cultural studies as a hotbed of anti-nationalism.

One of our binding concerns is precisely the problem of cultural 'specificity' and 'difference'. This is why David Harvey can take the opposite tack to Cunningham and accuse us all, in his Condition of Postmodernity, of complicity with blood-and-fatherland nationalism. Beginning with the study of class, then gender and race as shaping forces in social experience, cultural studies 'frames' culture as a site of practice where we are always forced to negotiate material constraints—including the nation. (Homi Bhabha's anthology Nation and Narration (1990) addresses exactly this issue).

In the last chapter, Cunningham again makes sensible suggestions about putting policy into our pedagogy. I am not convinced that "the cultural critic" is inherently in need of basic teaching tips (like beginning with media articles rather than specialist journal essays), but still—it's good advice. Hopefully, these practical ideas will have more effect than the grandstanding denunciations which Framing Culture so wildly applies across different critical fields.


Framing Culture is a book with a Position—with a very large capital P. This is the source of its pleasure and its problems. After wading through so much postmodern writing where everything is unravelled and nothing is declared there is something very appealing about a book that takes a stand.

Put simply, Cunningham's argument is that cultural studies has lost its radical edge. Its claims to being a critical and political enterprise are becoming hard to sustain. Cultural studies' language of resistance is not only idealistic and abstruse, but also has little impact on public debates about media culture. The search for 'progressive' texts, resistant subcultures and active audiences is a long way from where the real action is. For Cunningham, cultural policy, that vast terrain of government, economics, technology and institutions, is the true heartland of the political. And this is where useful cultural studies should focus its energies: on research which engages with policy and which intervenes in debates that structure the management of culture.

The gulf between criticism and cultural policy (a gulf marked by different languages, methods and outcomes) provides the fundamental opposition which underpins Cunningham's whole argument. While the cultural critique is abstract, disinterested and academic, according to Framing Culture, studies of policy are relevant, instrumental and vocational. This opposition is read as symptomatic of the wider context of the reform of Australian tertiary education.

In an interesting interpretation of the 'Dawkins reforms' Cunningham reviews the debates about the future of the humanities. He argues it is no longer possible to rely on tired old defences of the humanities as a privileged field devoted to the production of well-rounded citizens skilled in critical reasoning. The time has come to establish a more productive relationship between critical ethical competencies and applied vocational education. These two approaches to humanities education are not necessarily incompatible. In fact, the incorporation of a policy focus into cultural studies could well signal precisely this type of renewal.

After establishing the outline of his argument Cunningham moves on to a series of case studies in cultural policy formation. The purpose here is not to offer detailed historical accounts but rather to explore the nature and effects of the gap between criticism and policy. The case studies selected are: the problems of identifying a national cultural policy framework in the era of global cultural markets; the role of advertising in national culture; the saga of pay TV; and violence on television. A recurring problem is identified in these case studies: the tendency for cultural critique to operate in a separate domain where policy is either ignored or deplored from the standpoint of Left idealism. In opposition to this, Cunningham urges an engagement with the terrain of policy which seeks to challenge and extend it to more progressive ends.

One of the great values of the case studies is their Australian content. This book is militantly local; global economic trends and imported theory are interpreted from the specific focus of Australian conditions. In this way Framing Culture rejects the cringe mentality. It is not seduced by the rhetoric of the 'global cultural takeover', nor does it uncritically defer to British or American cultural studies.

For example, Cunningham's discussion of violence on television is situated within a sophisticated critique of various paradigms for investigating media 'effects'. In this way competing discourses and methodologies are assessed in terms of their ability for understanding and influencing the policy process in Australia and for expanding the critical focus of cultural studies. This technique makes for a dynamic analysis that does not demand that cultural studies service public agendas and research, but explores the positive connections that could be made between critique and policy.
A second positive feature of Framing Culture is its relentless focus on broadcasting. In the broad sweep of cultural policy the mass media are politically and economically dominant. They are big industries with big audiences, administered through the powerful market-oriented Department of Transport and Communications. Cunningham focuses on this sector as a set of cultural industries; in consequence he is more interested in the politics of industry development and regulation than aesthetic outcomes. This also means that Framing Culture shifts the analysis of cultural policy in Australia way beyond the fairly limited focus developed in Tim Rowse's Arguing the Arts. In Rowse's book arts policy and the politics of subsidy and patronage were the focus. As interesting as this was, Cunningham's study reminds us of the profound marginality of the arts.

Yet, as someone working in the field of cultural policy studies I have an ambivalent response to this book. Of course it is pleasant to see your work getting a tick of approval as 'politically correct', but I am not sure that I want to accept the terms on which this approval is granted. The central problem as I see it is that the case for cultural policy studies is seriously overstated. Too much is dismissed or caricatured in the quest to establish the special value of policy studies and too many tricky political questions are sidestepped.

More particularly, I have a number of reservations about aspects of Cunningham's argument. The first concerns his representation of cultural studies. Framing Culture is part of a wider process of self-reflection within cultural studies, evident in the proliferating histories of the field and in the angst displayed at cultural studies conferences both here and overseas about the dilution of the radical agendas of the 70s and early 80s in the interests of survival and establishing credibility. Cunningham's foray into this process of review is marked by his identification of three dominant approaches within cultural studies: the 'Left humanities' position (including the search for progressive texts and resistant social practices, as well as postmodernism and deconstruction); the 'Right social sciences' position, which rejects rhetorical Leftism and argues for empirically grounded work freed from the constraints of ideology and grand theory; and a third 'centrist' policy position which is characterised by empirical studies of public policy unconstrained by academic discourse and which have a definite progressive and programmatic intent. No prizes for guessing which position Cunningham identifies himself with.

I think this appraisal of cultural studies seriously misrepresents the field. Cunningham tries to establish the superiority of policy studies by opposing it to the idealistic Left on one hand and the empiricist Right on the other. This trivialises the complexity of cultural studies' critical project by implying that a species of revolutionary neo-marxism still predominates. 'Left' cultural studies is accused of clinging to a "totalising and confrontational rhetoric" which isolates it from the public political arena.

A close look at any recent cultural studies anthology or conference program would contradict this. If there is one achievement to which cultural studies can lay claim, it is recognition of the multiple axes of social difference and the plurality of critical practices. Gender and sexuality studies, post-colonialism, studies of popular culture and textual studies are a few examples of areas where the investigation of politics and culture often involves other paradigms and has various progressive effects. Cultural critique stands for a lot more than Cunningham acknowledges.

Yet, Framing Culture is not just a book about what's wrong with cultural studies; it is also a book about the state. Cunningham avoids monolithic and deterministic accounts of how culture is administered. His case studies are generally attentive to the diversity of functions and power relations which shape public cultural institutions. His accounts of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's role in defining 'Australian content' and 'media violence', for instance, traces how these ideas were produced and contested through the interplay of different interest groups.

Underlying this specific analysis is a wider argument for the renewal of social democracy and the concept of citizenship. Cunningham argues that it is only through the rhetoric of citizenship that issues of cultural rights, access and equity can be raised. Framing Culture presents a case for the revitalisation and promotion of social democracy, especially in opposition to economic rationalism. But whether social democracy is up to the task is a crucial question that Cunningham rarely raises. Economic rationalism is not only teaching us to believe that we cannot rely on government for anything but also that policies based on social and cultural benefits are simply disguises for protectionism.

Tensions between the oppositions of consumers versus citizens, market forces versus regulation and culture versus economics have a very distinctive resonance in cultural policies. Framing Culture explores the effects of these tensions on policy processes — yet its social democratic 'solutions' sometimes seem ineffectual in the face of the economic forces shaping cultural production and consumption. The emergence of the consumer movement, for example, is cited as evidence of the triumph of consumers as citizens demanding their right to accurate information and safe products. But this is surely overshadowed by the might of an Australian advertising industry dominated by transnational corporations which have an ambiguous relation to national regulations, let alone local consumer groups.

The problem with Cunningham's wholesale endorsement of social democracy is that it excludes the possibility of imagining other futures. Alternative visions of intervention and policy are prohibited in the interests of realisable reforms. One way this 'other' space could be developed is through the production of more substantial research on the political economy of Australian cultural industries. We still know very little about industry structures and organisation in the cultural sector. For too long political economists have ignored this area because of their fascination with what they consider to be more properly productive sectors such as manufacturing and primary industries. Yet it is quite possible that some areas of local cultural production and consumption could prefigure new economic models which achieve both market success and positive con-
sumer identity and control (the Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras is an example).

Another problem of Framing Culture is its definition of the relationship between intellectual practice and political change. Framing Culture constantly insists on intervention in policy as the correct political vocation for cultural studies. Cunningham berates cultural studies intellectuals for missing the opportunity of participating in discussions about policy. While they cling to the sanctity of disinterested scholarship, media industry bosses and conservative groups dominate public forums. It is impossible to disagree with the general call to unlock the academies, yet Cunningham’s vision of the academic as activist is more of a problem. The assumption is that the world of suits, shoulder pads, 7 am flights to Canberra and lunch with the minister is the site of ‘real’ politics.

I do not think policy studies is the source of a more authentic and effective political practice for cultural studies. It involves different intellectual practices and different political dynamics, but it is impossible to insist that these are superior to other forms of critical work. Again, Cunningham seems to ignore the dilemmas of applied intellectual work. In the case of consultancies, the lack of control over the research agenda, the inability to influence how the research is or isn’t used, and the constraints of the economic obligation are not simply problems of academic freedom but of contractual relations. Nor does he pay enough attention to the gap between formal policy formulation and the play of power that goes on in the senior management meetings of bureaucracies or in Cabinet. My experience as a consultant and academic leaves me a little sceptical. I can’t help thinking that joining the Labor Party or becoming a bureaucrat would be much more effective strategies for achieving specific reforms.

Framing Culture is a provocative book. The explorations of policy formation, the programmatic focus and the commitment to Australian content are important and valuable contributions to the already impressive body of cultural policy studies in Australia. But Cunningham’s dogmatic dismissal of cultural critique, his insistence on the concrete and the pragmatic as more properly political than other critical practices from teaching to textual studies, and his single-minded faith in social democracy can become infuriating. There is an almost evangelical subtext to the book: ‘policy is the way, the truth and the light’. Reading it I imagined a more appropriate cover cartoon—a Jenny Coopes image. Three women are peering into a pram admiring a new baby; one comments: “she’s got policy analyst written all over her”.

GAY HAWKINS teaches in leisure and tourism studies at the University of Technology Sydney. (Many thanks to Liz Jacka for her helpful suggestions.)