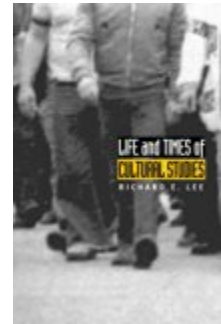


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard E. Lee. *Life and Times of Cultural Studies: The Politics and Transformation of the Structures of Knowledge*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 278 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3160-5; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3173-5.

Reviewed by Terrance Lewis (History Program, Southern University at New Orleans)  
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## Cultural Theory, Past and Future

There are many ways to classify the academic studies of culture. One rather crude way is to split the field of those scholars who claim to do cultural studies into those who study cultural components and the ideas behind them, and those who seek theories which link those components to analytical structures of economic, political, and especially social theory.

Anyone seeking the history of the first school of thought will be gravely disappointed in Lee's recent monograph. Those looking for a history of the second will find exactly that. *Life and Times of Cultural Studies* primarily traces the critical movement that emerged from the British New Left of the late 1950s in journals such as *The New Left Review* and its precursors, and the writings of E. P. Thompson and Raymond H. Williams, as its methodology and ideals spread through parts of English-speaking Academe, symbolized in this work by the founding of the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Lee also covers the historical background in British critical theory (especially early literary theory) from the time of the French Revolution onward, although the earlier periods are not as emphasized as the 1950s.

The monograph is divided into three sections, with a total of eight chapters. The opening section's first chapter traces the development of one idea of cultural studies as it emerged from the writers of the British New Left in the period 1945-1968, the theoretical constructs that underlay the assumptions of the New Left, and many of the

individuals directly and indirectly associated with both the movement and academic theory. This is followed by a chapter devoted to showing the strands of the development of various aspects of the British literary traditions from the French Revolution through the 1960s, world-system theory, and the various theoretical models of the left and right, and to how the emerging ideas of cultural studies "recombined the elite tradition of with the first New Left's concerns for history and popular culture just as the liberal consensus began to come apart" (p. 5).

The second part's three chapters follow both the internal theoretical developments and the institutional establishment of this approach to cultural studies over a period of more than thirty years. The first two chapters of this section look at the development of the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and related projects, the relationship between the scholars and institutional studies, and the changes in both the academic and western world during the 1960s through 1980s. It traces in particular the change from a primarily working-class emphasis in the earlier period to the greater accent on race and gender today. Chapter 5 looks primarily at how cultural studies was both adopted and adapted in the rest of the world, especially in the Anglophone areas. The last three chapters, which make up the final part, are an attempt to project how the past developments in the field might continue to shape it in the future.

The weaknesses of this work lies primarily within the

narrative structure. Subjects often shift abruptly, especially in the opening chapter. For readers with some familiarity with the history of cultural studies, these discontinuities will pose minor challenges. Those reading this as an introduction to the field will find it confusing at first, although by the time the monograph is finished, these disconnects will make sense.

Similarly, those familiar with the conventions of cultural studies will be little surprised by how little actual culture is mentioned throughout much of the book. The field emerged out of British New Left scholars and writers, who were mostly interested in the intersections of economic theories with other aspects of life. As those views expanded towards theories of race and gender, those underlying theories and the theoretical changes are explored more than the results.

The first sentence of the introduction in many ways sums up this work: "What follows is story with a purpose" (p. 2). The purpose is partly the history of this concept of cultural studies and more importantly a justification and advocacy of this concept. The first two sections fulfill that purpose. Lee is also candid with the arguments which have divided the field, and with the intellectual movements which have to some degree competed with it, such as deconstruction (pp. 154-156, and

the associated notes on pp. 227-228). No matter what the reader's opinion on this concept of cultural studies might be, Lee presents (at least after some meandering and convoluted sections strewn through the first chapter) a clear and powerful defense of the movement.

The third section in part doubles back to address some issues of now sometimes-discarded theories of dealing with cultural studies (such as references to C. P. Snow's idea of "the Two Cultures" and its implications, phenomenology, and existentialism, all scattered throughout this section). Lee also speculates as to the possible next steps the field might take, and so also deals with the speculative aspects of alternative futures. He concludes that although the actual theoretical underpinnings of the field will certainly continue to evolve, the process the field represents will continue, "creating a more substantially rational world by imagining a future with values, the rallying cry of cultural studies, reunited with knowledge, the watchword of science" (p. 214).

In short, while this cannot be recommended for undergraduates trying to get a fundamental handle on the field, it can be valuable for background reading to graduate students and scholars who have at least some rudimentary knowledge of it.

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