They might do two courses of sociology together with a literature course or history course, or courses in science and mathematics.

The issue you are talking about – student recruitment - is done by the University as a whole rather than by particular departments. Also, in Britain, there is no rural-urban divide of the kind you find in China because, in Britain, the countryside is never far away from the city. The country is too small for this apart from some of the outlying parts of northern and western Scotland. Nonetheless, the Open University has always been concerned to recruit students from diverse background. When students enter the university, they get a lot help from local tutors at the start of their degree programme – a lot of help with both subject content and with learning how to learn. **The Open University also makes a lot of effort to recruit less or differently abled students and to support them where they experience particular learning difficulties.** It makes special arrangements for students with varying degrees of visual impairment. It organizes teams of volunteers, for example, who translate study materials into Braille for blind students. A lot of care has been taken to help people return to study in the Open University.

Q: Can you share how you come to your interests in cultural studies and museum?

A: I have, throughout my career, been more interested in questions of cultural analysis broadly speaking than I have been in cultural studies as such, and I don't mind much whether my work is defined as belonging to cultural studies or to sociology. I did my PhD on the work of George Lukacs. Through working on Lukacs and having done a master's programme on sociology and literature at the University of Sussex, I got interested in the relationship between culture and society. That's been the enduring concern for me: how best to think the interactions between cultural and social relationships and practices. I have engaged with these questions in both cultural studies and sociology journals (and many other minds of journals too – journals of literary and intellectual history, for example) and in academic posts that have been located in both cultural studies and sociology departments.

I originally thought of my work under the heading of the sociology of culture. When I went to the Open University, and particularly during the period when I was chair of the Popular Culture course there, in the late 1970s, was the first time I developed an interest in what had been going on in cultural studies in Britain and this is when I first began to get connected to people in Birmingham Centre. The opportunity to produce a course on popular culture, using all the resources of the Open University - TV programmes, radio programmes, books, etc – was a fantastic opportunity, and it was this that really prompted my interest in cultural studies. It was at

this time that I began to read extensively the work of Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson and, of course, of Stuart Hall. All of these have remained important points of reference for my work.

I got interested in museums when I went to Australia **in the early1980s. This was a period of major museum development in Australia. There was a huge development of national museums, state museums and city museums, all at the same time – and, with some exceptions,** these were the first real efforts to engage with Australian history in museum terms. Most Australian museums developed in earlier periods were museums of natural history or anthropology or geology. There were few history museums before the 1980s. **This meant that this was a period in which you could see the national past being built and assembled – in museums and heritage sites - before your very eyes. This was a very good topic for me to engage with as a way of trying to make sense of an important new Australian cultural phenomenon and, in doing so, to make sure that, as an intellectual working in Australia, I engaged with and made an effective contribution to Australian issues.** And then I got interested in the history and theory of museums more generally and decided to study these in greater depth.

My interest in cultural policy came out of collaborative work. The decision to establish an Institute for Cultural Policy Studies at Griffith University emerged from collaborations with a number of colleagues and our sense that the time was right to organize an interface between cultural studies and cultural policy that would help to reformulate the concerns of cultural studies in useful and productive ways. I then moved on from that to a more general set of questions, derived from Foucaultian theory, concerned with the relations between culture, government and the social.