‘THEOR-ES’, OR THE PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

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This essay offers some ideas on what cultural studies is ‘for’. While refuting the notion that cultural studies is simply ‘for’ culture, I offer some definitions of how its apparently transgressive and revolutionary position may be seen as being ‘for’ the academy. I offer the hypothesis that the ‘out-reaching’ and ‘over-reaching’ methodologies of cultural studies construct a fantasy space in which academics remain in charge of their own disciplinary and institutional boundaries, transgressing or redefining them at will. This fantasy arises in a contemporary situation in which academics are actually less and less able to define the limits and set the contours of their institutional and professional domains. It is in the light of this argument that I revisit some aspects of the ‘Sokal Affair’, and claim that Sokal’s intervention, far from refuting the anti-disciplinary premises of cultural studies, rather affirmed the institutional necessity of tenured radicalism and licensed transgression.

Whether one prefers one’s culture with a big C or small c, as abstract entity or embodied practice, all culture is reaction formation, and the extremity of that reaction is proportionate to the condition that culture cultivates. In this sense, Cultural Studies is also a cultural formation, but not in the way that its practitioners often think. There is still a strong attachment by cultural theorists to those models which examine the conditions ‘for’ cultural practice, including Cultural Studies. This is to ignore the possibility that the condition is what the practice itself is ‘for’. In addressing the question of what Cultural Studies is for, this essay discusses some aspects of the ‘Sokal affair’, which, as is well known, began when the physicist Alan Sokal submitted a spoof cultural studies article “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” to the cultural studies journal Social Text, edited by Bruce Robbins and Andrew Ross (Sokal 1996). It was accepted, published in Social Text 46/47 in Spring/Summer 1996 and subsequently revealed to be a ‘hoax’. I am arguing that what the Sokal Affair revealed was not a ‘crisis in Cultural Studies’, but a crisis in academia which is normalised as cultural studies. That crisis, I shall argue, is a crisis of distinction; more specifically, a question of whether the distinction between academic and non-academic is one that academics can make for themselves.
I should also state up front that the Sokal Affair is a dead issue, which is precisely what is interesting about it. What one can say with certainty about this imbroglio is that nothing happened, or more accurately what was revealed was how nothing had already happened, and nothing was already happening. Cultural studies stages a permanent anti-institutional revolution which nonetheless guarantees the university's historical cultural ‘mission’. Sokal’s article, with its kernel of pure nonsense, was both the cultural ‘other’ which guarantees the progressive, anti-institutional aspect of cultural studies, and the ‘obscure object’ of study which guarantee institutional continuity. In other words, ‘Transgressing the Boundaries’ did for cultural studies what cultural studies does for the University, which is to confirm that the University still has the rights to an idea of culture, that academia’s reactions can be traced back to academic formations, and not to those that lie beyond its control. To give an example which I will be returning to throughout, it’s all very well if you can feel that the domination of the dominated or the otherness of the other is your responsibility, less comforting if, like Professor Bernard Porter of the Universities of Newcastle and Yale, you find your lecture notes posted on the internet without your say so (Porter 2000: 12-13). Porter said that this made him feel that “what I had been offering as personal interpretation, attached to me, had been transmuted into general, objective truth, a kind of impersonalised commodity” (ibid: 12).

I would argue, however, that the key issue here is not the alienation of the individual, but the form of the translation from particular to general, which affects both the individual academic and the University as a whole. Academia is losing the form of its translation from academic to non-academic, in fact it can be said that the non-academic is increasingly translating academia back to itself, much as Bernard Porter found himself ‘translated’ on the internet. Cultural Studies, with its core fantasy of anti-, post- or inter-disciplinarity, represents this translation, on academia’s behalf, as a problem which has its origin in the culturally reactionary status of academics and their disciplines. In this way, for example, art history is preserved by being ‘culturalised' as visual culture. Alan Sokal’s article was as conservative a reaction to the threats posed to the integrity of academia as cultural studies is, mainly because it was a model of the type of reaction-formation that has made cultural studies necessary. Sokal’s narcissistic illusion was that in cooking up cultural studies he was really doing something else, that his flattery had a double meaning. Cultural studies practitioners also think that they are doing one thing and something else, namely academic work which is also cultural, that is, work which is reflexively and democratically situated within the conditions of all types of cultural practice. I have claimed, however, that we should pay less attention to the conditions for cultural practices and think more about what conditions the practice is for, which does not allow for the privilege of a double meaning for what you do, but does allow you to think about how to model the articulation of particular and general in the move from academic to non-academic. It doesn’t matter, in terms of content, what is considered academic and what is not, and people can keep shifting that boundary