

Worth A Second, or a First Look

Reviews by
Lawrence Grossberg
University of North Carolina

Stuart Hall, Charles Critcher, Tony Jefferson, and John Clarke, **Policing the Crisis**, Macmillan, 1978, 437 pp, \$46.00 (paperback).

This is, in my opinion, the most significant book in British cultural studies. It defines not only a new theoretical basis for cultural studies (in a very original reading of Gramsci) but also explicitly defines cultural studies as a conjunctural practice and as the study of conjunctures (in a very specific sense) and expands the range of questions and political problematics within the realm of cultural studies. Many people will not recognize this as cultural studies—it is not about popular culture (but it is about the popular); it is not about decoding and active audiences (but it is about political struggle through culture to win control of the state) and it is not about ideological consensus (but it is about hegemony as the attempt to win consent). And just to add the icing to the cake, it all but predicts the rise of Thatcherism (so much for those who say that qualitative work has no predictive power)!!

John Clarke, **New Times and Old Enemies**, HarperCollins Academic U.K. and Routledge, U.S., 1991, 190 pp, \$43.00 (paperback).

John Clarke is perhaps the most under-appreciated star of cultural studies, especially in the United States, at least in part because he works in the field of social policy. His work is among the most eloquent embodiments of cultural studies' commitment to complexity, contradiction, contestation and context. Clarke has consistently refused to separate cultural politics and political economy. This book is perhaps the best statement of the British cultural studies' analysis of the rise of the new right and of neoliberalism (considering both the UK and the U.S.) and one of the most articulate critiques of postmodernism. His arguments are brought up to date in his newest book, *Changing Welfare, Changing States*. This is what I have always thought cultural studies is supposed to be.

Paul Gilroy, **Against Race**, Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2000, 416 pp, \$36.00 (hardcover), \$16.95 (paperback).

Paul Gilroy is certainly one of the most original and important thinkers around issues of social justice, racism and nationalism. In the United States, his reputation is largely built upon his brilliant early work: *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, and *The Black Atlantic*. But *Against Race* (despite its horrible title, chosen by the publisher against the author's wishes—the title in the UK is *Between Camps*) is perhaps the most rigorous attempt to distinguish anti-racism and what Gilroy calls raciology from contemporary theories of racial identity. Gilroy scrupulously investigates the political implications of the recognition that race is not a biological but a cultural category. He attempts to show how the latter reproduce forms of power and political struggle that have a long history and that have always hindered the attempt to establish just societies. This project is continued in his latest book, again horribly (and

involuntarily) titled, *Postcolonial Melancholia*.

Tony Bennett, **Outside Literature**, Routledge, 1990, 324 pp, \$39.95 (paperback).

Some time ago, Tony Bennett went through a conversion experience of sorts, abandoning his Gramsci-based work on ideology and popular culture, and adopting a Foucauldian "governmentality" perspective. This book, one of the first projects of that intellectual and political transformation, is also one of the most powerful reconsiderations of many of the intellectual left's most sacred assumptions about the nature of critical work and the responsibility of critical educators. If this book does not make you question some of your own taken-for-granted practices as a critic and teacher, I doubt that anything will.

Meaghan Morris, **Too Soon Too Late**, Indiana University Press, 1998, 310 pp, \$44.95 (hardcover), \$22.95 (paperback).

In my opinion, Meaghan Morris is perhaps the most original practitioner of cultural studies in the English-speaking world, and perhaps that is why she is so often and so easily misread. (For example, her first collection of essays *The Pirate's Fiancée* was often read as poststructuralist film theory instead of as a radical break with such theories by forging a kind of Deleuzean based cultural studies.) *Too Soon Too Late* continues the effort to forge an original and experimental practice of cultural studies, and confronts one of the most interesting questions I can imagine: How does history function, not as an intellectual or academic enterprise, but as a popular practice and desire? What is the place of history in everyday life? In a series of sometimes bizarre but always beautiful, engaging and brilliantly insightful essays, Morris gives a new power to history and to language.

J. K. Gibson-Graham, **The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)**, Blackwell Publishers, 1996, 299 pp, \$25.00 (paperback).

There is a long tradition that assumes a cleavage between cultural studies and political economy. I myself have been drawn into these debates too often. If cultural studies are to understand the contemporary world, it obviously cannot ignore economic relations, practices and institutions, as well as their articulations to other forms of relations, practices, and institutions. But it also cannot simply take up descriptions of the economy—whether neoclassical or Marxist—without challenging their epistemological foundations. Cultural studies assumes that any phenomenon is contextual, relational and (in part) discursive. The question is: How does one talk about economic realities in such terms? Well, I do not know, but this book is the best starting point I have found, and as an added bonus, it goes a long way to debunking the assumption of a monolithic economy, exploring some of the range of possible alternative economies in the contemporary world.

If it is not unbecoming to list one's own book, let me conclude with:

Lawrence Grossberg, **We Gotta Get Out of This Place**, Routledge, 1992, 352 pp, \$35.00 (paperback).

One of the most perplexing things about the intellectual left in the U.S. is how little it has endeavored to actually do the work of trying to make sense of the ascendancy of the New Right (and neo-liberalism). It has too often fallen back on old clichés and worn-out theories; despite the fact that conservative forces continue to gain ground largely at the expense of progressive (and even liberal) forces, the left continues to assume that it already knows what is going on. This book was an attempt to begin to think about what is going on and as such, it demonstrates, I hope, the power of cultural studies to contribute to the political conversation (a conversation I have continued in the newer *Caught in the Crossfire*.) Attempting to synthesize Gramscian and Deleuzian work, it also tried to connect questions of popular culture to state politics. Sorry for the self-promotion.