



## **Failure Is Always An Option: The Necessity, Promise & Peril Of Radical Contextualism**

**By: Andrew Davis**

### **Abstract**

This essay pays tribute to Lawrence Grossberg and his influence through a consideration of radical contextualism – an analytical process that: (1) understands reality as contingently relational, complex, and always open to alteration; and (2) attempts to narratively represent the messiness and complexity of empirical reality as rigorously as possible (with an explicit recognition of the limits of our ability to do so). The piece opens by reflecting briefly on these principles with respect to the genre of intellectual tribute – that is, to contextualize what it means to talk about Larry and his work within the framework of the advisor/advisee relationship. How do you combine the care of engagement with the ethics of argumentation to make a statement that is as personal as it is intellectual? From there, I situate radical contextualism within Cultural Studies as both an ethical-intellectual commitment and an analytical practice. The goal here is to discuss both the positive and negative potential of this process. I end by reflecting on how Larry’s intellectual commitment to radical contextualism also works as a personal form of radical contextuality.

**Andrew Davis** (2019) Failure is always an option: the necessity, promise & peril of radical contextualism, *Cultural Studies*, 33:1, 46-56, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2018.1544264. Publisher version of record available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09502386.2018.1544264>

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# Failure is always an option: the necessity, promise & peril of radical contextualism

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## ABSTRACT

This essay pays tribute to Lawrence Grossberg and his influence through a consideration of *radical contextualism* – an analytical process that: (1) understands reality as contingently relational, complex, and always open to alteration; and (2) attempts to narratively represent the messiness and complexity of empirical reality as rigorously as possible (with an explicit recognition of the limits of our ability to do so). The piece opens by reflecting briefly on these principles with respect to the genre of intellectual tribute – that is, to contextualize what it means to talk about Larry and his work within the framework of the advisor/advisee relationship. How do you combine the care of engagement with the ethics of argumentation to make a statement that is as personal as it is intellectual? From there, I situate radical contextualism within Cultural Studies as both an ethical-intellectual commitment and an analytical practice. The goal here is to discuss both the positive and negative potential of this process. I end by reflecting on how Larry's intellectual commitment to radical contextualism also works as a personal form of radical contextuality.

**KEYWORDS** Radical contextualism; conjunctural analysis; power; tribute; advisor/advisee relationship; cultural studies

It amuses me to be writing in honour of Lawrence Grossberg when he is still quite active and vital.<sup>1</sup> I had assumed this sort of tribute was reserved for emerita, the unproductive, or the dead. There is comfort in knowing that I am, at least in this instance, quite mistaken. My colleagues and I are acknowledging the contributions of a scholar who refuses to stop fighting the good fight; he may not even know how to stop. It is a testament to Larry's influence and tenacity that this issue goes to press while he continues channeling, and reversing, Antonio Gramsci's (1994, p. 299) acknowledgement of being 'a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will' – working (as did Stuart Hall) through an intellectual pessimism that might precede some optimism of the will, at the same time as he is attempting to hold on to an intellectual optimism that might stave off a totalizing, wilful pessimism (Grossberg 2018).

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**CONTACT** Andrew Davis  andrew.g.davis78@gmail.com

This persistent interplay between pessimism, optimism, intellect, and will directs our attention to what I consider to be one of Larry's most significant contributions: his dogged insistence on 'radical contextualism' as a guiding principle of the political/intellectual project that is Cultural Studies. Of course, this principle is unique neither to Larry nor to Cultural Studies. Traces can be found, for example, in philosophy, musicology, environmental studies, and Derridean deconstruction (Boretz 1973/1974, Haila 1997, 1999, Bilgrami 1998, Olsson 2009). But nowhere has the concept of radical contextualism been so thoroughly considered as in Larry's work, as he attempts to express the specificity of the Cultural Studies project.

In the following pages, I grapple with the intellectual, political, and personal implications of radical contextualism. This essay is an admittedly brief treatment of the concept and is in no way intended to be a final statement on the matter. On the contrary, my primary purpose here is to pay tribute to my advisor, mentor, and friend, Larry Grossberg. And I consider the opportunity to publicly honour Larry's intellectual and personal influence a daunting task. How do you write about a person who devoted so much time and care to helping you craft your intellectual identity, knowing they will read your words in a public forum? How do you determine what should be shared and what should be kept private given both the typical attributes and unique specificities of the relationship – a relationship grounded, either way, in trust? How do you combine the care of engagement with the ethics of argumentation to make a statement that is as personal as it is intellectual?

For someone who thought they might spend their whole life as part of a kitchen crew, pursuing a Master's degree was almost accidental. I was astounded to learn that someone would actually pay me to read, write, think, and talk. Get paid to read critical theory and write about stand-up comedy and R&B music? I wanted in on that hustle.<sup>2</sup> When I arrived at the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill to begin my doctorate, I had no idea what Cultural Studies was, and I only knew of Lawrence Grossberg from the photo on the cover of *Dancing in Spite of Myself*. By getting in to that programme and having Larry assigned as my temporary advisor, I was blessed with what I like to call 'the luck of the dumb.'

A couple of years into the programme, I had a conversation with the father of a friend of mine:

So, do you hate your advisor yet?

No.

Don't worry, you will. It's only natural.

Well, Dr. C—————, that moment never came. Like so many of Larry's advisees with whom I have discussed his advisorship, I have nothing but love and

admiration for him – as much for his rigour and criticism as for his guidance, loyalty, trust, and camaraderie. There are countless anecdotes (both personal and second-hand) that would speak to this, but those stories are not best for these pages; they are perhaps best kept within the context of the relationships Larry and his advisees have cultivated. We do not, of course, constitute some mysterious cabal, intent upon protecting secret knowledge from the uninitiated. The reason is far more mundane: regardless of the friendship and trust that may develop between an advisor and an advisee, the relationship is always already structured by formal institutional expectations, which are themselves bound up in definable power relations. Within that context, discretion is the best way to honour the personal relationship while also respecting the dynamics of power. I am proud to be counted among Larry's advisees, and I will not be the one to break the trust. I apologize for my selfishness, but I am not sorry for it. It is the product of a particular context of power relations, and, as Larry has taught us well, context is key.

For the remainder of this tribute, I will unpack the radical contextualism that is one of Larry's most important contributions, both intellectually and personally. First, I discuss why a radically contextual approach is necessary to considering problems of power. I then use that discussion to examine both the promise and peril of such an approach, both in the abstract and in relationship to particular research projects. I end with a consideration of that seemingly contradictory *mélange* of optimism, pessimism, intellect, and will that characterizes both Cultural Studies and Larry Grossberg – because, for some of us, anyway, it is hard to tell where the one ends and the other begins.

### **Where do we go from here?<sup>3</sup>**

With a nod to Marvin Gaye, Larry argues that the basic question of Cultural Studies is 'What's going on?' (Grossberg 1998, p. 67). Regardless of the context, phenomenon, or relations any particular Cultural Studies project may consider, one should begin from this perspective with an eye toward narratively re-presenting – representing, recreating, reassembling – the messiness and complexity of reality (within the limits of our ability to do so). 'Doing' Cultural Studies thus necessitates a commitment to radical contextualism – an understanding of reality as being contingently relational, complex, and always open to alteration. Every context one analyzes is characterized and overdetermined through its openness to other contexts and forces-in-relation, forces that are neither universal nor essential, yet nor are they relativistic. Because of this, one must commit oneself to the specific, articulated empirical realities of a given context (and to the concepts, theories, and methods to which those realities point), instead of committing oneself to particular theoretical or methodological predilections. In this way, Cultural Studies resonates with Wilhelm Reich's observations concerning the process of psychoanalysis:

Our method is not a principle based on fixed procedures; it is a method which is based on certain basic theoretical principles but *really* determined by the individual case and the individual situation. [The conditions that make an analysis effective] are different from case to case, and although they lead to certain valid technical generalizations, these mean little compared with the basic principle that the technique in every individual case has to be derived from the individual case and each individual situation, while at the same time one does not lose sight of the total analytical process. [...] What that means, to 'analyze,' remains obscure. (Reich 1949, pp. 6–7)

Unlike other disciplines, Cultural Studies does not privilege particular methodologies or theories over others. We refuse the assumption (common in some areas of natural science and the social sciences) that particular methods produce objective knowledge, as well as the practice (common in some areas of the humanities) of fetishizing the theorists and theories that confirm what we already believe about the world. This refusal manifests as a commitment to radical contextualism.

In order to get to an understanding of radical contextualism, we must first understand what is meant by 'context,' because this term means something quite specific in Cultural Studies as understood in Larry's work. To focus on a context is to be concerned with the 'specificity of particular practices' in socio-historical locations (Slack 1996, p. 117). Analytically speaking, 'context' refers to a historically-specific organization of social relations as an expression of power. A context does not, however, exist independently of the process of analysis; it is instead the analytical construction of an assemblage through the practice of articulation.<sup>4</sup> The articulation of an assemblage 'begins by discovering the heterogeneity, the difference, the fractures in' what is perceived to be whole (Grossberg 2010a, p. 22). In other words, constructing a context begins with the dis-articulation of social relations that have been made to seem normal, essential, and/or necessary. The process of analysis then becomes a project of reassembling (i.e. re-articulating) those relations into different unities (i.e. assemblages) that can produce (however temporary and contingent) other configurations of social relations. Radical contextualism, then, is an analytical commitment to mapping the force relations that produce certain conditions of power within a closure of social reality. And in this way, radical contextualism becomes a strategy for pushing to the forefront the mechanisms and operations of power in a given context in order to find tactics for intervening in and contesting those mechanisms and operations (Slack 1996). Different contexts can be overdetermined by the same force relations, but the ways in which those forces become articulated to each other (and the mechanisms and operations by which those forces manifest) depend on the specific historical and social conditions of the context itself.

For these reasons, analysis rooted in radical contextualism necessitates that Cultural Studies is a project that 'is always making itself up, reconfiguring

itself, in response to the changing configurations of power and the changing possibilities of struggle and resistance, possibility and transformation' (Grossberg forthcoming, p. 1). Cultural Studies must maintain a critical recursivity between the context under analysis, the 'somewhat ordered chaos' of the analytical process (Grossberg 2011, p. 426), and the self-reflection of the analyst. As noted by Ann Gunkel in a review of Larry's *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, 'radical contextuality shapes [Cultural Studies'] relationship to theory [in as much as] theory and context are mutually constituted and determining, desacralizing theory in order to take it up as a contingent resource' (2011, pp. 326–327).

It is from this insistence on radical contextualism that all other aspects of conjunctural analysis arise. By 'conjunctural analysis' I refer to the simultaneous interplay of articulated force relations that operate as a problematic for constructing and mapping the configuration of 'a larger structure of relationships, contradictions and contestations' (i.e. a conjuncture) (Grossberg 2010b, p. 313). To perform conjunctural analysis is to be concerned first and foremost with the 'specificity of particular practices' in socio-historical contexts (Slack 1996, p. 117), and then to map the force relations that enable and constrain certain conditions of power within that context. For this reason, 'the work [of radical contextualism] is done by historical specificity, by understanding what is specific about certain moments, and how those moments come together, how different tendencies fuse and form a kind of [temporary] configuration of contradictions' (Hall and Back 2009, p. 664).

Indeed, it is the attention to particular force relations in/as context that provides Cultural Studies with the basis for considering questions of power in any meaningful way. Without a radically contextual approach, one has little foundation for making claims about the concrete yet contingent 'organization – by power – of the social formation as a configuration of unequal positions and relations' (Grossberg 2006, p. 3). Power is, after all, being reproduced and challenged through different mechanisms and operations under different conditions in different contexts; it is 'complexly and contradictorily organized, along multiple axes and dimensions that cannot be reduced to one another' (Grossberg 2010a, p. 29). Modes of power are, consequently, assemblages – of mechanisms, operations, and terrains of struggle – within and through which force relations can be rearticulated into different contexts.

Significantly, the analyst, too – and indeed the very work of Cultural Studies analysis – are elements of a context. Intellectual resources, political commitments, social positionalities, etc., must be taken account of alongside everything else. As noted by Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise, the concepts, theories and methods one uses in the analytical process are themselves 'always embedded in, reflective of and limited by their historical circumstances' (2002, p. 486). That is, they arise from, engage with, and also give shape to the contexts, phenomena and relations under investigation.

The commitment to radical contextualism applies, then, to the specific disciplines we may need to inhabit even while challenging 'the legitimization of the disciplinization of intellectual work' (Grossberg 1998, p. 68). This perspective leads to the frequent invocations of Cultural Studies as inter-, cross-, trans-, and even 'actively and aggressively anti-disciplinary – a characteristic that more or less ensures a permanently uncomfortable relation to academic disciplines' (Nelson *et al.* 1992, p. 2). But it may be more helpful (even if only to mitigate the uncomfortableness of such inevitable relations) to imagine Cultural Studies as *recursively disciplinary*. That is, while we are compelled by our profession to exist within *academic* disciplines, we maintain a critical self-reflexivity that constantly questions the validity of *intellectual* disciplines, while also developing practices that seek to transgress the disciplinization of knowledge production as both an intellectual and academic performance.

In sum, the necessity of radically contextual intellectual work arises from the need to:

1. Resist reductionism, essentialism, and universalism;
2. Appropriately elicit and develop conceptual abstractions out of the empirical conditions of particular contexts;
3. Embrace the contested, constantly changing, complex multiplicity of socio-historical conditions; and
4. Maintain a critical self-reflexivity about the knowledge we produce, the conditions under which it is produced, and the implications of its production (Grossberg 2006).

## The promise and the peril

Having demonstrated both the importance and necessity of radical contextualism to Cultural Studies, I now want to weigh the possibilities and potential pitfalls of this commitment. Robert J. Helfenbein, Jr. (2003) argues that the primary benefit of radical contextualism is that it helps one to stay grounded in materialist, anti-essentialist, and constructivist traditions, and thus that it is crucial for producing rigorous analyses about how and through what mechanisms power operates in particular contexts. Furthermore, he argues that a radically contextual approach highlights the interconnectivity of material reality, the social world, cultural practices, and ideological formations. Regardless of one's predilections, one must insist on historical and cultural materialism if one is to grapple with the empirical realities of power. It is the question of power, moreover, that directs one to the anti-essentialist promise of radical contextuality. 'Relations of power and culture vary within the interactions of the moment' without a guarantee as to their character or outcome (Helfenbein 2003, p. 11). It is incumbent upon practitioners of Cultural Studies, then, to be suspicious of unitary, universalist, homogenous (i.e. essentialist)

theories of power and culture. Social reality and the dynamics of power that overdetermine such reality are constantly being (re)constructed. In 'unapologetically calling for a rhetoric of complexity' (Helfenbein 2003, p. 12), a radically contextual approach to social reality emphasizes this very constructedness in ways that object- or discipline-oriented research often cannot accomplish.

Taken together, the analytical practices that arise from these considerations are precisely what allow us (as Larry so often says, and as Megan M. Wood observes in this issue) to tell better stories about the world. The stories we tell have implications beyond the milieu of knowledge production. Radical contextualism is not just an analytical practice; it is an ethical commitment that 'reveals our relationship [to the world] as a genuine moral dilemma, that cannot be answered a priori' (Haila 1999, p. 340). The ethical component of radical contextualism is what, in part, connects the intellectual practices of Cultural Studies to their (potential) political functions – not with any predetermined understanding of what those political functions should be, but always in ways that are grounded in the realities of everyday life as experienced within the concrete mechanisms, operations, and relations of power (Grossberg 1998).

As a political/intellectual project, Cultural Studies attempts to create a relationship in which politics must acknowledge the authority of knowledge (Gunkel 2011). The purpose in doing so is to intervene in and possibly transform those relations of power that overdetermine lived realities of everyday experience. It is this relationship between knowledge and politics in Cultural Studies that points to the mutually-constitutive interplay of promise and peril that animates the core of radical contextualism. Stuart Hall (1996, p. 268), in reflecting on the experiences of the New Left as they related to a thinking-through of the legacy of Gramsci, gets to the heart of the matter:

On the one hand, we had to be at the very forefront of intellectual theoretical work because, as Gramsci says, it is the job of the organic intellectual to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know, not just to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly. [...] But the second aspect is just as crucial: that the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class. And unless those two fronts are operating at the same time, or at least unless those two ambitions are part of the project of cultural studies, you can get enormous theoretical advance without any engagement at the level of the political project.

As an analytical practice, radical contextualism is a source of the intellectual optimism that compels us to believe that we can come 'to know deeply and profoundly,' that we can produce rigorous, useful knowledge about the world. But as an ethical commitment, it is also a source of the pessimism of



the will that continually vexes our attempts to produce knowledge that is both intellectually rigorous *and* politically useful.

Indeed, there is certainly no guarantee that our work will reach (much less be accessible to) those involved perhaps more directly in on-the-ground political work. In order to have jobs, we must publish in academic journals. To get published in these journals, we must demonstrate a certain level of conceptual fluency and theoretical sophistication. In order to demonstrate those skills, we must often write in ways that are inaccessible to a wider audience, thus diminishing (if not forestalling) potential political applications of our work. As noted by Ted Striphas (2010), moreover, many of the journals that provide enough prestige to be of practical benefit for our careers are owned by companies that also have business ventures with connections to industries (e.g. defense contracting) that reproduce the very power relations that Cultural Studies scholarship seeks to undermine. A commitment to radical contextualism must explicitly acknowledge how Cultural Studies 'knowledge is represented, industrialized, and communicated' in ways that may run counter to our intentions (Striphas 2010, p. 18). The combined alienation of our work from our intentions can be profoundly disheartening. The commitment to radical contextualism 'makes cultural studies work tremendously difficult when done rigorously' (Slack and Wise 2002, p. 486), and it is likely to take a toll on a more embodied level as well. To try and fail, to retry and fail again, toiling without complete satisfaction but with the objective of telling a better story about a given context or conjuncture – this, on some level, is the predicament of Cultural Studies.

But perhaps I have focused up to this point too much on the potential perils of radical contextualism. In order to end on a more optimistic note, I want to return to the context with which I began – that of the advisor/advisee relationship. Doing so will allow me to address two important questions that I have not yet directly considered: 1) Besides the obvious intellectual implications, how do these reflections serve as a tribute to Larry?; and 2) What makes this form of radical contextualism *radical*?

## **Bringing it all back home**

Larry is somewhat famous around UNC's campus for his seemingly never-ending supply of t-shirts that bear a variety of messages. My favourite of these states, 'Failure Is Always an Option.' On the one hand, it is a profoundly pessimistic statement. No matter how smart or capable you are, no matter how hard you work, no matter how favourable the conditions might be for success, all could be for naught. I choose, however, to take that statement as a beautiful affirmation, a promise that no matter how many times you attempt, fail, attempt anew, and fail again, you can always find a way through, even if the way through leads to another potential failure. It is

okay to fail; just never stop trying. I can only do the work I do now because during my time as Larry's advisee, I was given the tools and was taught the practices to fail *productively*. Larry taught me how to turn every dead-end on a line of research, every half-conceived argument, and every shoddy draft, into the first part of a better failure within the context of my commitments, my project, and my abilities. Up to this point, I have intentionally avoided making public specific conversations, preferring to respect the privacy of the initial context of their occurrence. There is, however, one brief comment I would like to share. (Larry, I hope that's okay with you.) During our first meeting, Larry said to me, 'the nature of this advisor/advisee relationship will depend on what you need in order to do the work you want to do.' This, to me, is what makes Larry's radical contextualism – and, indeed, his advisorship – so radical. It is not only a *contextualism* in the sense of being a process of intellectual analysis, but also a *contextuality* in the sense of being a personal quality, an embodied practice, and a mode of engagement that takes as its starting point the context of the relationship.

In closing, I cannot help but be reminded of the words of Michel Foucault:

As to those for whom to work hard, to begin and begin again, to attempt and be mistaken, to go back and rework everything from top to bottom, and still find reason to hesitate from one step to the next – as to those, in short, for whom to work in the midst of uncertainty and apprehension is tantamount to failure, all I can say is that clearly we are not from the same planet. (Foucault 1990, p. 7)

And, might I add, clearly we did not have the same advisor. Because whatever the potential perils of a commitment to radical contextualism may be, however difficult and time-consuming and crisis-inducing the work may be, radical contextualism makes our intellectual pessimism sharper, our optimism stronger-willed, and our vision more clearly focused on the next step forward instead of the failure right behind us.

The real lesson of all this is that Lawrence Grossberg is not just still working in the present; he (like Cultural Studies) is working in the future tense. His force as a political intellectual resides not just in the work he has produced and continues to produce, but in the work that all of us who have been influenced by him will produce. And for those of us lucky enough to know him as an advisor, this is what it means to truly contextualize a tribute to Larry – to make it about the work. Indeed, Larry would be the first to tell you that this is not about him. Regardless, I would like to leave him the last word: 'Cultural Studies is supposed to be hard' (Grossberg 2006, p. 6).

## Notes

1. I will refer to him from here on out as Larry, in order to enact the radical contextualism I argue for by remaining true to the context of our relationship. I knew

him first as Larry, my advisor, before I truly came to appreciate the significance and influence of Lawrence Grossberg, the public intellectual.

2. Of course, our jobs are much harder and more significant than that. But that is the way it seemed to me at the time.
3. This and the following sections draw on my doctoral dissertation, *The Problem of Sovereignty: Nations, Corporations and Power Relations*, written in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill under the direction of Lawrence Grossberg (Davis 2018).
4. “Articulation” is understood here as “the contingent connection of different elements that, when connected in a particular way, form a specific unity” (Slack and Wise 2015, p. 152). “Assemblage” is understood as a “particular dynamic form with broader cultural consequences [...] a particular constellation of articulations that selects, draws together, stakes out and envelops a territory that exhibits some tenacity and effectivity” (Slack and Wise 2015, pp. 156–157).

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ted Striphas for his insightful and generous feedback during the drafting of this tribute.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Andrew Davis** is Visiting Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Appalachian State University. He earned his Ph.D. in Communication Studies from the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill with a Graduate Certificate in Cultural Studies, his M.A. in Communication from Auburn University, and his B.A. in English from the University of Georgia. Andrew’s research is located at the intersection of Media & Technology Studies, Cultural Studies, Political Economy, and Critical Theory. His current research focuses on the changing nature of power in the context of (on the one hand) the capacities and limits of convergent media technologies and (on the other hand) the changing relationships between transnational corporations and the U.S. nation-state.

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