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Steinberg, Shirley R.

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Shirley R. Steinberg

# Politics and the Bricolage: How do we make sense of recent events?<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

When I presenting my work at the University of Essen, I did so in the context of research, bricolage, social consciousness, and writing. As a film and television cultural analyst, I usually situate my research in the media. However, I did not expect that media would be so central to what I propose to discuss. In light of the 2016 American elections, and continuing changes in the EU political landscape, I want to employ the bricolage to the global news. As critical qualitative researchers, I believe our work must be fluid, in process, in keeping with this notion, we will create new research questions together based on the enormity of the current global political situation. When our work is in process, we do not look to an end, rather we look to adding more questions. Just when we get to “the point,” there should be another point to move to, and that’s very much part of critical qualitative research.

I take the word critical from the Frankfurt School of Social Theory, and adopt critical theory as a lynchpin for understanding research. Using critical theory, in a phrase, requires the acknowledgement and articulation of power. Power is at the center of our observations, how power works, where it works from, and questioning what forces support that power. In this chapter, power is apparent in all observations and questions.

As a critical researcher, I must acknowledge my own positionality, as this affects my ability to create research. In this case, it would be difficult to not preface it with a bit of an apology as an American to this audience, a somewhat narcissistic desire to analyze the impact of the recent election in the USA. My reaction about the American election, first, is another apology, still based on the arrogance of the American notion that the United States believes that it is the greatest country on earth. This embarrasses me, and it’s unpleasant for me to have to talk about Americans in this construct, but this is serious, and unfortunately the American elections of 2016 will affect all of us, because of trade, because of global relationships, because of concerns for world peace.

## How Do We Make Sense of What Is? What Is Not?

As critical qualitative researchers, we look at what is, but the most important thing is we look at what is not, a deconstructionist mode. We interrogate that which we do not see. This makes us different as researchers because the obvious is obvious, and so we want to see what is not being talked about, that tends to be what is encapsulated in power when it comes to critical qualitative research.

Jean Baudrillard predicted what has now happened in politics. He noted the arrogance of commercial corporate hyperreality. If you have interest in looking at critical social theory, contemporary cultural studies, popular culture, understanding Baudrillard becomes essential as he understood the importance of the existence of what is not there, which becomes more important than what is there. Baudrillard's work demanded that media be taken into account in regards to research and observation, that it was not just popular culture.

Popular culture defies easy definition. It can be defined as the culture of ordinary people—TV shows, the News, movies, music, radio, foods, fashions, magazines, and other artifacts that figure in our everyday lives. Often analysts maintain that such artifacts are mass-mediated and consumed by large numbers of individuals on a continuing basis. Such phenomena are often viewed condescendingly by academicians as unworthy of scholarly analysis...The study of popular culture is connected with the sociology of everyday life and the interaction and interconnection of this micro-domain with macro-socio-political and structural forces. Thus, the popular domain—as ambiguous and ever-shifting as it may be—takes on unprecedented importance in the electronically-saturate contemporary era (Steinberg, 2006).

In this discussion of the 2016 political elections, popular culture: the news, takes on essential political and social meaning as we attempt to read what happened, what is happening, and what may happen in American and global politics. I contend that a critical theoretical bricolage reading is an essential way in which to read...to research.

Going back to the earlier stages of the Frankfurt School, we understand that Adorno talked about culture, he made it very clear that there were two categories of culture, employing a bourgeois, upper middle class way of seeing the world, he noted the differences between high culture and low culture. This reminds us that philosophies, observations from decades ago must be taken into context, and not just applied blindly to current situations. Adorno is an example of this, as he highlighted the importance of interrogating contemporary culture, but certainly we understand now, that culture is not judged by being either high or low, in Adorno's view, high being more esoteric, canonical as opposed to the gritty, graffiti-ed way of seeing today's world. All contemporary culture is essential to consider when we discuss research and media. We understand that as cultural qualitative researchers, we do not judge the quality or notion of high and low when it comes to culture. This can be problematic, value judgments are placed on cultural researchers when they examine an artifact or a concept which seems to be attached to a "low" culture. Research value is often assumed depending on the topic the researcher chooses. As cultural researchers, it is essential that we clarify that "common" popular culture is more essential to understanding daily life than the high cultural canon. We must de-center ourselves from what is "academically appropriate" and what is research meaningful. What makes a difference to society? That question should be our focus.

Observing that the study of culture can be fragmented between the disciplines, those who advocate cultural studies look at the interdisciplinary approach, that which transcends any one field. Additionally, a critical cultural studies does not commit a qualitative evaluation of culture by a definition of “high or “low” culture, and culture may be the most ambiguous and complex term to define in the domain of the social sciences and humanities)...Educators are directly implicated by the analysis of culture (or should be) in that culture is transmitted by processes of teaching and learning, whether formally (schools) or informally (by wider social processes, e.g., popular culture). This pedagogical dynamic within all culture is a central concern of this chapter. Indeed, culture is inseparable from the human ability to be acculturated, to learn, to employ language and symbols (Steinberg, 2006; Steinberg/Kincheloe 2012).

I contend that had the American public understood the need for cultural research, there would have been a different result in the American elections. What was the problem? In my opinion, no one did any research. There was no research done. We cannot have an educated public unless we create a research conscious public.

A cultural and historical knowledge of film and literature would facilitate a recollection of the Ray Bradbury’s dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and subsequent film (1966). Oskar Werner plays Guy Montag, a fireman, who burns books. Bradbury’s novel reminds us that totalitarianism requires that knowledge must be destroyed. The world of book burning is not dissimilar to the current climate of the United States and some EU countries. Employing a cultural research bricolage critically would facilitate a citizenry to understand the patterns in within political dangers, creating responsible and informed voters. Government screens (called parlor walls) are a theme within *Fahrenheit 451*, much like the constant flow of information through screens over 70 years after the book was written, the population in the book receives knowledge through government-controlled media. One would find it hard to question the similarities between the elections of 2016 in the U.S. and the autocratic, intellectually defunct Bradbury government. Bradbury’s parlor walls emulate the constant media barrage which North Americans seem to cherish and absorb as truth.

My use of bricolage comes from an attempt to politically and culturally situate research and observation. One cannot make a judgment about which questions are essential for which contexts, and equally, one cannot make a fair decision as to how the questions are asked. Bricolage creates an ability to read data/research/situations through whichever lens is most appropriate. Employing narrative, ethnography, content analysis, survey, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and other theoretical methodologies/philosophies becomes dependent on each attempt to observe and record. The notion of bricolage stems from Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) who noted the bricoleur had the ability to take whichever tools were appropriate for specific experiences. This procedure and philosophical framework creates a tailored research experience for each specific instance (Steinberg, 2006).

The bricoleur, the research who employs bricolage, must be able to orchestrate a plethora of diverse tasks including interviewing and observing, to historiographical analysis, to self-monitoring and intrapersonal understanding.

The text produced by this research process of bricolage should be a complex collage, as it weaves together the scholar’s images, insights, and interpretations of the relationship between popular cultural text, critical questions of justice, the social context that produced it, and its effect on youth and the cultural curriculum

(Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Steinberg, 2006). Using theoretical and conceptual frames drawn from critical theory, poststructuralism, postmodern epistemologies, feminism, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, recovery theory and other traditions, bricolage interprets, critiques, and deconstructs the text in question. Because scientific research has traditionally offered only a partial vision of the reality it seeks to explore, pedagogical bricoleurs attempt to widening their perspective through methodological diversity. In no way, however, do they claim that as the result of the multiperspective bricolage they have gained “the grand view”—from their post-structuralist perspective they understand that all inquiry is limited and incomplete. Humble in this knowledge, the bricoleur attempts to gain expanded insight via historical contextualization, multiple theoretical groundings, and a diversity of knowledge by collecting and interpreting methodologies (Kincheloe, 2005; Steinberg, 2006).

George Orwell’s 1984 (1949) continues the theme of screen through the telescreen, another incarnation of the ever-watching, ever-informing media controlled by government. Big Brother’s words and facts are included in all broadcasting from the telescreens, included tutorials in learning the art of doublespeak. Both *Fahrenheit 451* and 1984, while subjects of literary discussion and theory for many decades, come to life as reality in what we will come to know as the Trump Era. Doublespeak, surveillance, non-news news, we are now living in dystopia.

Instead of becoming front and center, the screen becomes front and center, an altar established in the center of a home I believe that we are in dire need for a re-thinking on how we analyze, critique and research our world. And as educational researchers, it is now essential, as we work with children and youth to ensure that we begin to give birth to the first generation that is suspicious of media. We must begin to treat media like we would a science experiment, we must become tentative. Many are interested listening, observing, but still unaware that what is broadcast is not necessarily fact or truth. This is where the danger lies, and where we will be tested, tempted, and often deceived.

## Using Cultural Studies

I use cultural studies to understand that as social people, social theories, and as academics, that when we research the human, that it must be done in an interdisciplinary approach. And so even though my field is education, I believe that our field is consistently interdisciplinary. We must be able to walk into other disciplines and to be able to feel comfortable there. We create links, with engineers, with medical students, with nurses, historians, anthropologists, all disciplines. Understand that we are not trying to go inward in our discipline, but as researchers we need to go out, reach out, advocate for a critical research methodology for all. Nursing has certainly done that, as an example, and qualitative research in nursing is dynamic and informative. Indeed, as educators, we look to nursing schools for good and critical qualitative research. That may surprise some of you.

Anthropologists have given hundreds and hundreds of definitions of culture, and so it’s hard to for me to say “this is my definition of culture.” I’m just going to say loosely that I am looking at examining the patterns that happen in society and that be where we transmit belief systems; how does culture transmit? How do

politics transmit? How our social symbols represented in a culture? Those would be my loose questions; in my field it tends to be about popular culture. But now when we discuss news media, we question does that really fit into any particular discipline, or is media so large that it becomes the culture in which everything else lies within? Media is something we are not used to dealing with, in the sense that instead of reporting and observing news, it becomes the news, it creates the news. This is what we have seen from the 2016 election results, the news was formed, created, reported by media...and it became reality.

I'm not going to argue the notion of high or low culture, in the sense of how Adorno discussed it. I'm not going to advocate for which is more academic, more rigorous, more important, but I'm going to assert that we need to redefine what culture is. We need to redefine society; and media, meaning all media, must be profiled in what we define as culture...in all cultures.

Watch the film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*? It's about a Coke bottle that has been thrown out of an airplane, and lands in the Serengeti. The entire film is about the interpretation made by the people who find the bottle...referred to as the bushmen of the Serengeti. *The Gods Must Be Crazy* is an important film, I'm sure it's on YouTube. It points out that such an isolated place as the Serengeti (in the middle of sand dunes and vast open spaces) experiences an intervention with a Coca-Cola bottle falling out of the sky, an entire civilization is changed. There is humor in the film, the notion that something so small and insignificant can change society, but now I ask, is this insignificant?

I was in Fiji about 25 years ago. A trip doing qualitative research, I the first McDonald's had just opened for the first time in that country. Fiji is very remote, and at the same time, television had been brought to the island country. Within a very few years, anorexia appeared, bulimia appeared, both diseases of young women. These were diseases that had never been in Fiji. Female dysphoria, dislike – dysmorphia of one's body, female insecurity, all these things started to appear the culture changed radically – One cannot say McDonald's did it changed culture, as Fijian people are traditionally large in girth; and I'm not going to say television created changes. But we must acknowledge that the entrance of something, a cultural change, which did not belong to that society, changed that society in a very obvious way.

So as cultural researchers, we have to look for the cultural and social interventions that make things different. How does the world become different? What are the most important things we look at as researchers? as educators? How do we view the notion of everyday life? What is being said about everyday life? What do we know about everyday life and what do we not know about everyday life?

In my response to the election of 2016, a world-changing political situation, my research question would be: how do we make sense of the events of the past year? What was the conversation about politics? What was the global conversation this year? How was this conversation different than any other political conversation? How do we make sense of Brexit, and how do we make sense of Trump? How do we research something that is not? How do we research that which is not obvious? How do we interrogate something when we don't know what we are interrogating? Those are the questions that we have when we do critical qualitative research.

We do not start with a hypothesis that we are trying to prove or disprove. Indeed, we don't know what our hypothesis is. Our research begins to try to find a hypothesis, but then we find a hypothesis, and another hypothesis, and another hypothesis, and perhaps if we call our research finished, we realize that there re-

ally was no hypothesis, and that indeed our findings could change at any time. We have to be humble in our research.

Arrogance does not work in critical qualitative research because we do not know – we truly do not know what we are looking for. And any of you who've been in the sciences or traditional research know that in the back of a research mind, the researchers know what they are looking for: "We're going to prove or disprove this." "We are going to get it resolved." That's not critical qualitative research. Critical qualitative research is stepping into the unknown.

## Questions of Power

We ask how we look at the complicated relationships of power and knowledge, and identity. As educators, we are often so busy discussing on how to know and how to learn. That is not the question we should ask. Perhaps the question on what to research should be: how do we know how to research how we learn? We are never looking for an endgame. We are always looking for the process. Very process-oriented. We're not looking for the final. We are looking for the tentative. Research is tentative. We don't know the questions until we start asking, then we ask the question and we think of another question. This is what makes research critical.

We look at the very complex relationship between power and knowledge. We ask how is knowledge produced? How is it accepted? And how is it rejected? How do people claim to know? If you know something, how do you know that? What were the forces that created that knowledge? How do we know? What is the nature of the cultural and/or political authority? How does it relate to the dialectic of empowerment and in domination? How does power relate to this conversation? What is the authority? In which way is authority presented? How do individuals receive the symbols or the codes of this power? Are they assimilated? Do they just go along with it? Do they internalize it? Do they resist it? Are they transformed? I'll say that again. Are they assimilated? Do they resist it? Are they transformed? These are important questions. How do people negotiate their relationship with the official story?

How do we understand the screen, and the authority of a Big Brother? What is the official, the appropriate story? How can we use narrative experience to articulate our personal experience? How do we negotiate using personal narrative? I would argue that appropriate qualitative research, criticalized qualitative research, includes narrative. It includes story. That makes a difference, how do people absorb and understand that story?

How was pleasure derived, or pain or trauma from the stories? How is the relationship with Bourdieu's notion of dominant culture engaged? How is pleasure, pain, trauma derived within the dominant culture?

How are cultural differences along the notions of race, class, gender, language, religion, geography, sexuality, ability, encoded within the individuals involved? How is consciousness encoded? How is it processed? How does identity fit within the processing of information?

Remembering that along with everything we are talking about, that we are in the West, and consequently there is an enormous cloud of scientific rationality,

which infects everything we do. If we do research, if we interview people, our research is tainted by the notion that it comes within a scientifically rational historical basis.

## Using Bricolage

So how do we create a universal critical qualitative research method? I believe that positivism has dictated research methods up to, what we would call, loosely the postmodern era. I would argue that positivism has dictated most of our structures, instrumental rationality and positivism, expected to be used in universal methods of research.

Social theoretical research has often been positivized and instrumentally rationalized, with researchers we become subject to a positivistic notion of hermeneutics, this is absurd. A positivistic notion of interpretation, this is impossible. How can one be positivistic if the word interpretive is used? At this point, I would introduce bricolage.

A bricoleur is a worker. In France one can often see signs of a tool kit, with the title of bricolage advertising a hardware store, a place you would buy hammers, nails, saws, building tools. The notion of bricolage is to use different tools for the right job. This does not mean we do everything a little bit and nothing well. It means we do everything well.

When we employ bricolage, we work harder. If my students are using the bricolage, they don't do just an ethnography, they do an ethnography informed by the critical analysis cultural studies, phenomenology, semiotics, hermeneutics, addressing all of those social theoretical philosophical research approaches in order to make sense of what they are doing. In order to criticize the ethnography, one cannot just use the one ethnographic lens. We must use different lenses, which still aren't enough.

We become a master of all. We read with different lenses, different glasses for every single way. The point of critical qualitative research is to research and reinterpret, reinterpret, reinterpret, and not particularly to end up with an ending...a this...a thing...a result. There is no this to qualitative research. We can make assumptions. We can make assumptions that this result given us rich text and information, and we can discuss where to take these results.

This is not a medical conversation, this is not a discussion on hard science research. For instance, in medicine, I do not want scientists looking a new cure to a disease to use qualitative research to find the cure. I'm good with positivistic measurement of medicine. I'm okay with that. I do not want my lungs operated on by someone who is hermeneut, a philosopher. Does that make sense? There are places for everything. Mind you, holistic people will argue that quality of life does affect the health, but for treatments and medication, we need hard evidence, the larger the sample the better. But in qualitative sociological work, anthropological human work, I believe that there is not a positivistic answer that can solve what we're doing.



## Interrogating the Channel

For researchers or as voters, this is where the sight of critical interrogation becomes. We examine the channel. Marshall McLuhan in creating a communication model, established the theory of how communication is delivered...from sender to receiver through a channel. The missing link in the conversation is instead of interrogating the sender and the receiver, that we interrogate the channel. We question the method of delivery, the channel. And there is where American voters failed, where we have no literacy to be in the world, because we are not taught to be suspect of something we believe is secure. It is suspicion that allows us to become empowered. To seek what is not evident. To question the sender and receiver is obvious in communication, we must examine the channel, and the power behind the channel, in this case, in a neo-liberal world, where the money is, how it is used, and who is behind the money.

Working with student teachers, I questioned their using of Wikipedia as a valid citation in their work. The students replied that Wikipedia is truth. It's the new dictionary. I opened Wikipedia, going to a topic they were all familiar with, I typed in a change and saved it, and proved to them that anybody can change Wikipedia. They still didn't believe me. They thought it was a trick. It took me several days to prove to them that Wikipedia could be changed by anyone. We have a lot of work ahead of us as teachers, as critical thinkers to convince people to consider that that which we are getting is not the truth. It's about seeing suspicious, being intellectually suspicious, in the West, we are not a culture that is intellectually suspicious of the media. The Daily Show's fake news has become the news agency for people between 20 and 40 years old, the number one place that people get their news, through a comedy program. I enjoy The Daily Show but that is a frightening notion. We do not interrogate the information we are given. The screen continues to give information and the majority of watchers believe it, without question.

We don't interrogate the channel. Trump is a billionaire, but hard questions were not asked about his money. We didn't follow the money because with Trump there was no money to follow, so there is big question about why is he getting so much publicity for free? How can one of the richest man in America get everything for free? And there is the critical question. Where were the questions, the interrogations?

Stories from agencies like the BBC became about the stories. News about the new on Trump, how he got attention, how he made news. No interrogation about the substance. Clinton lost the day she was nominated because she was a woman. I don't mean to sound like an essentialist feminist, but I believe that. I believe that the United States was afraid of another Obama. The fact that they had "suffered" with a Black president for eight years did not negate the fact that many, many Americans are racists. They were not going to let this happen again. No more non-dominant cultural presidents.

Had I been in charge, the person who ran would have been a white man, grey hair, 15 grandkids, Christian who would pray with anybody. I would have had the most conservative appearing presidential candidate. I would not have had a woman, never. But I believe there was no research done, no questions asked that could inform those who selected candidates. The right questions weren't asked, this is what happens when we don't research, when we don't think.

When you have this huge explosion of a Black president, eight years of a Black man in the whitest country, the most racist country in the world, did this not dawn on anybody? They ran a woman (Hillary Clinton) with a husband of questionable integrity, a woman who became entangled in blame for minute things like personal emails. Her husband was attacked, her job (30 years in politics) was made disreputable, and there were no facts, no historical evidences used to discount what Clinton was accused of. I believe Americans were so blinded by the screen, by the unproven facts, the loud voices from the Trump campaign, that they stopped listening to anything else.

This election was The Hunger Games. Trump is President Snow. It was media. It was presentation, it was spectacle. Looking at the symbolism, the images, it was clear that semiotics proved that Trump was being created by the media as the favorite. For example, during debates, placing Trump in the middle every time, with 16 other candidates, he stood in the middle. Who made that decision? Who was Big Brother? Whose interest was served? Trump.

This was carnival, the best carnival ever done. And so even a mere content analysis of body placement could have told us, there is power going on here. What are the causes? How did this man get put in the front every time? What was the conversation about that? Who owns the television stations? Who owns the media? But, we were not thinking like researchers as a society. The screen told the story, and people believed it.

We, as human beings, can enact a culture of research and interrogation. We should not discount a healthy note of cynicism. How do we underrate it? I think we should all be cynical and create a culture of research. We are interrogators, we are interested in the world, we want to follow the money, we want to follow power. We want to know where it came from. We want to know. We want to know who is behind the screen.

## Anmerkung

- 1 Bei dem Beitrag handelt es sich um ein überarbeitetes Vortragsmanuskript. Der Vortrag wurde im Rahmen der Winter School 2016 „Interdisziplinarität in der Qualitativen Bildungsforschung“ an der Universität Duisburg-Essen gehalten.

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