

Cultural Criticism and Politics: An Interview with Professor Stefan Collini

Xie Longxin

Abstract: Stefan Collini is Professor of Intellectual History and English Literature at Cambridge University, and Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Historical Society. His research is mainly in the relationship between literature and intellectual history from the early 20th century to the present, and his current research focuses on the cultural role of, and the historical assumptions expressed in, literary criticism in Britain from 1920 to 1970. His books include *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (2006), *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* (2008), *That's Offensive! Criticism, Identity, Respect* (2011) and *What Are Universities For?* (2012). Dr. Xie Longxin, on behalf of *Foreign Literature Studies*, interviewed Prof. Collini in 2014 when he visited the Faculty of English of Cambridge University. In the interview, Prof. Collini expresses his views on the relationship between cultural criticism and politics, and literature and reality. He emphasizes that cultural criticism has a political dimension, but the effectiveness of criticism is limited; criticism cannot aspire to “replace” politics. He believes that cultural criticism should be about more than politics and about greater ideals of human flourishing. He also points out that literature is a kind of reflection on reality, and that cultural criticism always involves a form of ethical criticism.

Key words: Stefan Collini; cultural criticism; politics; literature; ethical criticism

Author: Xie Longxin is associate professor at College of Chinese Language and Literature, Hubei Normal University (Huangshi 435002, China), and a visiting research fellow at Faculty of English, Cambridge University. His research interests are literary criticism, narratology and semiotics. Email: xielongxin@mail.ccnu.edu.cn.

标题: 文化批评与政治：斯特凡·柯里尼教授访谈

内容摘要: 斯特凡·柯里尼是剑桥大学英语系思想史和英语文学教授，英国学术院院士，皇家历史学会会员。他的主要研究领域为 20 世纪早期到当代的文学与思想史的关系，当前主要研究 20 世纪二十年代到七十年代英国文学批评中的文化和历史任务。近年来的主要著作有：《缺失的精神：英国知识分子》（2006）、《共同阅读：批评家、历史学家和公众》（2008）、《冒犯！批评、同一性和敬重》（2011）、《大学何为？》（2012）等。2014 年，受《外国文学研究》委托，谢龙新博士利用访学剑桥大学英语系之机对柯里尼教授进行了访谈。访谈围绕文化批评和政治的关系、文学和现实的关系展开。柯里尼教授强调文化批评具有政治维度，但是批评的效果是有限的，批评不能奢望去“取代”政治。文化批评应该超越政治维度，从而在更高的层面思考关于人类兴旺发达的理想。他认为文学

是对现实的一种反思方式；文化批评一直包含一种伦理批评的形式。

关键词：斯特凡·柯里尼；文化批评；政治；文学；伦理批评

作者简介：谢龙新，文学博士，湖北师范学院文学院副教授，英国剑桥大学英语系访问研究人员，主要研究文学批评，叙事学和符号学。本文系作者主持的国家社科基金项目“文学叙事与言语行为研究”【项目批号：11CZW003】和参与的国家社科基金项目“叙事形式政治潜素与意及其生成模式研究”【项目批号：10BZW004】的阶段性成果，同时受到国家留学基金和湖北师范学院重点学科建设经费资助。本次访谈得到湖北理工学院师范学院严小香讲师的帮助，特此致谢。

Xie Longxin (Xie for short hereafter): Dear Professor Stefan Collini, first of all, I would like to thank you for giving me this invaluable opportunity to interview you. It is very kind of you and I hope it is not too much of an inconvenience. Also, on behalf of *Foreign Literature Studies (FLS)* and the chief editor, Prof. Nie Zhenzhao, I would like to thank you for what you as a member of the editorial board have done for *FLS*.

Cultural criticism, as you highlighted at a lecture at Yale University in 2012, “concentrate(s) on reading particular cultural or symbolic forms of expression as symptoms of the state of health of that society,” thus it is “the diagnosis of social and political life.” Factually, cultural criticism has intricate links to politics and ideology from the outset. Would you please clarify the historical context of the close affinity between cultural criticism and politics? Is it politics that chose the cultural criticism, or otherwise?

Stefan Collini (Collini for short hereafter): I do not believe I have any original or distinctive views about “cultural criticism.” It seems to me to be a convenient and traditional label for the practice of attempting to assess the ethical and cultural “health” of a society, especially by “reading” or interpreting its cultural expressions. This will have a political dimension, of course, but it seems to me driven by something broader than politics in the narrow sense and to be about larger ideals of human flourishing.

Xie: Cultural Criticism occupies an important position in your academic field, which is also attracting more and more attention and research in academia. However, it seems that “Cultural Criticism” is becoming more and more confusing and puzzling nowadays, just as you said at the lecture, “the term *cultural criticism* is now a semantic minefield.” Would you please “hazardously” give a definition to it? Or, what factors lead to the difficulty of definition?

Collini: I can only repeat here what I said in answer to the previous question. I don’t have a personal definition of ‘cultural criticism’. I suppose the best extended illustration I can give of what it means to me is by referring to the three pieces I published in *New Left Review* in the exchange with Francis Mulhern in the early 2000s. But the term is used in so many different senses now that it would be pointless to try to stipulate one “true” sense.^①

Xie: It is popular that cultural criticism is in a way similar to cultural studies. The name “cultural studies” I refer to derives from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Then, what would you like to comment on the relationship

between cultural criticism and cultural studies?

Collini: Again, I don't think I have anything distinctive to say about this, and my own work has been pretty distant from cultural studies. That is now a world-wide set of approaches that perhaps have little in common with the work that Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall started in Birmingham in the mid 1960s. I have a lot of respect for their early work, but Cultural Studies has moved a long way away from those beginnings. I published an essay in *English Pasts* that attempted to discuss some of the more ambitious formulations of the goals of cultural studies as they were understood in the mid 1990s, but I don't think I would want return to the subject now.

Xie: There is both Cultural criticism, with a capital C to emphasize "high culture", and cultural criticism, with the lowercase *culture* referring to popular culture "to break down the boundary between high and low, and to dismantle the hierarchy that the distinction implies". In my opinion, this distinction itself includes the seeds of politics. What are your opinions about that? What do you think the object of "Cultural Criticism" is?

Collini: I'm afraid this seems to me a variant of the earlier question. I don't in general find the distinction between "high" and "low" culture very helpful. It suggests a more hierarchical cultural world than I think we have lived in for the past couple of generations. But once again this goes back to the "semantic minefield" constituted by contemporary uses of "culture." It is almost impossible to say something brief about this now: one just has to be aware of the variety of uses of the term and to pick one's way very carefully.

Xie: So, in a certain meaning, many other criticisms can be also looked upon as cultural criticism in the way of political or ideological criticism, such as feminism criticism, post-colonialism criticism, and new historicism criticism and so on. Contrasting with those above, what are the unique characteristics of cultural criticism itself?

Collini: The terms you list indicate some broad methodological approaches to the study of literature and other material. "Cultural criticism" isn't mostly used as a methodological category in that way, I think. It could draw on any of those approaches, and no doubt it often does.

Xie: I agree with you in that writing, painting, composing, and so on are activities that may help prompt the kind of reflections on those unsatisfactory aspects of reality, and that "disciplined reflection can furnish a place to stand in attempting to engage critically with the narrow pragmatism of any particular political programme" ("Culture Talk" 51). If my understanding is correct, this reflection should be firstly on the condition that literature, for example, includes explicitly or implicitly the social contents in them. So, what is your opinion on the relation between literature and reality? This is an old question, but I don't think it is outdated, especially when critics deal with modern and post-modern literary works.

Collini: The first thing I want to say is that we should try not to reduce the variety of forms of relationship between what we call "literature" and what we call "reality." There are so many forms of literature, after all, which are not in any straightforward or descriptive way attempting to "say something" about reality. The aims of such writing may sometimes be to surprise, they can sometimes be to shock, they can sometimes be to move, and sometimes they may just be experiments with form or sound. In relation to the question you asked, what I mostly want to say

is that engagement with a variety of forms helps to provide a greater range of critical perspectives for addressing any issue, including political issues. I don't think such perspectives provide any simple answers; I don't think they are the only resources we can turn to; and I don't think they trump all other considerations. But they do provide various ways to sharpen or refine or re-frame the kinds of question we call "political".

Xie: Because reflection, in my view, is just a spiritual and notional activity, it needs a medium to transform this reflection into reality. If literature aspires to have influence on reality, what are the mediums it should resort to? Whether is politics one of them?

Collini: Human action is inflected and informed by ideas and preconceptions of various kinds, and since literature inevitably engages with and helps to shape people's beliefs, people's assumptions, so it starts to transform the vocabulary and perspectives we all bring to political activity. In that sense, we are all the mediums.

Xie: What do you think are the responsibilities of cultural critics or the role of cultural criticism?

Collini: I am cautious about specifying particular responsibilities for cultural critics or anyone else. Their main responsibility is to be as intelligent, rigorous, and subtle as they can – which is to say, it's the same responsibility as that shared by any scholar. Obviously, if one is to engage in this kind of criticism, then one needs also to be alert to developments in contemporary society to a greater extent than scholars working in more remote fields need to do, but even that is only a matter of degree since all scholars need to understand enough about the contemporary audiences for whom they are writing.

Xie: Nowadays, "the state of health" of society is significantly different from both the mid-nineteenth century of Matthew Arnold and the mid-twentieth of F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams. What do you think the changes are, and how should the cultural criticism tactically adjust itself to "diagnose" or interfere with the politics?

Collini: The question of the ways the world has changed since any of these figures was writing is much too large to address in a single answer. One change I would mention is that whereas for Arnold, and even to some extent for Leavis, it was obvious that the educated elite were the relevant audience to be writing for. That is no longer the case. Contemporary societies are far more plural and democratized than they were in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (which I believe is a healthy development), and so this means that there may be a greater range of audiences to be addressed — and now a greater range of media to be used in addressing them.

Xie: For the University of Cambridge, because several famous cultural critics, such as F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams, once studied and researched here, can I say cultural criticism is an important "tradition"? Does this "Cambridge tradition" have impact on your values and notions of criticism? Would you please make a comment on the "tradition" and the relationship with you?

Collini: I have to be honest and say that I don't really have any notion of such a "tradition". Of course, there are some clear links between Leavis and Williams, but I'm not sure that makes them a "Cambridge tradition." I anyway would not want to emulate or repeat their kind of work. Leavis sometimes worked with a too-sharp binary distinction between the forces of darkness

and the forces of light and was often too dismissive of the modern world. Williams could fall sometimes back on an obstructively abstract set of categories and an invocation of his own working-class background. I don't think of myself as writing in the same style as either of them. Perhaps the larger continuity is that my years teaching in the English Faculty here have given me a heightened sense of the value of close attention to language even in the rough world of public debate, but I wouldn't claim any monopoly of that for Cambridge.

Xie: In recent ten years, you have published numerous new researches, in which cultural criticism is still the important research object, but the focuses have some changed. It is more pertinent and practical to reality. Am I right? Would you please make a summary on your academic development of recent 10 years and an expectation of the future?

Collini: Over the last two or three decades, my work has moved from the nineteenth to the twentieth (and now twenty-first) centuries, and I have moved away from the history of political and social thought to public debate more generally and to the role of literary criticism in particular. I am not sure if that is what you mean by "more pertinent and practical to reality". It is true that in recent years I have done more writing that is critical of current policy, especially higher education policy, but actually I wrote my first piece in this vein in 1986 (a version of it is reprinted in *English Pasts*). To some extent, my greater engagement with contemporary public debate comes from being more senior and having more confidence, perhaps, but it also comes from changes in the world. From the 1980s onwards we have seen a great transformation of the character of our society as a result of the triumph of market fundamentalism, and so it has been hard not to be drawn into trying to combat some of the more pernicious effects of this generally pernicious dogma.

Xie: So, your recent work, *What Are Universities For* (2012), has produced comprehensive social effects, in which you unapologetically defended the cultural and intellectual role of universities (141-49). May I read it as cultural criticism's real effect on politics in practice?

Collini: In *What Are Universities For*, I attempted to re-state a familiar view of the nature and function of universities, and then to show how recent policies in Britain (but also elsewhere in the world) have rested on misguided ideas of the university as a business engaged in competition in a market-place. The relation of universities to society's needs is necessarily an indirect and long-term one, and we should be cautious about allowing their purposes to be reduced to that of training for employment and generating economic growth.

Xie: *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* has also been very influential after its publishing in 2006 and triggered many discussions. Would you please introduce its main thoughts and its controversial points?

Collini: In *Absent Minds*, I discuss "the question of intellectuals" in Britain (51) — that is to say, the way the issue has been conceived and debated. I challenge the widely-held view that intellectuals have not existed in Britain, or not been important, or have recently disappeared, and I try to show that these attempts to locate "real" intellectuals elsewhere are part of a wider pattern to be found in other countries as well.

Xie: Finally, I want to ask two questions about *FLS*, and I hope it is not beside the point.

Have you ever learned of “ethical literary criticism,” a critical theory or approach proposed in 2004 by Prof. Nie Zhenzhao, Chief Editor of *FLS* who interviewed you ten years ago? This critical theory has been gradually accepted by literary scholars in China, Korea, Malaysia and other countries, and has brought about numerous articles and books published in China and other countries. If you know something about it, would you mind making some comments? Since ethics is both political and cultural, could you give some suggestions about it from the perspective of cultural criticism?

Collini: I have been delighted to see the success of *FLS*, and I am pleased to hear that the “ethical literary criticism” of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao has been influential in China and some neighbouring countries, but I am afraid I do not know anything in detail about this movement. I can only say that since literary criticism is, ultimately, about the character of human experience, and since any approach labeled “ethical” must, in some way, be involved in reflecting on what is involved in human flourishing, then it seems to me that some engagement with the ethical, in the broadest sense, is inescapable for good literary criticism. But this is a rather obvious, and rather general, sentiment, and is, I am sure, a thought with which all readers of *FLS* will already be familiar.

Xie: And, I notice that there is no lack of cultural critics you interested in, such as F. R. Leavis and Matthew Arnold, whose criticism might have been called ethical or moral criticism. So, are there some ways in which cultural criticism and moral criticism can be combined? Would you please introduce some opinions of them about that? Thank you.

Collini: I am not sure that I would make such a firm distinction between cultural criticism and ethical criticism. That is to say, the kind of engagement we call cultural criticism involves some reflections of the quality of life, involves some reflections on human purposes, some reflections on the world around us. It implies something about the shape of a fully human life, about the values people live by. This kind of engagement recurs in the works of those people you mention, such as in the writings of Leavis. It’s a kind of reflection which doesn’t tend to be systematic philosophy; it is much more occasional and personal. But this is all the time animated by a quite serious concern with ways in which some of the forms of contemporary life forego what is it is to be fully human. In this way, I think cultural criticism always involves a form of ethical criticism. And that is the note on which I should like to end. I am flattered to be interviewed here, and grateful to you for your interest in my work, but as you will see from my answers I am not sure that I have anything very distinctive or new to say about literary or cultural criticism – at least not anything that cannot be said better by China’s own most distinguished scholars in these fields.

Note

① Prof. Collini’s exchange with Francis Mulhern includes three papers: “Culture Talk” (*NLR* 7, January–February 2001), “Defending Cultural Criticism” (*NLR* 18, Nov.–Dec. 2002) and “On Variousness; and On Persuasion” (*NLR* 27 May–June 2004). In these papers, especially in “Defending Cultural Criticism”, Collini defends as far as possible the possibility and the legitimacy of conventional cultural criticism. He believes that even though the

term “cultural criticism” is now used in many senses, the traditional sense, which is associated with works by authors such as Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, and Richard Hoggart is still usable and useful. In the exchange with Francis Mulhern, Collini restricts the concept of “culture” to what Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* called “the primary” meaning, namely, “artistic and intellectual activities” (“Defending Cultural Criticism” 91), while not denying that other senses for other purposes are legitimate. Moreover, he argues that “where the enterprise of ‘cultural criticism’ and its relation to ‘politics’ is in question, there is at least a certain utility to beginning with this narrower sense of ‘culture’” (75). In this sense, “‘cultural criticism’ signifies the movement from this complex of artistic and intellectual work towards society” (91). But the effectiveness of criticism is limited, because “such criticism does not usually grapple in any very sustained or detailed way with the perceived defects of that society” (91). So, criticism cannot aspire to “replace” politics, because, as criticism, it cannot do what politics requires. But, “to identify two realms as disjunctive is not to condemn them to an eternity of non-communication” (91). Therefore, writing, painting, composing, and so on, are legitimate human activities, and the category to which they belong is not best understood as a form of escape from, or compensation for, the unsatisfactory qualities of “reality.” But “they are activities that may help prompt the kind of reflections on those other aspects of reality that immersion in those aspects themselves does not so readily tend to foster” (91).

Works Cited

Collini, Stefan. *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.

---. “Culture Talk.” *New Left Review* January–February (2001): 43–53.

---. “Defending Cultural Criticism.” *New Left Review* November–December (2002): 73–97.

---. *What Are Universities For?* London: Penguin, 2012.

责任编辑：四 维