

Tony Bennett (UK / Australia)

After Culture?

I am, of course, only half serious! How could cultural studies exist – let alone a Cultural Studies Association – if its object didn't? Yet I am not the first to wonder whether the concept still has any analytical mileage left in it. Raymond Williams, for one, famously wished that he had never heard of the damned word. Since then, a good many developments have weakened its theoretical purchase no matter how much it has blossomed as a concept in public political discourse in the widespread subscription to the belief that many social problems need a 'cultural solution'. Many other disciplines – anthropology, for example – are now distinctly wary of the culture concept. Any sense of a clear culture/nature separation is now untenable in the light of the work developed in the wake of Latour's critique of the modern settlement. And many of the theorists whose work has enriched cultural studies in the 1990s and 2000s (Foucault, Butler, Deleuze, Latour) do not themselves offer any extended engagement with the concept of culture or even offer a space in which such a concept might be developed. In the light of these considerations, I shall review the grounds for questioning whether the concept of culture is capable any longer of fulfilling three of the main functions it has performed at earlier stages in the development of cultural studies. The first consists in the supposition that a general realm of practices might be identified in terms of properties which distinguish cultural practices from other practices (usually economic and social). The second concerns the possibility of offering a general account of the relations between culture and the social. The third pertains to the supposition that there might be a distinctive cultural politics. In reviewing these questions I shall also ask whether some of the concerns that have congregated around cultural studies might now be better conceived as parts of a broader field concerned with the study of knowledge practices.