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Desperately Seeking Theoretical Debate: Interrogating the Post-Theory State of Cultural Studies

In this session we aim to interrogate the particular moment cultural studies is passing through with regard to its theoretical frameworks. In the 1970s and 1980s a more or less coherent and all-encompassing approach to culture emerged through combining structuralism, culturalism and Marxism. While Cultural Studies was never identical with one theory theoretical debate circled nevertheless around certain key terms, objects and problems. It was a hugely productive moment, both in theoretical and empirical terms, but the gradual exhaustion of the theoretical framework left an empty space. In the 1990s the approaches multiplied (as did the objects that were analysed) and the debate over certain key problems was replaced by a more pragmatic but also less explicit application of various frameworks in doing cultural analysis. The governmentality approach to culture was one of the possible candidates to step in but it never really obtained the same importance as the structuralist-Gramscian framework.

At this moment it looks like we have entered an era of renewed empiricism and theoretical pluralism: *theoretically informed* research is being conducted but there is no attempt to construct an overarching and coherent theoretical framework. At the end of the first decade of the new millenium cultural studies seems to have gone the way of film studies: after a period of heady Theory empiricism and historicism prevail. The panel aims at discussing the reasons as well as the consequences of this shift: What does it mean to do cultural studies without a common theoretical framework and without an attention seeking theoretical debate? Is cultural studies and its interventionist and political legacy in need of a new theoretical project? Or should we only aim for mid-level research and abandon the quest for the equivalent of the structuralist-Gramscian moment? Around which terms or modes of thinking could such a project be conceived? Or perhaps popular culture and the media themselves have changed to such an extent that new concepts are needed, or that a single theoretical framework has become insufficient?