

## What's the Use of Cultural Research? Editorial theme introduction

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What's the use of cultural research? In late modern society, culture is increasingly positioned as a key force or core element, whether in management or sustainable development discourses, debates on European integration or media trends. At the same time, the value and importance of cultural research is often somewhat paradoxically questioned, and there is a mood of imminent threat and lack of confidence among scholars in this field.

The first thematic section in the first volume of *Culture Unbound* is devoted to the usefulness of cultural research against the backdrop of culturalisation. It aims to explore the impact of culturalisation on cultural research in a broad sense. This concept is a contested one. Does it mainly denote a trendy ideological discourse or a 'real' historical process? Could it be an instrument in furthering cultural research, or does it, on the contrary, risk devaluing the concept of culture, when it is inflated and spread far beyond the domains of 'proper' cultural research (whatever that may be)? What risks may be identified in using culture as a tool to further research interests? What are the politics guiding different definitions of usefulness (and, indeed, culture) in cultural research and elsewhere?

### **Culture, Research Policy and the Politics of Usefulness**

One topic in such a discussion of culture, cultural research and usefulness deals more specifically with issues of usefulness, quality and measurement in the human sciences in general, and in interdisciplinary cultural research in particular. Even if culture today is often identified as a key innovative force, cultural researchers rarely experience that their research is positioned at the fore. Is this due to the fact that many cultural researchers work in disciplines or fields that are not easily assessed according to existing criteria in research councils and other funding bodies? Or is it due to the cultural researchers' inability to convey that their research is useful? Are the quality criteria guiding cultural research different from the quality criteria of other research fields and outside academia, that is, can the 'usefulness' of research be universally defined, or is it completely dependent on the context? Could usefulness be measured in ways that give more credit to cultural research than is the case today?

There is a tension between the criteria of usefulness and the criteria of excellence in the academic world. On the one hand, quality assessment often stresses

the importance of international publication and other factors of individual merit. Major national and international research-funding bodies, established publishing companies and top-ranking academic journals always tend to rate much higher than being useful to the local environment. Works written and published in the domestic language and distributed to a wider audience locally or nationally can, on the other hand, sometimes be deemed more immediately useful to society than those with high excellence points in the big international journal. There is also a tension in that excellence tends to be measured by internal scientific criteria whereas usefulness involves other, extra-academic actors and partners. This is related to the boundary between academic cultural research and political, social and cultural practices found in other parts of society. There is a need to strike a balance between critical intellectual autonomy and self-reflexive linkages to other, non-academic interests and forms of knowledge and understanding.

There is probably no simple solution to these issues. Usefulness can, at best, be fused with excellence and critique, and all cultural researchers should probably strive for such moments. But there is no neutral middle point between them, no perfectly balanced (“lagom”, as we say in Swedish) critical usefulness that solves the problems once and for all. Instead, the research system must be able to uphold a contradictory ambivalence, with a plurality of support and funding structures where quite contrasting projects and perspectives can thrive as parallel alternatives, rather than seeking to widen a golden middle road for all.

On the one hand, efforts should be undertaken to make even critical cultural research useful, demonstrating how such knowledge-seeking helps to solve, or at least deal with, urgent societal problems on several levels. Even the negativity of critical perspectives serves as an empowering function by simply attacking blocks of dominance and boundaries that prevent people from developing their creative potential. Moreover, there is always at least an implicit positive, or even utopian, moment in even the most critical research, by indirectly hinting at possible alternative directions for history.

On the other hand, the whole discourse of usefulness needs to be seriously challenged, since a more autonomous quest for knowledge, based on scientific curiosity rather than on other, more pragmatic, interests can lead to insights that only much later turn out to be of use to others. The inherent instrumentalism implied by the concept of “usefulness” could thus be questioned in favour of the intrinsic value of cultural research, aligning the interests of cultural research with those of high culture (Fornäs et al. 2007: 28). The discourse of usefulness is thus inherently intertwined with issues of power. According to whose interests is usefulness assessed? All citizens do not have equal access to formulating problems, and critical basic research should not let itself be bound to the often short-sighted needs of dominant institutional interests in society – those who have the money to spend on research. For the same reason, it could be argued that the power of defining relevant research problems should not be left solely to the researchers, since they

partly represent the institutionalised interests of academia. Arguments in favour of the intrinsic value of cultural research should therefore be balanced against the possibilities for other members of society to gain access to the influence on knowledge-production.

This creates a complex dialectics. A critique of usefulness can be ultimately useful, although it is often the critical element that makes research truly meaningful and helpful for long-term societal development. However, it is difficult for individual scholars to simultaneously fulfil both functions: to make research useful while criticising the demands for usefulness as such. Both these positions need to be played out against each other and delimit each other's claims, so that neither deteriorates into either servile apologetics or stubborn isolation.

Cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1992/1996: 340, 347f) has argued that intellectuals (in his case both in academia and culture) must be able to combine autonomy and commitment.

... [It] is by increasing their autonomy [...] that intellectuals can increase the effectiveness of a political action whose ends and means have their origin in the specific logic of the fields of cultural production. [...] On the one hand, the aim is to reinforce autonomy [...]. On the other hand, it must tear cultural producers away from the temptation to remain in their ivory tower, and encourage them to fight, if only to guarantee themselves the power over the instruments of production and consecration and, by involving themselves in their own times, to assert the values associated with their autonomy.

In arguing for a social responsibility based on autonomous forms of practice in the cultural and academic fields, including research, seminars, scholarly publications etc., Bourdieu gathered support from both Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, who also, albeit in different terms, have been engaged in supporting the critical and socially responsible knowledge production that is possible only through a self-critical and reflexive application of field-specific procedures, nourished not least in cultural research. Their various critiques against the commercial and political governing of culture and research did not aim to isolate them in any ivory tower, but rather to enable unique interventions in politics and social life.

A complicated question is how this rather strong ideal of autonomy can be reconciled with the interdisciplinary efforts of cultural studies, which also partly strive to undermine the boundary between academic and non-academic knowledge-production. This was essential already to Raymond Williams, who was in other respects rather close to (not least) Habermas' position (Nieminen 1997). This issue will have to be left for another occasion, however. Cultural researchers in the current situation do need to defend a minimal degree of relative autonomy, in order to retain at least some scope for curiosity and critique, even if they also accept certain demands on usefulness (while fiercely rejecting others). It is not despite, but because of, our critical problematisations that we can work meaningfully for dialogues and alliances with non-academic actors in educational, political and cultural movements of various kinds.

More specifically, there are in many parts of the world several problems to solve in order to defend the specific values of cultural research in the current context of accelerating demands for profitability, usefulness and/or excellence. The precise conditions and balance between them shift between countries and regions, but from our Swedish horizon, we can, for example, identify the following, briefly summarised, issues.

As for the outflow of research in the form of academic publishing, much remains to be done before the prevailing measures, culled from medicine and the natural sciences, can be said to fairly represent the quality and quantity of publishing according to the established practices in the humanities and social sciences. In these areas, books, anthologies and national publication in the domestic language are in many cases more influential – and indeed more important – than articles in leading international journals, even if the latter serve as a useful complement.

Concerning the inflow in terms of external funding, a greater flexibility is also needed so that evaluations do not focus on a too limited set of funding options, but can accommodate a more diverse span of sources. It is also questionable whether external funding is always a mark of excellence, since the most critical research may actually both want and be forced to cope on a rather autonomous basis. In addition, research in areas with few and financially weak external partners also deserves societal support. A key aim for cultural research is to improve understanding and communication between people, and this can hardly be measured in terms of how able they are to attract external funding.

The “through-flow” of people and knowledge effected by academic education already tends to possess relatively standardised quality and quantity measures, but their links to research evaluation are sometimes neglected. There is a tendency to prioritise research and publishing merits before educational ones, even in contexts where the latter are arguably essential.

Not all publishing is academic. Various forms of communication with the general public, in the media or by other means, should also be regarded as relevant to quality assessments.

Most of the preceding aspects are usually measured individually, but there is also a specific value in the ability to build creative collectives. One may well discuss the possibility of acknowledging how research environments are constructed and reproduced socially and intellectually.

Quality measures should not be permanent and one-dimensional, but should aim high. There is no absolute quality; instead, quality is a relative concept. Quality for whom, in what respect? There must therefore be different scales for different purposes, depending on whether one is asking for the best research producer, the best educator, etc.

The evaluation procedures of research funding bodies are mostly deficient in adequately dealing with genuinely interdisciplinary proposals and projects. New and solid procedures need to be developed, to counteract the bias of the strong and

conservative mono-disciplinary system against innovative transdisciplinary projects. Otherwise, transdisciplinary research runs the risk of repeatedly falling between chairs.

The last point deserves a few clarifying words. Interdisciplinarity is a common buzzword in programmes on the local, national and transnational level, but in practice, research-funding systems are less successful in living up to the elegant phrases of innovative transgression.

Michael Gibbons (1994) and Helga Nowotny et al. (2001) opened up perspectives for the future of research where a late-modern “Mode 2” society makes traditional disciplinary (and national) boundaries increasingly defunct. While they tend to regard this as mainly a result of external pressures, Andrew Barry and Georgina Born (2008) have argued that there is also a strong internal, scholarly factor involved. Not only the societal interests demand new forms of knowledge that cross academic borders. Not least the increase in cultural studies exemplifies how such a transgressive push is also nourished from within the universities, where scholars doing cultural research have long found it necessary to forge new links and develop the creative borderlands between conventional disciplines. Such cross-disciplinary research makes the in-betweenness itself intellectually productive, producing knowledge that is not merely a combination of separate elements from single disciplines, but builds on – and produces – a growing movement of scholars who may perhaps be called “researchers without frontiers”.

Similar ideas are currently being tried out in European research policy, where interdisciplinary and transnational cooperation is often prioritised. However, both on a national and an international level, evaluating instruments tend to lag behind. According to Barry and Born, the tendency to use combinations of monodisciplinary experts in such cases misses the opportunity and necessity of acknowledging the specificity of transdisciplinary research, which is more than an additive combination of traditional areas, aiming instead at producing new insights across the boundaries. Research funders at all levels need to develop new standard procedures incorporating mechanisms to find, select and prioritise evaluators who themselves have genuine interdisciplinary experience when dealing with interdisciplinary proposals. At present, surprisingly, this is rarely the case, which is unfortunate for the creative innovativity of research at large, and for exploiting the potential contributions of cultural research in particular.

When talking about transdisciplinary research, it is important to also touch on the relationship between cultural studies as a critical intellectual movement and cultural research as a broader set of interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences. Cultural studies have historically provided an arena for critical research on the boundaries between traditional academic disciplines. The transnational circuits have served as a useful interface between different traditions and perspectives. Still, there are also other strands of cultural research that are not entirely at home under the cultural studies umbrella. So what is the relationship

between cultural studies and cultural research today? Are both concepts needed, and how do they differ? Why have groups of scholars, centres and other initiatives around the world chosen one or the other term to identify their activities?

## Mapping out Different Uses for Culture in Research

As the editors, we are pleased to present a wide range of articles on this set of topics, each relevant to the discussion of the role of our own vocation, cultural research, today and in the future. Some of these articles address the initial question – *What's the use of cultural research* – more or less directly. In the first article, entitled “What's the Use of Culture”, Tom O'Dell discusses how cultural research in general and anthropology in particular can be applied in different areas of research, such as tourism and cultural economics, and how the demands for usefulness, as well as the scholarly responses towards such demands, have been articulated in different ways in different historical and national contexts.

Billy Ehn's and Orvar Löfgren's article “Ethnography in the Market Place” takes an even more empirical stance on the matter of usability. Ehn and Löfgren open their text by posing the question “What happens when cultural analysis enters the world of applied research and academics become consultants working with corporations and public institutions?” The article focuses on commercial ethnographers in Sweden and Denmark who sell their services on an open market. They serve as practical examples of how cultural analysis can be applied outside the universities, how this affects the research process and what kinds of reaction it may trigger inside and outside academia.

The next article, “‘Cultural Policy’: Towards a Global Survey”, relates the question of applied research to the specific field of cultural policy studies. Here, Yudhishtir Raj Isar approaches two major shortcomings in the tradition of cultural policy studies: “the divide between ‘theoretical’ and ‘applied’ research and the quasi-exclusive focus on governmental agency in the analysis of cultural systems”. He claims that it is essential to transcend these limitations if cultural policy research is to be truly useful in the future.

The two final articles open the perspective towards a more general discussion on the conditions and future for scholarly research. Mikko Lehtonen's article “Spaces and Places of Cultural Studies” is not concerned so much with the relationship between research and culture, as with the cultures of research and the role of cultural research within the cultural landscape that academia constitutes. In this context cultural studies represent the challenge of *purposeful diversity*: of building an environment hospitable to scholarly heterogeneity.

The last article in this first thematic section of *Culture Unbound* has the somewhat fatalistic title “The Future of the European University: Liberal Democracy or Authoritarian Capitalism?” This should not be seen as a sign of defeatism but

rather as a way of emphasising the urgency of the overarching question: What's the use of cultural research? Here, Sharon Rider points out the pitfall hidden in an exaggerated devotion to the ideals of applicability and a blind faith in the existing methods for evaluating research. She warns that the "transformation of the university into a supplier of specific solutions for pre-determined, non-scientific needs" runs the risk of sacrificing the potential for universities to contribute to the development of a liberal democracy, for the short-term payoff of providing solutions for an authoritarian capitalism. In short, it is a defence for the freedom and self-sufficiency of academic research and a reminder that cultural research can be of no use to anyone else if it is of no use in itself.

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