

# **Beyond the Ivory Tower: Cultural Studies, Politics, And Public Intellectuals**

**An Interview with Sut Jhally  
Edited by Jeremy Earp**

*This interview, conducted by Lynn Comella and Jeremy Earp of the University of Massachusetts in January of 2005, explores the relationship between cultural studies, the educational work of the Media Education Foundation, and the relevance of both to contemporary American politics.*

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## **Cultural Studies, Determination, and Difference**

*Can you talk a little bit about how you use cultural studies in your own intellectual work?*

I came across the value of contemporary culture studies when I was working as an undergraduate at the University of York in England. I went there to study history and sociology and I quickly became interested in the intermingling of sociology, pop culture and politics, and what was necessary to understand a society that was essentially undergoing a seismic shift in its major institutions. Stuart Hall talks about how cultural studies was a response to this need for a new way of looking at a society that was transforming in front of our eyes. And I guess cultural studies also helped me make sense of my own life and what came to be called the post-modern experience, in that identity wasn't so fixed and stable any more.

*Could you elaborate on that thought?*

Well, in an important sense, I was always culturally – and in terms of identity – at the margins or in the margins. I was never at the center. I was the center of my own world of course, like all of us, but that was always a kind of marginal world. I was born in Kenya, my parents are Indian, and when I was six years old we moved to England, where I grew up and was formed. So England is really home to me culturally, but throughout that whole process I was being pulled in a myriad of different directions. Was I Indian? Was I English? Was I a mixture of the two? These questions pointed to the very basic question of identity – my relationship to masculinity, race, nation, and so on.

So it was because I was thrust into this very particular, and peculiar, situation that I always experienced myself as somehow on the margins. On the one hand, I was always regarded as an immigrant in England, even though that's still what I regard as home. Then I moved to Canada, and now I've been in the United States for the last twenty years. But again, I have been kind of marginal to this kind of central dynamic of identity in all of those places. And what's significant, I think, is that you can see things differently from the margins. I don't necessarily think you can see things more clearly, but you do see them differently. It forces you to pose questions that are not so straightforward, that don't have such clear-cut answers. The questions you ask and the answers you get end up being kind of messy. And I think that's exactly what intellectual work is all about: you have to get the clarity but you cannot avoid the mess.

*When did you do your undergraduate studies, and was there something about that time period that affected how you initially came at this work?*

I started at York University on the north of England in 1974, around the time Hall and his colleagues at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham were coming out with all this incredible new stuff. It was the hey-day of cultural studies. In fact, I remember I got Paul Willis' Ph.D. dissertation on language and the cultural differences between biker and hippie communities – he'd only just completed it, and I got it on inter-library loan, so I was actually reading this stuff exactly as it was

being produced. This was also the same time that the *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* series was being published. It wasn't like there was a tradition of cultural studies; it was developing at the same time it was emerging. The point is that there was no set way of doing these things, and even as an undergraduate I could see that you had to come up with new ways of understanding the shifts that were taking place. So right from the start, cultural studies was important to my intellectual development.

*It sounds as though cultural studies allows you to marry your interests in history to your interest in sociological analysis in certain ways. There is so much of a tradition in cultural studies of doing exactly that.*

Cultural studies allowed me to develop an interdisciplinary perspective, drawn not just from sociology, but also from literary studies, history, anthropology, linguistics – from all of these different places. It was really kind of an exciting intermingling of traditions and fields that allowed you to see what was going on in the moment, or at least gave you the possibility of seeing what was going on in the present in exciting new ways. That was really very energizing for an undergraduate to be involved in that kind of work, and it continued with my initial Master's thesis work at York as well.

*What was that about?*

It was about the birth of Thatcherism, although Hall had not quite yet coined that term. There was a key moment in 1977 when Thatcher did an interview on TV where, it seemed to me at least, she shifted the very terrain on which you could talk about race. For the first time you had a major politician in a mainstream interview saying that the problem with immigration wasn't just about jobs – which had been the established and somewhat rational way of talking about immigration as a problem to that point – but that it was essentially a cultural issue. The specific term she used was “swamping.” She said these people were swamping the English way of life and English culture – both of which had given so much to the world that they had to be protected from this siege of immigration.

Before this moment that kind of talk was limited to what we would now call the radical and racist right, to people like Enoch Powell and extremist parties like the National Front. I thought this was a key moment because what she was doing was bringing this kind of fringe stuff into the mainstream. Here we had a mainstream politician saying really extremist things, and rather than the extremism being transferred to her, what was happening was that her “respectability” was being transferred to extremism itself, making it more acceptable and normal. I thought this was a transformative moment, and I also thought it wasn't being recognized for what it was: the unleashing of a dangerous racial discourse into the mainstream of society. And as a result of the work that Stuart Hall has so tirelessly done, we now know that the racial appeal to an English identity was absolutely fundamental to why Thatcherism was able to take shape and then survive as a political, cultural and economic project.

*And I'm assuming that this appeal to English identity was an appeal to a white identity?*

It was absolutely framed in racial terms. The English, who had given so much to the world, were white, they were carriers of the famous “white man’s burden.” And there were these hordes of brown and black people swarming in from the outside world who were threatening to change all of that. And while there had always been a good deal of immigration from the West Indies, Thatcher was explicitly talking about Asian immigration.

There were two huge Asian migrations into England, both from East Africa, one from Kenya and one from Uganda. Those migrations really did in many senses transform at least parts of major cities. As Hall says, just as the British Empire was trying to cut the umbilical cord, everyone arrives on the doorstep and says, “You said you were the mother country, so here we are!” At the very moment the Empire is dissolving, in other words, the Empire quite literally comes home. It really is in this sense the chickens coming home to roost.

And that was part of the revolution that Hall talks about, where a very old and traditional industrial society was being transformed – first by commercialization and the expansion of the market, then by immigration. This produced a kind of cultural trauma that is still very much unresolved in the English imagination. And Thatcher was expressing something very important about how this was all being experienced. My thesis was an analysis of the Thatcher interview and the resulting media coverage, and how, discursively, the English understanding of common sense itself was shifting. Obviously the new translations of Althusser and Gramsci were vital to this analysis, providing a new way of thinking about the relation between ideology and “conventional wisdom,” all of which coincided with what was developing in cultural studies at virtually the same time.

*The cultural studies tradition that you reference is very much connected to the Birmingham Center, where a struggle with and over Marxism is at the core of the project. But American cultural studies, even of the critical variety, seems to be less connected to that problematic. Is that an important difference for you?*

I think it is. And it’s around issues of difference and sameness where that dynamic can be seen most clearly. First of all, it’s important to stress that Marxism is still relevant in the modern world, not just politically but intellectually. In a very important sense one of the central thrusts of the Western Marxist tradition has been to work out not just the economic side of capitalism, but also the less developed analysis of politics and culture. It’s really been a working out of the very particular problem around agency and structure surrounding the many complexities of the base/superstructure model or metaphor – and I do think, by the way, that it is much more a metaphor than a model. Western Marxism offers a way of thinking about the key relationships that any social scientist is drawn to – the relationship between agency and structure, individual and society, between individual and collective. And the central question is the question of determination. The reason why Marxism is important, in my view at least, is that it gives the most nuanced and complex way of understanding determination. It’s a way of talking about difference and sameness

in a way that remains coherent.

For instance, when we talk about difference and sameness, we immediately need to ask which questions are most interesting and productive for us to focus on. It strikes me that “difference”, from an intellectual perspective, is not all that interesting to study. I know that within the world of cultural studies, and American cultural studies in particular, this may seem almost heretical to say, but the reason for posing it in this way is to recognize that difference and variation are built into the human species at a very fundamental level. They are built into our individual lives in the most basic sense that no one else has lived, or can live, by definition, precisely the life you’ve lived, I’ve lived, anyone has lived. We are all in one sense unique in human history, in terms of the experiences we’ve had that have landed us in this place at this time. The combination of discourses that surge through us as we try to make sense of the world is absolutely unique. And that’s built into us as a species. We’re always active, always trying to understand the world, always interpreting, and of course always communicating. We’re a story-telling species that always needs to communicate, always needs to understand, and that understanding is always mediated through culture and through our individual, lived experience. So no one has exactly the same understanding of reality because we all bring our different experiences to that process.

Let’s look at this more specifically from within the context of the tradition of audience studies. To me the interesting question is not why people would make different meanings from the same text. That’s simply what we should expect when we recognize our uniqueness. In fact, we should expect infinite meanings, because people bring so many different elements to their interaction with stories.

We now know from the work that’s been done in cultural studies that there can be no meaning in the text itself, that meaning is always an interaction between the text and what readers bring to it. And it’s precisely that interaction that should be the focus of study. When people bring all of these huge and varied experiences, the infinitely different lives that they have lived, to the reading of culture, you’d expect to find difference. In fact, if you didn’t find difference there’d be something weird going on. So for me difference is not the interesting question; the infinite meanings of the social world are simply part of us as an active, interpreting species.

So the question, then, is this: given the possibility of infinite meanings, why is it that in concrete and specific circumstances only a *few* meanings are given? That seems to be the more interesting question. Not why are people different, but why – given that there is so much difference built into us – are people so much the same? What are the structures that make us so much the same?

This is why I think the Marxist discussion of determination is so valuable. It gets to the heart of what actually brings people together, given that the possibilities of being torn apart are built into our nature, in a sense, as a species. In this way Marxism gives us the most elaborate way of understanding sameness and difference, of understanding why people come to believe the same thing. While it’s true that not everyone ever believes

exactly the same thing, and while there are always important exceptions, nevertheless a Marxist orientation helps us come to terms with why so many people do indeed come to embrace virtually identical and unquestioned sets of beliefs. And why they construct understandings and institutions around these beliefs that come to organize the fundamental belief structures of entire societies.

*What you're talking about goes against a great deal of recent work in cultural studies that seems to shift emphasis away from power, and to focus on the activity and agency of audiences in their interactions with media. How would you respond to criticism that says that in the end you may simply be reproducing the one-dimensional analysis of a crude Marxism that is no longer capable of explaining how media operate in a post-modern context?*

I have no doubt that many people would read what I'm saying in that way. That is, they point to differences in interpretations as evidence that media power is very limited and that audiences are very savvy in how they interact with media forms. Diversity of interpretation is used as a way to show that power is not operating, when in fact what I think you have to look at is how power works through diversity. Popular forms can only be popular if they work in diverse ways, and no popular form works in only one particular way. For example, in the work I did with Justin Lewis on *The Cosby Show*, we identified the show's ambiguity as the key to how power, and popular culture more generally, operate to reproduce racial discourses that are deeply troubling. You have to have an analysis that is complex enough to actually look at that diversity. But you also have to frame it within a context that looks at how that diversity of interpretation can be used, how it can be put to use by particular institutions for their own ends.

*There seems to be an inflection here on the reception side. What of the production side in all of this?*

On the production side there will always be ambiguity and complexity, because people can't control how messages are read. Producers might have all kinds of ideas about how the messages they create are going to work, but in the end they can't control that. That's the difference, I think, between doing literary studies and doing cultural studies. Literary studies is really looking at the message and the complex ways in which the message is put together. I don't want to deny that. In fact, even with the focus on the audience, I don't want to get too far away from the focus on the message, because in fact people are always interacting with specific things. People can't just make any meaning they want. They're interacting with the messages that come to them, which have already been framed in a very particular way. So you've got to be able to look at that. You have to have the tools to be able to deconstruct the text in its full complexity. And at the same time you've got to be able to show not only how wide open a message is, but how closed down it is. In other words, that there is a limit to how it can be interpreted. But the point I want to make is that if you only stand on the side of textual analysis, then you have no idea how the text is actually being used, how it is actually being interpreted, and how those texts are actually operating in the world of real meaning.

Hall says that cultural studies is about examining “the dirty semiotic world” where power meets meaning. And to understand this dirty semiotic world, you have got to be able to look at the messages; you have to be able to look at audiences; and you have to look at the broader context, the political, economic, social context within which those things take place and circulate. And that’s very difficult to do. I mean, you can’t just sit in your office and look at an image or a video on MTV and figure that out. It requires a huge amount of work.

*The issue of pleasure is hotly contested right now in communication studies. What would you say to those who might criticize Hall, or you for that matter, for not taking a full enough accounting of how power meets meaning meets pleasure? Isn’t there a danger of reducing the ambiguity and potential power of experience here?*

Meaning is always connected to pleasure. When I talk about meaning I am not just talking about abstract meanings or structures of knowledge. I am talking about the way that people actually interact with and experience the world. And again, that is the question of popularity. When I talk about popularity, I am talking about the question of pleasure. You have to be able to answer for what it is that in fact drives people towards these kinds of messages, towards this kind of media and popular culture. But if you highlight pleasure exclusively, then everything comes down on the side of the audience and the side of agency, especially if you find that there’s diversity in interpretation. Activity and diversity get the stress, and suddenly you’ve lost the centrality of power within this analysis.

The best example of someone who does this is John Fiske. He became quite well known about fifteen years ago because of his focus on pleasure. What he did within this body of work was that he essentially defined diversity as evidence that textual power was not operating in the way we thought about it before. He essentially said, “Well, people are deriving different meanings from this, so that must mean that the text is not very powerful.” On the one hand, he’s right that you have to recognize that there is diversity in interpretation. But if you stop there, and only stay on that side of the equation, then you’re going to be floating off into the world of pleasure and agency, looking solely at how people are making meaning and more or less exercising full control over their own lives. You can then say, as many do, “Look at how little effect the media has on people.” And when that happens you enter the world of apology for the existing order of things. And that’s right where some pop cultural critics have gone. The point is this: by saying that this issue of power has been overplayed, that “effect” has been overplayed, some people have gone to the other extreme and fixed their focus solely on the question of what drives people, what motivates people in their interactions with media. Everything then starts to resemble what used to be known as “uses and gratifications” research: What uses do people get out of this? How are individuals’ needs gratified by and through their interaction with the media? And to me that’s disastrous, both from an intellectual and a political perspective, because it completely loses touch with the context within which media messages matter and operate in the first place. It loses the context in which people interact with messages, with how messages are constructed, with the very things that condition how people think about and experience pleasure.

I'm all for pleasure, who isn't? But we also have to recognize that pleasure can be used against people. In fact, pleasure has always been used against people. That is the essential nature of how power operates. That is the essential nature of how ideology operates. Pleasure masks the work of ideology precisely when it seems as though you are making meanings that come from yourself. If I had to choose one way to make sure that a population was under my control, that's the way I would do it – make sure that the population actively controlled itself in pleasurable ways. And from there it's a short step to assuring that people take actions that are against their own material interests.

*With all of this in mind, if a young scholar were interested in popular culture, what advice would you give her about the types of questions she should be asking? What would mark a political question as worthy of asking, in your view?*

In my view, there are two aspects, always, to the kinds of analysis cultural studies should be doing. On the one hand, we have to deal with the question of popularity. That is, why do some cultural forms take hold at particular times and become popular? Even in the case of moguls like Rupert Murdoch, powerful media producers cannot simply impose their views on the population. For something to be popular it has to interact in meaningful ways with what is already going on in the lives of people. So that's the first question to ask: What, exactly, is the basis of a particular phenomenon of popularity? And this then provokes much more fundamental questions about what's actually happening in people's lives. So it's not simply: "Why is this message popular or why is this song popular?" But instead: "How is a specific song tapping into what's going on in the concrete and material lives people are actually living?" So that's the first question, the question of popularity.

The second question then emerges from the uses of that popularity. That is, how is meaning – meaning made in the interaction between a popular culture and an audience – being used politically? And to get to the core of that question, we always need to bring in the question of power. In this sense, it really goes back to a very old debate between agency and structure. And the point is that the best cultural studies approaches never fail to take both of these things into account. So yes, cultural studies has to look at agency – because people are not simply dopes or dupes, they are not dumb, and they actively engage with cultural forms to make sense of their lives. But – and this is crucial – we do so *not* under conditions of our own choosing, as Marx said. What's imperative, what this dynamic demands, is that we focus on both sides of this dynamic: the active side, yes, but also the side that people do not have under their control. Part of the problem with some recent trends in cultural studies is that they have lost touch with that second part.

## Media Education Foundation: Building Institutions

*A lot has been said about how the Media Education Foundation (MEF) evolved out of MTV's threat to sue you over your video Dreamworlds, but I think less is known about how MEF has grown and evolved as an organization over the past decade and a half since then.*

I wish I could say I had this grand vision for MEF that predicted where we would be as an organization today. But the fact is that MEF, like virtually all institutions, developed within some very concrete conditions, in response to a number of very specific situations. First, as you note, was the *Dreamworlds* controversy. The major decision I made at that time was to distribute *Dreamworlds* myself, so that meant that MEF from the start was not simply going to be a production company, but also a place that would try to distribute things as well. But the truth is that this was less a decision than a reaction to circumstances. I went to a number of independent distribution organizations with *Dreamworlds* but none were all that interested in it. So MEF, more or less at its inception, was set up to distribute one video – with the passing thought that if we could generate any funds from it, we could then think about supporting another project.

*And were you still an organization of one at that time?*

More or less. But in the very beginning I did bring on somebody part-time to help with sales. Actually, I've been thinking a lot recently about the history of this organization. MEF started in 1991, and from June of 1991 to June of 1992 I had one unpaid intern who dealt with the sales of *Dreamworlds*. We then moved into our first offices, consisting of four small rooms, in June of 1992. I'll never forget standing in this empty space with four rooms wondering what the hell I had done. But as money came in, we started to buy furniture and computers, and before long I was asking myself, "Okay. But what now?" The answer was a video on tobacco advertising.

*Why tobacco advertising?*

First, because I thought it was an important topic. Second, because I thought there would be a demand for it from educational institutions. In fact, that's precisely the rationale that informs, in very broad terms, how we function to this day. Two things always: social importance and market viability. And I think this is a combination that some progressive or alternative film producers sometimes forget or miss entirely. They have a topic they want to do, and market considerations are secondary. That's why there have been some fantastic films that very few people have seen – because on the left, distribution has not been thought through as much as production has. My reason for highlighting this was really pretty simple: it was the only way that we were going to survive, and to succeed you first have to survive. And I just didn't have the resources to start writing grants and raising money that way.

All of that said, we didn't choose topics just because we felt they could make money. MEF has never done that. If we did that, there would be no reason for us to exist. So

we've always operated with two questions in mind up front: Is this a topic that needs to be studied? And if so – and only if it is so – can we sell it?

*Playing devil's advocate for a moment: Isn't it hypocritical to operate this way – given that so much of your work critiques the excesses and injustices of the capitalist market? Aren't you just using the market yourself and producing something as a commodity and then selling it?*

I couldn't disagree more. I don't see it as a contradiction at all. Because one positive aspect of the market is that it gets you in touch with different groups. That's what the market is good for. If you don't cater to the demands of certain groups, you don't survive, so in this sense the market links us to where we want to be. Politically and pedagogically we wanted to be in classrooms, and the market was a way of linking us to that aim. That was where my work as a professor really paid off, in the sense that I had a pretty good feel for what would work in classrooms, and for what was necessary. This is just what MEF has always been balancing – the topics that need addressing, with the necessity to get the distribution and resources needed to continue doing the work we do.

I'm always thinking in these terms, and in this sense, yes, an awareness of the market is always there. In the early days it had to be there. It was necessary to our survival. And there's no doubt this produces some negatives. You always have to produce and sell, produce and sell, produce and sell. There's an incredible pressure for new products, and that pressure has been pretty unrelenting over the last 15 years. In many ways, I haven't really had a chance to sit back and reflect a lot on these kinds of things.

*So all of this demands a certain kind of growth. If you have to produce new things in order to have economic viability, and you need that viability to fuel your organization, then you have to grow. And even if that growth isn't always registered outwardly in terms of hiring more staff, for example, it would seem that you nevertheless do, constantly, have to be giving people new reasons to come back.*

True. But it's also political. To produce more things means that you're getting more ideas out there and into classrooms. The market is the means of doing the critical work we do. As I said, the pressure has been more or less unrelenting, especially as we incurred debt from the start. The main reason, I think, was that I made a pretty crazy decision – which was to say that we were going to both produce and distribute. People generally don't do that because each of these takes huge amounts of resources.

For a lot of reasons, I don't think ours is a model that can be easily replicated. Sometimes when people ask how we did it, they're looking to duplicate it. And I'd be lying if I didn't say that it's very tough. Still I do think it's possible, in the United States especially, because there is a large educational market here. The key is to think carefully about all of the dynamics involved with that market, and to produce very specifically for it. It would be a lot more difficult, I think, to duplicate this in other countries, because there isn't the same kind of large educational market capable of sustaining an organization like this in the way it needs to be sustained.

So on the one hand, the reliance on sales alone to sustain MEF has had some very negative side effects in terms of this constant pressure to produce more things. But the same time, there is a positive aspect to it: if you can get to a position where you can sustain yourself economically, it does actually give you the freedom to take on projects that you otherwise wouldn't be able to take on. And I'm talking specifically here about dealing with subjects that most philanthropic foundations would never fund because they're too sensitive and controversial. That's actually what we did *with Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land*. There's just no way that *Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land* could've been made by an organization that depended on foundation grants to survive, because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in the United States at least, is a topic that is more or less off-limits, even for most left-of-center foundations. But we were in a position that allowed us to fund the initial stages of this ourselves. I remember talking to one of our advisors about this, and he said: "Someone just needs to do this. This is one of those statements that needs to be made, even though we're not going to make huge amounts of money out this." Our funding structure allowed us to take a risk on a project we believed in. We would not have been able to do it otherwise.

In that sense, I never want to be solely reliant upon foundation grants. If you come to rely too much on foundation grants, you're also going to have to rely on program officers who may change suddenly. That's exactly what happens sometimes, and it can create big problems for non-profits. The program officer changes, the priorities change, and suddenly half your budget is gone and you're laying off the people you'd been supporting with that money. So while I'd certainly like to get money from foundations to support some of our work, I never want to be dependent on it. The market is something we can control, for the most part anyway. We don't have to worry about one person making all the decisions. If we produce the right things, and they're important and useful to teachers, then we know we can get our stuff out there, and, in turn, reinforce the stability we need.

So the bottom line in all of this, I guess, is that the structure of MEF poses challenges, but it also presents huge opportunities to do things we wouldn't otherwise be able to do in the traditional non-profit world. Even though MEF is non-profit, in the sense that no one owns it, and in terms of the normal way non-profits are described, the ways in which we support ourselves are not at all typical.

*What other challenges have you faced running MEF over the years?*

There have been, and there continue to be, many challenges, some financial, but also others that have to do with organizational culture. It's an issue that a lot of progressive organizations struggle with – the tension between mission and daily operations. On the one hand, our mission is to produce materials that help people deconstruct the world they live in, to begin to understand the structures that shape their everyday environments, but also to envision alternatives, possibilities, and different ways of seeing the future. All of this is guided by a progressive vision that is not at all political in the everyday, partisan Democrat-Republican sense, but very political in the sense of embracing values of citizenship that demand individual autonomy and awareness in the face of any kind of

power that would undermine these democratic imperatives. On the other hand, there are always additional questions about which values should govern MEF's concrete operation as an organization. That is, how do you actually get films made under time pressure? How do you get them distributed under fiscal constraints? This has been the constant challenge, and not just for us but for all progressive organizations. In fact, it's just this that Stuart Hall said eventually drove him away from the Birmingham Center – the tensions created by this developmental dialectic. MEF is not unusual in having conversations around these things.

*On the issue of how you select topics, can you talk about some of the considerations involved beyond financial concerns?*

First of all, I think MEF is in something of a privileged position at this point, because the videos we do produce and distribute have the potential to raise the topics we choose to a certain level of importance. The videos will get out there, and people are likely to talk about them and use them in classrooms. But it's an important question, because we're constantly thinking about the topics we should be looking at. And there are political and commercial decisions that come into play, in the sense that we're required to think about not only what's important at a specific moment in time, but also into the months and years ahead. We have to think about issues in terms of transitory versus lasting social relevance. The challenge is to pick those topics that you know are going to be around for a while. You don't want videos that are outdated by the time you make them. We've sometimes come close to that, in that we've sometimes taken so long to do a specific title that it loses its initial relevance. You've got to be able to look into the future, and this is a good thing, because it challenges us always to address issues in a way that moves beyond cultural symptoms into the very structures and conditions that produce them.

As for the actual decision-making process, the challenge is to meld all of these factors, and also to ask some other basic and fairly mundane questions. Will a certain topic be too difficult for us to treat in a video? Can the topic be addressed adequately with one expert, given that single-interview videos are the easiest to produce? Do we know enough good people who are well enough versed on a topic to invest time in a multi-interview project? Are we looking at something that seems very important, but lack the expertise, or access to expertise, to do a good job with it? What kind of research will be required to even get a project to the point where we know what we need for expertise? All of these practical factors, and many more, come into play.

*Do you have a personal favorite or favorites?*

There are videos that have been extremely important to MEF, so let me come at your question that way. I think we can identify five or six titles. *Dreamworlds* was the first vitally important video, of course, for the simple reason that it started everything. Then we have a period where MEF makes videos about health and media issues, the most important of which is a video called *Slim Hopes*, which was produced in 1995 with Jean Kilbourne. That takes us to another level because the response is so positive and the sales are very high. It allows us to expand from the first office, the four small rooms, into

the rest of that space and a whole other part of the building. It allows us to grow in terms of staff as well. The next landmark videos, and they came out around the same time (2000), were *Killing Us Softly 3* and *Tough Guise*. Their success propels us even further. Again, it's gender issues that are driving all of this to this point: *Dreamworlds* is about gender, *Slim Hopes* is about gender, *Tough Guise* is about gender, and *Killing Us Softly* is about gender. And the success of the last two allows us to think about expanding again, and in 2003 we buy this great old, broken-down fire station in Northampton and are able to fix it up so that we have the space to do what we do better.

*That was huge for the organization, no?*

It was. And if not for those videos being made and embraced, it wouldn't have been possible. Then I would have to say that the next pivotal video is *Hijacking Catastrophe* in 2004. That video expands our reach – taking our material beyond institutions, professors, academics and students, to ordinary citizens and activists.

*Was that film made with an eye toward that market?*

Absolutely, in the sense that it was made with an eye towards serving as a useful resource for Americans as they approached what many people regarded as one of the important elections in history. Our mission is educational, and after 9/11 there wasn't a lot of information coming from mainstream media. The trauma, the sense of patriotism, the fear in the media of being labeled un-American, all of this created a media climate that shut down thinking and debate about the policies we were seeing emerge right after 9/11, then in the lead-up to the war and beyond. So the question became how MEF could use its resources to provide materials that would help citizens make more informed choices. The result is that MEF is now at a very interesting stage. *Hijacking Catastrophe* has given us a different kind of profile, one more explicitly connected to the requirements of democratic citizenship, the fundamental demand in a democracy for information. And our challenge now is to build on that while maintaining our baseline mission to provide material to universities and colleges that continues the crucial work of addressing the important cultural and social issues – issues that always seem to be caught up, at base, with issues of gender, race, sexuality, class and the like.

*And do you have one favorite from this list?*

Those are the videos that have been important to MEF. In terms of my own favorite within those, it's difficult to say because I tend to like every video we make. But I do think the video that did the most to change the way people saw MEF was *Tough Guise*. In general “gender” has tended to mean “women”, and I think we inadvertently kind of went along with that. I think *Tough Guise* really got masculinity onto the gender map in a very mainstream way. To be able to intervene, to be able to say something meaningful about the social construction of masculinity, and to do so in a non-threatening way to that kid in the back hall of the lecture theater, was very important. That's the core of what cultural studies should be about, and that's what cultural intervention is about. In terms of the classroom, it's not just about talking to the front row, but also being able to talk to that

student in the back row who doesn't really want to be there, who's there because he has to be there. You've got to be able to reach into that back row and to have a presence there. I think *Dreamworlds* did do that, and I think *Tough Guise* did that as well.

*What you're describing is pedagogically challenging, to say the least. Anyone who has taught will tell you it's easier to reach people who are already committed.*

I think it's the central challenge of pedagogy, and cultural pedagogy, to talk to people you otherwise wouldn't talk to, and may not have a lot in common with. The reason *Dreamworlds* worked is that it dealt with images of pleasure; if they weren't images of pleasure, they wouldn't be in music videos. The function of these images is to draw people in. And with regard to *Dreamworlds*, men have told me that their initial reaction when they were told they would be watching the video was, "Wow, we're going to get a whole hour of watching beautiful women in our classes." There's no doubt that that's what hooks people in, and the reason for that is that these are images of desire. And I think we have to explicitly recognize that. Given that we don't have the same resources that record companies have, or that Hollywood has, we've got to exploit the power of those images and turn them back on themselves, much like a martial artist redirecting the power coming at them. We've got to turn the power that's coming at us directly back on its source. The challenge, then, for something like *Dreamworlds* is making sure people do not get lost in the seductive power of the images, and to make the images problematic, to take familiar images and make them strange so that they can be seen at a critical distance in new ways. That is why there are so many images, one after the other, until the moment of pleasure turns into overload. The other thing I did in *Dreamworlds* was to rip out the music from the music videos, and replace it with my own voice. So to get the images, they also have to have my analysis at the same time. You can't take one without the other.

*So you're interrupting their normal consumption of popular culture?*

Yes. So that the next time they're watching music videos, these ideas, these alternative ways of seeing things, are in their heads. That's what cultural intervention is about. It's not about control; it's about intervening and having a presence. With *Dreamworlds*, it's also very important that the voice over the images was a male voice. And in fact, some of the early feminist response to *Dreamworlds* was pretty negative. Some people said, "Well this is just the same old patriarchal voice from above telling us how to think. Why wasn't there a woman's voice in there?" I recognize that I could have made that choice, but the fact is that I made a very deliberate decision to feature a male voice. If your ultimate target is that male student in the back row, a male student who's likely to be defensive or outright dismissive in the face of any serious talk about sexism and misogyny in something like MTV, the risk – as unfair as it assuredly is – is that he will be more likely to dismiss a woman on these issues. That's what he's been trained to do by the culture. Boys will be boys and all of that. And it just becomes, in his mind, another puritanical woman moaning about images and feminism and whatever, and he's tuned out. Already in his mind are all the stereotypes that go along with that female voice, and he's tuned out to the analysis already. But if it's a male voice, it's harder for him to do that. If nothing

else, it presents a moment of confusion, productive confusion, I hope. If he's going to reject it, he has to reject the ideas; he's got to deal with the ideas. So it was very important for me, strategically, pedagogically, that it be a male voice saying these things. It's not until men take this on, it's not until men use their privilege to deal with these things, that you can intervene effectively in those places. Not exclusively of course. I'm not saying only men can do it, obviously. What I am saying is that unless men have a very important role within that, it's going to be impossible to deconstruct male culture.

I think *Tough Guise* works in very much the same way. The fact that it's a man talking about these things allows entry into a world that might otherwise be closed off. In some ways, it gives men permission to engage these issues. And it doesn't hurt when the man, as with Jackson Katz in *Tough Guise*, is someone who in some stereotypical senses embodies traditional masculinity in that he's an ex-football player. And the way he talks about these issues resonates with a lot of men who have never thought seriously about these things. He can't be rejected straight away as a "soft" or male-bashing guy who's been taken in by feminism. In that sense his body is very important to him, and his voice is very important to him. And this means that if you're going to reject his analysis you've got to reject the ideas, not some stereotype that's already in your mind.

## The Media Education Foundation and Politics

*To what extent do you see MEF as an explicitly political organization?*

Well it is and it isn't. It's a political organization in the sense that we want to be active in the world, and we want to inspire people to be more active in the world. But we're not political in the sense of being connected to the political process, particularly to a political party. A lot of our work takes aim at the concentration of power, and in this way has been fairly relentless in exposing the anti-democratic bias in our supposedly "liberal" media, for example. If our work is political, then, it's political in a small "d," democratic sense that transcends parties and establishment politics as it exists today. We see our work as simply advancing the demands of citizenship: helping people to critically examine the bombardment of images and information that constantly come at them so that they have more control over their lives and those who act in their names – whether Republicans, Democrats, or media executives. In that sense, we're political in that that we believe knowledge matters. And our basic mission is to help get as much knowledge as we can into places where it matters most and can make a difference. We feel that the way to do that these days is not only to write books and articles. The way to do it is by making videos and films that are capable of intervening in the world where people live. In that sense, it's highly political.

*How has this political orientation been reflected in the actual subject matter of MEF's projects over the years? Has the nature of the kind of political intervention you're talking about changed or evolved over the years?*

To some degree, yes – but from the start we've remained an intellectual and pedagogical organization, so the nature of the questions that we focus on pushes us in a very particular direction. In that sense, I actually don't think MEF videos have changed very much. The core of our mission has always been to take the latest cutting-edge knowledge, from the academy or from wherever else people are dealing with media issues, and to translate this knowledge into forms that ordinary people can understand, so you don't have to be a scholar or an expert to understand the analysis. In this sense, I see what we do as democratizing information. We simply try to make this stuff accessible so that the ideas can actually intervene in the world. That impulse has been there from the start, and it hasn't changed.

*Let's move a little deeper into this relationship between intellectual, scholarly work and what you're saying about accessibility. Do you see your work as a media scholar, as a cultural studies scholar, as in any way separate from this pedagogical emphasis at MEF?*

To me, cultural studies scholarship has always been not only about understanding the world in the best ways it can be understood, but also about staying attuned to how knowledge can be made to matter in the world. It was that particular perspective that actually engaged me in the project of cultural studies to begin with. What engaged me was that cultural studies was looking at stuff that was going on right now, that you

needed new knowledge to be able to understand that, and that this new knowledge was going to be able to intervene in the world you were looking at.

*Is it safe to say, then, there's a sense of urgency that attaches to this kind of orientation and work?*

I do think we're living at a unique moment in human history. There are some things that we know we are hitting the limits of, the physical environment, for example, which we're consuming and destroying. There's no question that's new and has never happened before in history – that we could actually be destroying the world. We also have the capacity now to destroy the world with nuclear weapons. So both of these things are radically new, unique. We have never had those possibilities before. And obviously they produce a sense of urgency, or at least they should do.

But more fundamentally, what we are talking about is the dialectic between democracy and power. I think one of the fundamentals of human existence is the drive towards democracy and the drive toward freedom. I think there's no doubt that we are, as a species, probably freer now than ever before, that more people are free now than at any point in human history, and that more people are able to control their lives in unprecedented ways. That's the result of the longing for democracy, which a lot of people have talked about. But the project is in no way complete. In fact, the democratic project, the impulse toward freedom, can never be satisfied. Freedom ceases to exist the moment it becomes complacent. And that's why there's always a necessity for vigilance in a democracy, a sense of urgency that keeps us on guard against the institutionalization of “democratic” power centers that undermine what they claim to be serving, advancing, or realizing.

Alex Carey, the Australian theorist, says that there are three great developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. First is the growth of democracy. Second is the growth of corporate power. Third is the growth of corporate propaganda to protect corporate power against democracy. Although I think that throughout history elites have used culture to maintain control, what seems to be different right now is the specialization involved – the specialized institutions that have now grown up around this propaganda. The advertising industry and the public relations industry have now become specialists at tapping into the emotional core that drives people. So the open question right now is whether or not human beings are ever going to get to that stage where we will be able to save ourselves – and the planet – before our economic models destroy the environment, or our weapons and wars destroy everything. This, I think, is the great question of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Can we save ourselves from unprecedented dangers in the face of unprecedented propaganda bombardments that keep us numb and uninformed?

*What can cultural studies, as we have been talking about it, bring to political analysis that political science and other forms of communication studies have not already been doing for years?*

What cultural studies brings to politics and political analysis is an explicit and deep focus on how political meanings are mediated – that is, how public opinion is structured, or controlled and manipulated outright, by means of techniques like advertising and public relations. Cultural studies allows an engagement with the myriad meanings that attach to the relationship between these techniques, our political structures, and the political meanings that result from and in turn affect this relationship. Again, I don't think that the use of PR by elites is anything new. I just think there's more awareness of the phenomenon now, and I think cultural studies gives us good tools for understanding political movements and processes in new ways.

Very early on I did some work with Justin Lewis and Michael Morgan, colleagues of mine at UMass, which we funded with proceeds from sales of *Dreamworlds*. (In that sense, I guess, there was a connection between gender and politics right from the start.) We did a survey done during the first Gulf War in 1991. At that time, there were all kinds of opinion surveys circulating that measured how much the American people supported the invasion of Iraq and the drive to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. Poll after poll showed that 80% and 85% of people supported what the Bush administration was doing. We saw all of this, and we began to think of ways to enlarge our understanding of the political situation. And what we quickly realized was that nobody was asking about the *basis* of that support. Nobody was taking things a step further to determine *why* there was apparently so much support for the war. What we wanted to get at was the underlying discursive structure that was informing people's understanding of the world and allowing them to support this kind of action. So we conducted a survey that asked not what people believed, but what they actually *knew*. We thought, up front, that there was a relationship between what people believed and the actual knowledge that informed their understanding of the way the world worked.

We asked a number of questions about the Middle East and about world affairs. And what we found was that Americans had very little knowledge about what was going on around the world. In fact, the study showed that the more people supported the war, the less they knew. So there was an inverse relationship between support for the war and actual knowledge about the events that were connected to that region. We also wanted to link this to media coverage of the world, so we also asked people how much media they watched. And we found an extremely interesting relationship: The more people watched television, the less they actually knew, and the more they supported the war. So the media seemed to be centrally connected to Americans being systematically misinformed about a major part of the world, and therefore about the actions being taken in their name in that part of the world. It was an interesting study that allowed us to move deeper into the nature of support for the war. And I think this is precisely what cultural studies can do. I think it allows us to pull apart some of these broader notions of public opinion and to get a sharper sense of the way people are really thinking about things.

*A 2004 study of public opinion by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) came to similar conclusions about the current war in Iraq.*

Yes. That survey used a strategy similar to ours, which is to look at knowledge rather than simply opinion. And they found essentially the same thing we did a decade and a half ago. Here again, there was very, very strong support for the war, but that support was based on almost no knowledge. No real information. And when I talk about knowledge, I'm talking about very basic facts that are indisputable about that region. Not opinion about the region – just basic facts about the region and aspects of the war. And again, this study found that media was at the center of this. I think the most famous finding of the PIPA study is that the more people watched Fox news, the less they knew about the war, the less they knew about the region, the less they knew about the world, and the more they supported the war. So watching Fox news not only makes you more conservative, it also makes you more ignorant. What all of this suggests is that there may be a relationship between ignorance, political propaganda and corporate media coverage of the world, and where American politics is right now.

But I think we can also take things further than that. I don't think people are simply misinformed, because there's a lot of information out there now, even among mainstream sources. Take the twin issues of weapons of mass destruction and the connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda as framed in the run-up to the war in Iraq. Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction. And even Congress has come out with official reports saying that there were no links between Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. And yet the majority of people who voted for George Bush still believe that weapons of mass destruction were found and that there was a link between Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden. They actually believe that the war in Iraq is somehow connected to the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

The question, again, is why people believe this. Are people just dumb? Or have the media really done their job in ways that prevent real knowledge from getting through? The interesting thing is that the fact that there were no weapons of mass destruction, and that fact that the link with Al Qaeda is non-existent, are now mainstream ideas. They are not ideas that simply exist on the margins, and if you watch regular news you will come across these ideas. So I think we need to now ask or complete the question, which is this: Why, in the face of countervailing evidence, do people still believe that weapons of mass destruction were found? And I think at that point you have to look at the relationship between knowledge and identity.

I think one of the reasons why large numbers of American still believe these things is because if they didn't, if WMD and the connection to Osama didn't exist, then the war in Iraq is illegal and possibly about nothing more than a giant power or resource grab. And this just won't cut it given the kind of self-identity Americans have, given the belief that America is always on the side of good, always on the side of freedom and democracy. I think that this belief in America is so strong, and the very ideal of America is so strong, that a lot of people simply will not allow facts to get in the way.

But it should also be said that in one sense, if this analysis is valid, there is hope. Because it shows that people's support for the war is based on noble reasons. They do not support the war because they support empire, or because they support genocide, or

because they support expending the blood of American troops to control oil reserves. Instead, it seems clear that a lot of Americans really did think that Saddam Hussein was a threat, and therefore America had to take just action against this threat. It's in this sense that we can see the positive dimension here, because the support is based upon a noble set of values. What's interesting is how these noble ideas and motives can be exploited by people with no real interest in democracy and no interest in upholding any American ideal of virtue. If we don't dig deep into the discursive structure of these stories, if we ignore the issue of American identity and focus only on arcane policy details, I think we end up with a very superficial, one-dimensional way of understanding how and why people actually come to support government policies.

*But you're not suggesting that people are simply passive consumers of media coverage and propaganda, are you? That people are brainwashed?*

Absolutely not. The one thing that cultural studies has always shown us is that you cannot think about media in a simple, one dimensional way. There are always highly contradictory dynamics at work. We always have to remember that ideology can work through contradiction. Two contradictory ideas can exist simultaneously within the same kind of discursive structure, and a standard political analysis doesn't give you any real insight into that. A standard Marxist analysis doesn't give you enough insight into that. As I have said before, we have got to look at both identity and ideology at the same time, look at how they hold together and how power works within this relation. And this is exactly what cultural studies gives us – nothing if not insight into what Stuart Hall calls “the dirty semiotic world of power and knowledge.” The job of cultural studies is to try to unpack that Gordian knot. And it's really difficult to do because it's so tightly wound and consists of so many different strands.

*Hijacking Catastrophe is about empire. And Peace, Propaganda, and the Promised Land, on one level, shows how the imperial drive of the US to control the Middle East is often fundamentally at odds with claims that our presence there is all about spreading our values and supporting democracy. How do you think the notion of an American empire sits within the larger frame you're describing of an American identity?*

That's the key question. What would happen if Americans actually understood themselves as an empire and actually regarded themselves as an empire? I think Americans have a huge, almost built-in resistance to thinking about themselves as an empire. This notion that America only works for the good persists, and I think it does so directly against the notion of empire as global control of the world for its own sake. Empire then gets framed not as empire, but as the natural expression and expansion of exceptional American ideals.

*Isn't that true of past empires? Empires have never really said that they exist to control and crush people simply for the sake of controlling and crushing people, have they?*

I think there's a certain way in which democracy distinctively inflects the operation of the American empire. The Roman Empire, for example, not being a democracy, didn't have

to worry about controlling the population. The British didn't particularly have to worry about controlling the population either. At the start of the British Empire, Britain was not a democracy, so it didn't need to channel its imperial designs through democratic ideals. You could do two things together: You could serve British economic interests and you could also bring "civilization" to the heathen hoards. And that was part of what the white man's burden was. I am not too sure how much that went beyond the elite circles.

I think what is really significant about American empire is that this notion that we are doing the right thing actually works in the opposite way. I don't think that elites now think that way at all. I think that when the architects of empire were sitting around trying to figure out how to control oil in the Middle East, they were talking about economic factors and what they needed to control. And then they were saying, "Well, how can we sell this?" So right now I think it actually works opposite, in some ways, to how the British Empire worked, in that elites don't believe any of this stuff. They know that none of this is about democracy and freedom, but that it has to be sold to the population within the context of these ideals. And it has to be sold to the population precisely because it is a democracy, because in a democracy you need to bring the people along – or at the very least assure that they don't rebel. Again, coming back to Alex Carey's notion about the growth of democracy and the growth of corporate power, and the role corporate propaganda plays to curb the potentially anti-corporate "excesses" of democracy – what this means is that propaganda becomes a baseline necessity in democracies in a way it is not in dictatorships. Saddam Hussein didn't have to worry about this kind of thing in Iraq, because he could simply control the people through blunt force and fear. The Soviet Union, likewise, for all of its propaganda efforts, could always control the population by military means and state policing powers. But when you have a democracy, propaganda and ideology become much, much more important. This is why you have to have your specialized institutions, like advertising and public relations – to be able to fulfill that function.

*Beyond actual content, how much of the PR mobilized in the build-up to the war do you think simply functioned as a form of distraction for an already distracted public?*

Distraction seems to imply that they don't want you to really think about this. As long as you aren't really thinking about what's going on, then it's fine. Some analysts who I greatly admire think this is actually what popular culture is – simply a distraction and deflection from the "real" world of politics and policy. But I don't think it's enough to say it's merely about distraction because they actually do need to bring the population along. They need to win active support. Again, this is not just acquiescence. They need to get part of the population to be active supports of their policies, so that the population comes to invest in government actions. There's no doubt that right now that there is in fact a large section of the American population – perhaps not the majority, but a large enough section of the population – that is very motivated politically and very active in the Republican Party, that is also very invested in empire and this war effort. And we are not talking only about rich people. We are not talking about oil barons. We are talking about people of modest means, who actually have no economic interests in empire but who are

now invested in it ideologically. That, I think, is new. I think that is something that is distinctive right now.

Simply talking about ideology and deflection doesn't get at that. At some point, if you really want to fight this fight within the United States and you want to be able to have this democratic debate around this, then you have to be able to deal with that. You have to be able to deal with the level of identity that people have invested in empire. You are not going to simply take it apart by pointing out the facts to them. And that's what I think is interesting about the weapons of mass destruction issue, and the issue of Saddam Hussein's link to Al Qaeda; it's the fact that when people came to understand these things were not true, it didn't make any difference.

You have got to intervene at another level. You have to intervene at a level that shows people exactly what is at stake for them personally: how they are invested in war policy and empire, how they are losing through these policies, and the way these things affect their concrete lives, their material lives – how much debt they have, whether or not their sons and daughters will come back maimed, either physically or psychologically from this war. Unless we engage people at that level, we are not going to have much hope in changing the discursive structures that inform how Americans understand the world.

*Can you talk about how this analysis plays out in the context of Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land?*

I think if ordinary Americans knew exactly what was going on in the Middle East, if they understood exactly what was happening in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and knew their own government's role within that – I think they would be horrified about the role America has played in enabling one of the most horrendous events of the last 38 years, Israel's occupation of the West Bank. I think that if people knew what was really happening in their name, policy would change. So we made *Peace, Propaganda, and the Promised Land* as a way to show how Americans are systematically misinformed about this subject. If it didn't particularly matter how you thought about the world, then there wouldn't be this incredible propaganda effort to make sure Americans thought about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in one very narrow way. And so the film was designed to show Americans how media coverage of the conflict affects their own understanding, and therefore American foreign policy itself in that part of the world. Perhaps it is based on a kind of naïve idea that if Americans only knew what was really going on, *and their complicity in it*, then something could change.

*Is there a certain kind of racism at work here as well?*

That's a different thing, I think. I don't think you have to be racist to turn away from the information that exists out there about the Palestinian conflict. There is simply very little information available to mainstream audiences, so I don't think you can make that equation. Perhaps if there was a lot of information available and people were still turning away from it, then you could make a different kind of argument. But right now I don't think you can do that. I don't think that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about race or

even religion in terms of how it has played out here with American viewers. There is a racial element to it in the sense that Israel is framed as a white, European democracy set against Arabs who want to drive the Jews into the sea. That kind of broad framing definitely exists, but I don't think it is essentially sold through the racial aspect; I don't think race is the central aspect of how this conflict has been mediated. On the contrary, I think it is largely mediated through absence. One of the things that you find when you start looking closely at this is that Americans know almost nothing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And sometimes, it's not only that they know nothing; it's that what they do know is simply factually wrong. They think the opposite of what is true.

*You said that this is more about absence than anything else. A lot of the groups that you document in Peace, Propaganda, and the Promised Land -- pro-Israel, Zionist organizations -- they obviously do not view themselves as anti-Palestinian or racist organizations. They see themselves as guardians against a long tradition of anti-Semitic racism against Jews. That seems to be in the forefront of their work, and you seem to be putting it on the side. How would you respond to that?*

I think there are two issues about anti-Semitism that are crucial. One is the existence of anti-Semitism in the world, the existence of anti-Jewish sentiments and the impact they have on the actions that people take. The Holocaust is the prime example of what happens when anti-Semitism is taken to its logical conclusion. Anti-Semitism exists in the world, and has existed for a long time—and actually in the Christian world much more than in the Arab world. In fact, in the Arab world anti-Semitism was a very, very minor phenomenon until the start of the Zionist movement in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Anti-Semitism in the Arab world, in fact, doesn't exist until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It exists, in a huge way, of course, among Christian nations. So that is one crucial fact: the existence of anti-Semitism.

The second question, for me, at least from the perspective of what we are looking at here, is how the *accusation* of anti-Semitism can actually work to silence people. And I think you have to separate out those two things — that is you have to look at how anti-Semitism is used discursively. And I think you have to look at how anti-Semitism is used discursively to make sure that in fact anti-Semitism in the real world does not increase. I think anti-Semitism, as an accusation, especially around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has been a great silencing mechanism. That is, any criticism of the policies of the government of Israel is automatically labeled as being anti-Jewish and therefore anti-Semitic. It has often kept people quiet because no one wants to be accused of anti-Semitism. No one wants to be accused of being a racist. And whenever you deal with this issue in a critical way, frequently this is the first accusation that is made, and it is a very, very powerful silencing mechanism.

In fact, I can tell you that for over ten years it kept me silent about the conflict in the Middle East. I did not start dealing with this issue explicitly until about 1996, and yet for years prior I had been teaching courses at the University of Massachusetts on issues of ideology and identity. There's no question, as a simple matter of intellectual honesty, that I should have been looking at how the media was representing the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. The fact that I didn't amount to personal cowardice, in my view. When you are dealing with questions of propaganda, how can you avoid so primary an example of propaganda with regard to American foreign policy? You can't. It's simply there, kicking you in the teeth, and you actually have to make an effort to avoid it. And in fact I think I did. And the fact is that I knew that if I dealt with the issue, if I raised the issue of propaganda in my classes and was in any way critical of the policies of the Israeli government, there were going to be rumors of anti-Semitism and rumors of racism. Here I was a tenured, full Professor at a liberal university, and yet I was worried about what was going to happen, what some people were going to *say* if I brought this issue into the classroom. For ten years, these fears silenced me and I didn't touch the issue. I talk about it as cowardice because cowardice means not doing what you have a responsibility to do because of the possible consequences. I'm not talking about cowardice as failing to act in the face of grave dangers, like the threat of violence or death. I'm talking about cowardice as failing to speak – in a democratic society, no less – for fear that people are going to say nasty things about you. And that was enough to keep me silent. Imagine how that works for other people who don't have the protection of tenure that I have.

All of this was actually brought home to me in the most powerful way at a talk by Edward Said I attended in 1996 at Hampshire College here in western Massachusetts. It was an event celebrating the work of the great Third World activist and intellectual Eqbal Ahmed. Noam Chomsky was there. Howard Zinn was there. Dan Ellsberg was there. Anyone who was anyone connected to the Left was there celebrating his work. And the last person who spoke was Edward Said. When he got up to speak he actually had tears running down his face, tears of happiness. He said, "The reason I am here is that when the rest of the Left forgot about the Palestinians, Eqbal did not, and for that he paid a great price in terms of his intellectual career and his own academic career." I remember thinking when he said that—in a moment of shame, "Why haven't I dealt with this?" And I made my mind up at that moment that I was going to. I was no longer going to hide from this issue in the way that I think most intellectuals have hidden from it, out of fear of the repercussions.

This is in fact exactly how propaganda works. It can actually stop people from raising questions that make things uncomfortable. When I talk about absences, that's what I mean by absences. You can control people in that way. So one of the first things that I started to do at that point was to think about making a film on how the media has covered these issues. We are media critics at MEF, and this film was really about the media coverage of that conflict and how it shaped what people knew about the issue.

At the same time, I started doing surveys in my classes to find out what my students knew about the conflict, and they yielded some very interesting answers. One of the questions I asked was about the occupation of Palestine. I asked what country has been continually condemned in the United Nations for illegally occupying someone else's land in the Middle East. And I provided four possible answers: Kuwait, Lebanon, Israel, and, because I couldn't say Palestine, Palestinians. Those were the four possible choices. That is an objective, factual question. The answer, of course, is Israel, which since 1967 has been involved in the illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and has been

condemned continually in UN resolutions around those issues. These are students at a good, liberal university, but a lot of times they would say, “Well, actually I don’t know.” And I’d tell them they had to at least guess, because I felt that guessing, rather than simply being random, might actually reveal something interesting about what was going on in their heads. And over the years, between 58%-65% of my students have answered that they think Palestinians are illegally occupying someone else’s land in the Middle East.

*What does that tell you?*

What that told me was that the propaganda system was working really, really effectively. It wasn’t just the propaganda system working through the news. It was also the propaganda system as extended in TV programs and movies and video games, where Arabs are always presented in this very narrow way as terrorists and as murderers. It was clear that when my students thought about the Middle East, they thought, “Okay, I think I know where it is,” and when they then need to make a decision between good guys and bad guys, in their minds they have this idea that Palestinians are, by nature, terrorists and therefore must be doing something bad. If someone is occupying something illegally, then it has to be those people who, in my imagination, are connected to those kinds of negative, barbaric things.

*It would seem that some of this sort of thing extends to the political environment after 9-11 – where to offer any kind of explanation of the root causes of terrorism got framed as either a rationalization of horrible crimes, or downright treasonous.*

Absolutely. But I think you have to distinguish 9-11 the event, and then the way that 9-11 has been used – the discursive construction of 9-11. And again, there is no doubt that it has been constructed in such a way that it is designed to shut-off debate, to shut-off any kind of thinking. The moment you start to talk about why 9/11 might have happened or how it has been used politically, the moment you start to talk about any of that you are shut down. You’re told that you don’t care about the troops, or you don’t care about the victims that died that day, or that you’re on the side of Osama bin Laden and the terrorists who carried this out. I think this has worked very effectively not only to shut down debate, but also to push all discussion about 9/11 in a very particular direction that requires unquestioning – and therefore fundamentally anti-democratic – support for American foreign policy.

What’s really interesting is how soldiers, the people who are actually in Iraq, think about these things and how they interpret why they’re there. People who come back after visiting occupied Iraq say that one of the things you notice when you talk to soldiers is that they say they are there to avenge 9-11. In fact we know that when they staged the demolition of the statue of Saddam Hussein, the American flag that they initially draped on it actually came from Ground Zero. In a lot of soldiers’ minds, there is a very direct connection between the towers coming down and what is happening in Iraq right now. And in one sense, there *has* to be. If you’re a soldier on the ground, why are you there? Why are you engaged in an occupation of a foreign country? Why are you treating

ordinary civilians in this horrible way? Once the idea of weapons of mass destruction is gone, you are not there because Saddam Hussein is really dangerous. Once the idea that this is somehow connected to terrorism is gone, why are you there? You are simply there as a mercenary. So for the soldiers in particular, what do you push? You cannot push the weapons of mass destruction rationale, because it's objectively false. But what they have been able to put forward is this other idea that in fact Saddam Hussein is connected to Al Qaeda, and that what they are engaged in is a response to 9-11. On that basis, you can do all kinds of horrible things.

Again, there's a kernel of nobility in this. You are no longer just a mercenary acting on behalf of wealthy interests driven by sheer power politics or hunger for other people's resources. You are not there for the oil. You're there because you are protecting America by making sure that another 9-11 doesn't happen. When I talk about discursive structures, that's exactly what I'm getting at: the rationalizations that people have in their minds that allow them to do what they need to do. Again, I don't think we can generalize about what goes on in the hearts and minds of American troops—they are not all bad, and they are not all good. But a lot of them are, by definition, very ordinary people who have been driven to the military because of economic reasons. And you have got to somehow get that population to go along with the imperial adventure. And the way you do it is not by selling empire. You don't do it by selling empire. You do it by saying that this about terrorism. This is about protecting the people back home. You hear it from soldiers all the time. If you look at some of the letters they've written, they're heartbreaking. They say again and again that they're fighting terror there, so we don't have to fight it in New Jersey. That's the kind of image they have in their mind. That they are on the front lines, and if they don't do what they're doing then these heathen, Islamic hoards are going to be at your door in New Jersey. Again, it is an incredibly effective propaganda tool.

*All of this—advertising, public relations, political advertising—seems to be drawing from this reservoir of values, morals, nobility, the stuff of deep human longings. A lot of commentators have talked about just this in the context of Bush's 2004 re-election victory, the whole "moral values" dynamic. How do you read this?*

I don't think the last election was won or lost on values. I think the last election was decided on the basis of fear. And again, this comes back to how 9-11 was used. Those of us who live in states that actually didn't matter in the election, who don't live in swing states, lived in a very different world from those in places like Ohio and Pennsylvania. They were inundated with messages and bombarded with campaign rhetoric from the start of the campaign to the end of the campaign. And what the Republicans pushed time and time again was a message of fear. They pushed the idea that electing John Kerry was going to make you less safe, was going to invite more 9-11s. But let's remember that the vote was 51-49%. This was not a landslide victory. Even within some of those states that absorbed the brunt of this barrage of fear, Bush won a very, very narrow victory. So I think we have to be careful about separating America into blue and red states and suggesting that there are differences between regions of people based on something like inherent values. On the other hand, there is unquestionably a difference in the ways people were appealed to, and I think fear was decisive in this regard.

*How much do you think media reform can change the political environment we've been discussing?*

Media reform could make real political analysis and real information more accessible. Right now, the vast majority of money that campaigns collect goes straight to the media to buy advertising time. So the media don't actually have an incentive to engage in real critical analysis. And the result is that we end up getting only what comes from the political parties themselves. If you had true reform of the system, if you made advertising less important, if we insisted that media have a responsibility in a democracy to provide information and programming that is useful to citizens, there's no question that would change things. You'd get a different kind of discourse emerging out of that.

*Short of that, is there a way to accomplish some of these things within the existing system?*

I think the way into it is by talking to people. I mean, people aren't just all about values. People are also interested, I think, in material issues. My colleague Justin Lewis wrote a book on this. In fact, when you look at the American population, they are very progressive around a whole host of issues: around taxation, for example; around the environment; around health care. But what's happened is that the political parties have simply not dealt with those issues. That, I think, is the great trick that corporate America has played. They bought out the Democratic Party by providing money both to the Democrats and to the Republicans. For Democrats, corporate money outranks labor money about 7 to 1, so that corporate money is very important to both Republicans and Democrats. And what that means is that Democrats will simply not raise the fundamental and structural economic issues, the very issues that have the potential to rally the majority of the American people to their side.

*They do raise economic issues, but in a limited way?*

Yes, it's within a very limited frame, within the strict contours of corporate values. The Democrats simply don't tap into popular progressive values. So the only real separation between Republicans and Democrats emerges on social and cultural issues, abortion and religion and homosexuality – rather than health care, taxes, jobs, student loans, the things that really affect people's lives. I think the only way to get it back to progressive issues is either to reform the Democratic Party, so that it once again becomes the party of economic populism, or through a third party that explicitly raises and addresses these kinds of issues. Short of these two things, there is no way you are going to change the structure, because otherwise you are simply in the domain of values. What corporations have done, in one warped sense, is brilliant. How do you take the major issues off the agenda? You fund both political parties. You fund both political parties and those issues are then taken off the agenda and politics then becomes about what? Politics then becomes about social and cultural issues.

*Not only issues like guns or abortions, but issues of identity, like you said.*

Absolutely. It becomes about these broader ways in which we think about the world, and that's why masculinity was so important in the last election. There is also the incompetence of Democrats. Kerry's campaign was literally incompetent. And it was incompetent because it didn't answer the attacks on his ability to lead, on his manhood, as it were. The Swift Boat ads had an effect because the Kerry campaign didn't respond aggressively, which meant that the Republicans could then dominate those issues as well. But the key here is that if this is what politics is all about, then Democrats, and certainly progressives, will never win. Let's say that the Democrats won on that basis, by playing this game better. And let's say that Kerry had carried Ohio. Would it make a difference in terms of fundamental economic policy? No. It would make a difference in terms of protecting a woman's right to abortion and some other important cultural issues around gay rights. But would it have made any difference to the major things that actually structure people's lives around jobs and around trade and taxation and those things? Absolutely not.

I think what you have to look at is how to move economic issues back into the agenda. I mean, it really is very strange. In America, economic issues, in any meaningful sense, have been all but taken off the political table. In the rest of the world, meanwhile, economic issues are what politics is always about. And that gets back to the responsibility of progressive intellectuals, and progressive organizations like MEF. The role of progressive intellectuals is to try to understand that you cannot think about the future without understanding where you are right now. You have to understand the present in all its complexity, in all its many dimensions, and once you've done that, you have got to be able to take that knowledge out into the world – so that knowledge actually starts to matter, actually starts to have an impact on the everyday, concrete lives of people.

And that's all we're trying to do at MEF. We're trying to take knowledge and get it into an accessible form so that it's available to more than just elites, specialists and experts. So while at the heart of this, the starting point is always about education, we can think about education in a more broad and democratic way. We can think beyond the classroom about the demand for a public pedagogy as well, and that's the greatest challenge of all.

*Okay. But given the size of mass media, its expansion, its concentration, the new forms of technology that are making it more and more personal and accessible to people, what kind of hope do you have that the kind of work MEF is doing can stand up to the incredible resources and concentration of power on the other side working against it?*

It is tough to look at the situation and be optimistic in any kind of way, because you don't have access to the main means of communication that exist in society today. And there's no question that it's hard to know how you can actually be influential when you don't have that. The only thing you can do is to keep working in the cracks of the mainstream institutions that are in control, because people actually do want to talk about these things. People are desperate for this kind of information and you have to go where they actually are. You have to go where they're talking and gathering to address these kinds of issues:

unions, churches, and the places where people actually live. But at the same time, I don't want to downplay the classroom. Given how widespread secondary education is in the United States—about 50% of the population actually goes to schools—I never want to diminish what can happen in the classroom; it's a great form of public outreach in and by itself. That is what gives me hope.

Fundamental change isn't going to happen in the short term. But if you can raise these issues, especially with young people, and if they take critical consciousness on as part of how they think about the world, then there's hope. Gramsci said it best: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." If you don't have both of these things together, if you don't have the intellectual analysis along with the reason why you need to do intellectual analysis in the first place and faith that change can always happen – if those two things are divorced from each other, then people will actually devolve into paralysis. I worry about that sometimes. I worry that people sometimes look at MEF videos and say, "I never realized the situation was so bad." But I also know we're doing everything we can to inspire people to believe that the world can be changed.