

# Unpacking Knowledge

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**Abstract:** *For two decades now, what goes by the name of Cultural Studies (CS) has been in the business of repackaging knowledge. One way of assessing CS's strategic position in the current geopolitics of knowledge is to say: With its emergence as the latest ideology of PC comprehensiveness that rushes to bless too many things, like phenomenology *autrefois*, previously attested interdisciplinary fields, such as critical theory, comparative literature, cultural anthropology, and others, have seen themselves squeezed between this fifth column of globalization and the "malignant alignment" of disciplinary thought. Three decades and more ago, these fields were at the forefront of academic (and) publishing endeavors, where they enjoyed the crisp freedom granted to spearheading drills; they now see themselves squeezed unto self-justificatory exercises and resented cutbacks. CS seems to be "disciplining" comparative literature, critical theory and the others at the speed of fashion change. The game in town might be, "show me your interdisciplinarity and I'll show you mine," but what has emerged as regularity is that yesteryear's interdisciplinarity tends to become today's (more enlightened?) disciplinarity.*

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You get a gift: it's nicely wrapped and kindly delivered, but as you open it, out of the box and bows, there jump a pack of wolves. What will you do when they come at you?

For more than a decade, what goes by the name of cultural studies (CS) has been in the business of repackaging knowledge. One way of assessing CS's strategic position in the current geopolitics of knowledge is to say: With its emergence as the latest ideology of PC comprehensiveness that rushes to bless too many things, like phenomenology *autrefois*, previously attested interdisciplinary 'fields', such as critical theory, comparative literature, cultural anthropology, and others, have seen themselves squeezed between this 'fifth column' of globalization and the 'malignant alignment' of disciplinary thought. These fields were, two decades ago or so ago, at the forefront of academic (and) publishing endeavors, where they enjoyed the crisp freedom granted to spearheading drills; they now see themselves squeezed unto self-justificatory cutbacks. CS seems to be 'disciplining' comparative literature, critical theory and the others at the speed of fashion change. The game in town might be, 'show me your interdisciplinarity and I'll

show you mine', but what has emerged as regularity is that yesteryear's interdisciplinarity tends to become today's (more enlightened?) disciplinarity.

Yet, what knowledge comes our way in a CS package? What knowledge is packaged to be ready for us(e); what's 'ready at hand', techno-framed to predispose us and dispose of us? The Anglo *distinguo* between 'know how' and 'know that' does not lead to unpacking, because its prior framing is already a packaging that blends into and as its substance. The unpacking, or unzipping of *know thats* is called retrieval; the unpacking of *know hows* is the memorial or pragmatic actualization of skill.

Packaged knowledge is strategized knowledge: it takes on a form of presentation that employs violence to straddle the world with its own conceptual grip and whip. The guts of the package are the packs, like packs of wolves, compact in movement, irresistible. The pack projects its image as a package; what lies within the package is the pack, the organized group of formed knowledge that resists disassemblage. With the force of a hidden truism, knowledge is the hidden pack in the package. Priests, curators, professors, critics mediate between the package and the pack. The truth may be that knowledge is caught between the pack and the package; but truth gangs up knowledge as the pack in any package.

Unpacking does not mean to unpackage in order to see the pack inside (the cave of Polyphemus, the source of the grotesque, the animalic survival instinct that is recognized as the main function of the I in Spinoza's ethics or of the system, in the general theory of systems). Such unpacking reason is packed unto itself, not too different from the totalitarian mob that scorches the earth only to persevere in the thrust towards an empty freedom. To unpack means, less apparently, to dislodge the pack. This can be achieved by turning the organized violence of the pack against itself: a difficult movement that is parallel and contrary to Nietzschean *ressentiment*. In this fundamental sense, unpacking both depends on the insistence of deconstructive unmakings of cultural constructedness and acknowledges the empty limit of deconstruction. The pack retrenches itself, redoes and reforms itself. Behind various packagings, the pack gangs up on the world. This ganging up is not analogical: analogy is the world's committee, which expresses retroactively a sort of cursory or surprising togetherness. Analogy is the stigmatum of our weakness: it is the reflex reaction to the pack, in fact, it is the counter-pack package. This analytic togetherness is marked by its own lateness, thus such knowledge is (i) a necessarily late response to life by 'making sense out of it'; (ii) a post-existential response ('*nach-existentiell*', i.e., coming after and directing itself towards existence); and (iii) a conceptual grip-of-power over life. On the contrary, 'to unpack' forces us to go to the roots of our gnoseological reflexes: knowledge beyond the surface of its 'whatness' and 'howness.' As culture is the world that matches the world through interaction, the study of culture must decide what knowledge we are talking about. Cultural studies represents itself as the harbinger of an extreme freedom – the freedom of 'anything goes' (provided it goes techno); it is the most comprehensive expression of techno-culture to date – call it 'aboutness unlimited.' The general clustering of techno-culture under the umbrella of cultural studies is a form of packaging as available for free, somewhat indistinct consumption; the 'competition,' unable to offer

a competitively comprehensive image of freedom, is sent packing. But the freedom defined within the purview of the culture pack is inherent to unsuspected violence. By leveling down the traditional differences between ‘high brow’ and ‘low brow’ artifacts and practices, cultural studies has come to occupy the position of the Purgatory (one remembers that the Purgatory, the third place in the Christian netherworld, which never went acknowledged by the Christian Orthodox and, when the time came, by the Protestants, has become dogma at the fourth Lateran Council, in 1215. The imposition of the Purgatory came after tortuous theological debates at the Sorbonne, since the 1160s, and after ecclesiastical negotiations that do not seem to have been totally independent from the acts of devout sponsorship coming from the quarter of the Lombard money lenders. As the same Council elevated simony to the rank of the first capital sin, and defined one of its two meanings as ‘lending money with more than 33% interest,’ one could infer that the aforementioned Lombard money lenders were willing to lower their interest rates in exchange for that after-life neutral ground. Somehow, ‘33%’ became the dividing line between Hell and Purgatory, and it is here that I cut short this much longer story.)

Some critics tend to see in cultural studies an emanation of and an heir to Fergusson’s and Hegel’s civil society (Gellner [1994], Rajan [2001]. While criticizing the former, Rajan makes the point that ‘The University today functions as a civil society. Moreover, Cultural Studies is the epitome of this society: a pragmatic use of the humanities within a modular structure that appears to promote freedom, even dissidence... although dissidence is often cosmetic... [and] interpellating minority identities and localisms into a disciplinary complex which, rather than criticizing structure and reification, [which] reprojects the affect of identity politics onto a jubilant specular identification with technology and economics. Cultural Studies is, in this sense, the end of Marxism no less than of philosophy...’). While agreeing in principle with Rajan, and considering that the university of excellence of today proposes an administrative – acephalic – model in whose reality CS thrives, I tend to regard cultural studies as a purgatorial stage, or, if you prefer, as the fifth column of globalization in the realm of the humanities and social sciences.

Under the unfathomable comprehensiveness of representations, cultural studies have been so far the clustering of a series of analogical packagings: reflex, rather than reflected reactions to the pack. Reflex takes precedence over reflection when, as is the case here, reflection is the representation of its own aboutness. A few steps towards ‘unpacking’ may help to both hinder the restless overtaking of the universal by the cultural studies general – and the clearer positioning of culture within such a realm of studies.

### **In the loop: something called ‘knowledge’**

The issue should not be expedited by saying that cultural studies is to culture what military music is to music, for that would be a sign of impatient polemics. The impatience of the ‘theory wars’ of the 1980s, followed by the ‘culture wars’ of the following decade, warns both critics and their readers against a lack of strategic thinking whose signs are

not about to vanish. For a while now theory has been tied to the two paradigmatic places of modernity: the bazaar of capital and the agora of democracy. In this bazaar-like agora the theory of knowledge at the stage of information will have to stand by itself. If we go on to define information as pure knowledge of the selfless, this image will resemble the Greek *Ananké*, or inflexible necessity's unfathomable character, the fact that generic man's downfall is the embodiment of it. Man disappears in the *Ananké*, as man disappears in the large numbers of statistics or demography, or in Hegel's triumphal march of spirit. If one asks again how does one escape the straightjacket of the Hegelian system, that belly from which no Jonah was to come out alive, one would have to return to the crux of that system: the Hegelian subject. In his introduction to the *Logic*, Hegel associated the subject to 'the identity of identity and non-identity' (*Werke*: 4.78). All instances of identity politics, the master-slave dialectics and the dialectics of recognition rely on this association. Beyond the historical reactions to this subjectivity (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin, Bataille, Derrida), what we have been witnessing more recently is the emergence of information as the abolition of the Hegelian subject. Information is knowledge without agency: it is knowledge known to no one. As such, information is the twisted result of the Faustian pact. One remembers that in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (as in the later elaborations of the motif, say, in Goethe) the capacities that the *Doctor-causa-sui* is bestowed upon by Mephistopheles are self-contained. Faust wants to know it all, to imagine it all, and to have it all. What Marlowe tells us, though, is that Faust is given power over strong simulacra, or pale, incorporeal signs that he cannot hang on to. Faust gets to know knowledge, to imagine imagination, and to have having. The self-containment and self-reference of these domains, the hopelessly consistent expression of which is the Hegelian subject, is the Puritan narcissism of self-enclosure, of Hieronymus Bosch's glass-like spheres filled with blessed couples, the garden of delights of an emerging, nuclear age of the bourgeois family. The Faustian destiny, which was accomplished and overcome by Nietzsche's love for one's destiny, or *amor fati*, is also one of the enigmas of that fate which European tauromachy had to passionately endure, beyond a whole array of fascisms and communisms and of their critique in, say, Mann's *Dr Faustus* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* among so many others. For, after the rampage of fascism and communism, humanism would be only their pitying mask. The various sorts of identity politics do not deny shelter to the inverted appearances of fascism; the sentimental kitsch of that which, in the crude light of capital, goes by the name of 'business-as-usual', does not stray from empty runs of the Communist mobs in power. Beyond this, as data becomes predatory, the age of Cyberpolis will get the better of the world as an instance of post-human humanism.

Information disengages agency from decision, by appropriating them to its own system, rather than link them. Information fractures action from interpretation by delivering them to what Heidegger called *Technik*, or technics. Everything can be attributed to information, as if it were a cyber-mother tongue, an Esperanto of empty ecumenism. But by the same token, there is no one left to be recognized at the seat of agency, there is no master of slave identities that one can protest against. The lack of definite agency in Cyberpolis is countered by paranoid productions of the One Meaning:

the theories of universal conspiracy or exhausting hypotheses of a hyper-organizing, godly force of the universe, for instance, the one whose seer Einstein became in his old age. Yet, the bad news coming from Cyberpolis is not that *They* are responsible and in charge. The bad news coming from Cyberpolis is that *They* are neither responsible nor in charge. Whoever is the first to cast the stone when there's no One to hit?

Between the wars, Walter Benjamin saw the overtaking of knowledge by information coming at the speed of disaster, and constellated with the poorness of experience and the increased impersonality of communication. To him, information was the cold offspring of nominalistic excesses; or, in Adornian, the excessive, breathless, murderous last stage of the Enlightenment. To both Benjamin and Adorno information was the counterpart, or the archive of a world become a slaughterhouse. To later critics, the overtaking of knowledge by information capital, market and other forms of impersonal possession appeared as the lame wisdom of the hibernation of experience – or ‘hibernetics’ – feeding back and feeding forward on a world without a way: an artificial *viaticum*.

The decades of the Cold War, and the Warm Peace that followed witnessed to the further and systematic disempowering of experience and to the increasing ‘division of labor’ between knowledge and experience. One begins to suspect that the modern association of knowledge and experience is historically determined, thus temporary. In the pagan and Christian ages, experience was not deemed to carry cognitive value – experience was of the body, trite and trivial, not *noetic*, or spiritual. It was only through the liberation of the subject for knowledge that experience gathered cognitive relevance, mainly in Montaigne but, first, in Rabelais's encyclopedia, through the figure of that Pantagruelic *orbis disciplinarum* that the 1653 English translation of Sir Thomas Urquhart calls the ‘bottomless pit of knowledge.’ One comes to suspect that the reflex, typical of the Renaissance, of locating the subject of knowledge in the individual, or the subject of experience, is in the process of being cancelled out. This disentanglement of the subject of experience from the subject of knowledge goes beyond the limited impact had by Heidegger's scintillating and impotent critique of the age of the world image (*Weltbild*), or Foucault's proclamation of the ‘death of man’ pre-dating the general anti-humanism of French post-structuralism. This time, the disentanglement touches everyone, as predatory data overwhelms both theoretical acumen and the monstrous, lascivious and flat meanders of the Leviathan. While only kitsch (the sentimentalism of resentment) will put together knowledge and experience, one should also fear that every inhabitant of Cyberpolis will have a microchip on his shoulder. What will be left of relevant experience other than the carrying, not of a cross, but of guilt made imperceptible through micro-technologies.

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To avoid the funeral minefield of definitions, let me liken ‘knowledge’ with what the Romans and their soldiers called *viaticum*: what sustains one on the road – the fare on the go. Wherever one goes, one can take out this or that bit of ‘the known’ and feed oneself or others on it. Snails carry their houses (they're slow, how else; just think of

carrying your abode on your shoulders, even if you were to proceed to be inspected by Martin Heidegger). Remember the fairy-tale prince, who, using a magic whip, transforms his palace into an apple, takes it to the new land, puts it in the midst of an idyllic landscape, cracks the whip again and the apple changes back into the castle? Maybe that prince knew that his magic was to anticipate modern habits, like computer-file zipping and unzipping, or nanotechnologies. Maybe he did not care. But, of the forgotten oral societies, the chief things we remember is that their *viaticum* was memorial: the *guzlars*, for instance, were, perhaps still are carrying myriads of epic lines they knew ‘by heart,’ packaged in semantic, diegetic and prosodic blocks, along with the formulae that ‘block’ them. Writerly societies are prone to archiving so as to free their members from the yoke of personal memory. This is an old story retold by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, the story of Thoth who, after inventing writing, went to advertise it to the Pharaoh as the most remarkable instrument for preserving memories. Yet, as the Pharaoh remarks, writing will induce forgetting for, if one can entrust oral memory to writing, one would not need to keep that memory in one’s mind, but ‘alienate’ it to the writerly archive. The Pharaoh’s bitter wisdom is both quick-responding and aware that this quickness comes too late: writing has already been invented as the new *viaticum*. We now see how the meanders of the history of writing are radicalized in the American split between the comprehensive archive (no library is like an American library) and the much diluted temporal sense, or personal cultural memory of the American subject. In the globalization *à l’américaine*, space covers without masking the split between the general archive and the personal lack thereof. It is not impossible that illiteracy be the ultimate result of this archiving fever and its accomplishment. Some day, the reading skills may come to be reserved only for a class of professionals, distant heirs to the scribes and reading slaves of the old age. Maybe this illiteracy will be branded as ‘sacred,’ as that knowledge by the converted heart that medieval exegesis called the supreme – or anagogical, or mystical – level of the Holy Writ: the ecstatic aeon when the soul is filled by the Book, when man becomes that book. In *Fahrenheit 451* Ray Bradbury imagined a community of misfits who evade the dystopian society of book-burning firemen to live in forests and learn by heart this *Madame Bovary* or that *Don Quixote*. Those sylvan book-(wo)men that carry on the packaged remnants of the society of writing in their ignifuge memory are not as improbable for those who, going to read in the most formidable public archive of our era, the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., notice that there are at the most two or three other souls palpitating in its immense central reading room. In this history of alienating substitutions, perhaps the rampant domination of images will overwhelm writing and reading and will displace them entirely. If today passivity inflicted by TV images is masked by that surrogate of human agency and choice called remote control, it is not inconceivable that, one day, our libraries will read themselves, like diamond jewels cast in thick rubber. Such a hypothesis is mediated by the universe’s fascination with the United States and by a Borgesian imagination some share and fewer confess. It is the hypothesis that the ultimate packaging of knowledge is information: impersonal, self-communicating selfless information. Such knowledge clogs the arteries of life and traffic; it becomes the highwayman, the bad cholesterol of the day. This clogging goes



by the name of information, and in its name cyberspace is born as a network of (information) superhighways that sucks in the immediacy of experience and leaves its users addicted to it. This addiction makes them *infomaniacs*. That news that goes beyond good and evil is information, information-unto-itself, or, the hermetically closed pocket. Informers and the informed alike are hooked into the network of information, on the solid ground of the dry land that they are made to resemble, depend on, and extol as a given. As information collapses the difference between the pack and the package, it does not leave any room for knowledge, it pushes out the subject of experience and offers itself to this subject as prosthesis. The world is offered as prosthetic information to the infomaniac in the same sense in which culture is offered to the cultural student: the packaged pack of everything, ready to use in a dreamy, Schillerian state. As Tom Cohen, J. Hillis Miller and Barbara Cohen write in 'A Materiality without Matter', their introduction to *Material Events*, 'Our Schillerian attempts to return to return from the inscriptive order of mnemonic programming to rhetorics of humanism... or to retro-humanism appeals to representation, the subject (identity politics), or experience more generally (metaphorical work on the 'body'), are examples of this relapse' (2001, xi). That untenable humanism, whose '-ism,' like any '-ism,' is appended in devilish suffixism to the word that precedes it, and voids 'human' of all direct claims to meaning by claiming them for its own systematic funeral, that humanism elicits a fake melancholy when it asks: 'Now, what does 'everything' try to mean?'

### **Knowing: something, the thing, nothing, everything**

In short (for this is an intricate story to be told *in extenso* elsewhere), the object of knowledge, whether or not called *Gegenstand* or *Objekt*, or *Bestand* – is located in a temporal state that, for lack of a better term, I call 'objectual'. The objectual is the past time of objects. That past of the object is not immediate – for it is mediated, and reconstructed as to be timelessly present to the contemplating mind. Although their intuition may be direct, as Kant wants it, the constitution of the objects of knowledge is that of entities living in the 'already-no-longer-there.' For intuition to be immediate, it would need to coexist, on the same onto-temporal plan, with its objects, thus to emerge in the infinitesimal past of objects. But intuition lies in the present and relates not to objects, but rather to 'something's. The 'something' is not the same as 'the thing', but it precedes it, always more imprecise and more decisive than the thing can ever be.

'Why is there something rather than nothing?' 'Just because!' (Warum gibt es etwas eher als Nichts? – Darum!), Heidegger wrote at the beginning of his *What Is a Thing?*. This givenness once stated, and the ontological brakes taken off, one can focus on the relationship between the thing and 'the something.' The existence of 'something' is primitive; the existence of things is mediated by the abduction of the intuitive 'something' by the object, and thus moved into the objectual past. The subject of knowledge 'has' the object, in the sense in which it is contemporary to the object's having already been. The thing is, in critical terms, the constellation of objects and subjects. While Hegel's Spirit proceeds to the de-objectification of the object, the Leftist interpretation of the

world in Marx claims some urgency because of the de-subjectification of the subject in the reifying course that capital took. As perhaps we ought to remember, the historical excess of totalitarianism – in both its fascist and communist embodiments – lies in that de-subjectification became its subject.

The thing is the object experienced by the subject. Objects can be detached from experience by systematization. While they keep the distance from experience, they free experience for a present that is both quasi-independent and repetitive. Any experience repeats *à rebours et à l'avance*. In the order of explanation, the present of experience is squeezed between these past- and future-driven directions. Yet, as experience is the origin of its own repetitions, it always emerges as present. The phantom in the experience can be attributed only to a spirit (of the age), a *Geist*, or a *Zeitgeist* that creates the atmosphere of knowledge and experience. It is in this sense that the Socratic 'I know that I know nothing' is a breaking formula: its something-ness coincides with its thing-ness and renders the 'everything' as an *alazonic* negative. There is no 'everything' in irony, because 'everything' is the universal posture of a series of particulars that have already been voided of existence and now enjoyed the borrowed life of the congregation of 'everything.' The communitarianism of everything reminds one of the least ironic of the beast pacing within mind's zoo: pantheism. When 'everything' has already replaced 'something,' a vague idea of culture is given license to ground cultural studies. And nothing else matters, not even knowledge. Because, to the 'everything' of cultural studies, there corresponds a half-knowledge for which everything can and must be understood politically. As existential decision is the allegory of life, political decision is the allegory of politics, and nothing is safe from the latter unless it is sheltered in the devastation of the former.

Political decision is *present* only as the consequence of its future consequences, as the environment of another environment: kenosis at two removes from the event. This loop creates an empty present, and in it events get lost, whose virtuality, though, is as vivid as ever. In the loop, the present as the consequence of its consequences, becomes the object, thus the present is moved into the objects' imperceptible past. This (unconscious?) trade offers legitimacy at the expense of experience. The advance of the administrative principle, of the acephalic university of excellence, and of cultural studies proceeds at a speed that overwhelms the once popular distinction between truth and error.

By invoking a juvenile notion of freedom together with the politically correct idea that everything can be 'culture,' cultural studies has amassed significant political capital in the academic and publishing worlds. The CS packaging of 'everything' its point of pragmatic resistance: its pack. To unpack its knowledge means to expose cultural studies as an act of collaboration with a poor spirit of the age, to which CS itself has contributed as arm and a leg. Packaging is not only a way of containing and representing an external order: it is also a way of containing within the order of representation. To recap, CS is the purgatorial fifth column of globalization that furthers the giving of the humanities over to technocrats, administrators and other packaging instances. It does so in the name of a non-reflected humanism – a quite speedy resolution. Whoever catches up CS-speed



is no longer impersonal, like the moderns, nor a pastiche, like the post-moderns, but just orphaned of oneself.

Who has an ear for our era's ferocious velocity?

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