

Interview

“Cultural Studies, Political Culture, and a Politics of Hope”: An Interview with Lawrence Grossberg

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Abstract

We hosted Emeritus Professor Lawrence Grossberg with his talk on “Cultural Studies, Political Culture, and a Politics of Hope” on May 9, 2024, as part of “Individual Development Planning Course” event organized by the department of New Media and Communication at İstanbul Nişantaşı University. The questions in the interview were designed based on the contents of Grossberg’s soon-to-be-published book titled *We Would Build A New World If We Only Knew How (On the Way to Politics)* by Gülden Demir. Grossberg’s talk centers on a critique of the common metaphor of “building bridges” to link various groups or individuals. He argues that it is not merely about understanding and accepting differences, but about being willing to undergo transformation through the establishment of the relationships. He also emphasizes that cultural studies aim to understand the complexities of the world to inform potential strategies for change, rather than dictating specific actions, leaving the choice of strategies to others. He argues that affect is just as organized and constructed as meaning, highlighting the importance of truly understanding the perspectives and experiences of others, even those with conflicting views, as essential for meaningful dialogue and change. Finally, he stresses that cultural studies, characterized by its radical interdisciplinarity and contextual thinking, fosters better understanding and encourages democratic, inclusive intellectual discussions vital for societal progress.

Keywords: Cultural studies, polarization, affective landscapes, popular politics, political culture

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Interview



Söyleşi

“Kültürel Çalışmalar, Politik Kültür ve Bir Umut Politikası”: Lawrence Grossberg ile Söyleşi

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Öz

9 Mayıs 2024 tarihinde, İstanbul Nişantaşı Üniversitesi Yeni Medya ve İletişim (İngilizce) Bölümü tarafından düzenlenen KEP (Kişisel Eğitim Programı) etkinliği kapsamında, Emeritus Profesör Lawrence Grossberg’i ‘Kültürel Çalışmalar, Politik Kültür ve Bir Umut Politikası’ başlıklı konuşması için ağırladık. Söyleşide yöneltilen sorular, Grossberg’in yakın zamanda yayımlanacak olan *We Would Build A New World If We Only Knew How (On the Way to Politics)* isimli kitabının içeriğine dayanarak Gülden Demir tarafından hazırlandı. Grossberg’in konuşması, farklı gruplar veya bireyler arasında bağlantı kurmak için yaygın kullanılan “köprü kurmak” metaforunun bir eleştirisine odaklanmaktadır. Sadece farklılıkları anlamak ve kabul etmek değil, bu ilişkilerin kurulmasıyla birlikte dönüşüme uğramaya istekli olmak gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Aynı zamanda Grossberg, kültürel çalışmaların, belirli eylemleri dikte etmekten ziyade, potansiyel değişim stratejileri oluşturmak için dünyanın karmaşıklıklarını anlamaya çalıştığını ve strateji seçimini başkalarına bıraktığını vurguluyor. Grossberg, anlam kadar duygunun da organize ve inşa edilmiş olduğunu, anlamlı diyalog ve değişim için, karşıt görüşlere sahip olanlar da dahil olmak üzere, başkalarının bakış açılarını ve deneyimlerini gerçekten anlamının önemli olduğunu savunmaktadır. Söyleşide Grossberg son olarak, radikal disiplinlerarası olma ve bağlam odaklı düşünme ile karakterize edilen kültürel çalışmaların, daha iyi anlayışı teşvik ettiğini ve toplumun ilerlemesi için gerekli olan demokratik, kapsayıcı entelektüel tartışmaları desteklediğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kültürel çalışmalar, kutuplaşma, duygusal ortamlar, popüler siyaset, politik kültür

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Söyleşi



Professor, thank you very much for accepting our invitation as part of “Career Planning Course” event organized by the department of New Media and Communication. I would like to start with your emphasis on the importance of moving beyond polarization in your work and building alliances across different groups. How can we do this? What role can cultural studies play in helping us understand and connect with people from different backgrounds?¹

Lawrence Grossberg: I am going to try to be brief in my answers, and then if people want me to elaborate, I will, partly because I love talking. That is partly why I became an academic and a teacher, and I can talk forever. You can ask me a question and I’ll go on for hours, so I’ll be brief. Actually, that is two questions, or at least I want to break it up into two questions. One is about polarization, and one is about connecting. And for both of them, I want to suggest how cultural studies can help us. Polarization is a way of understanding relations as a binary opposition. There are two positions and they contradict one another. That is true whether you are talking about populations, conservatives versus whatever you call them in Türkiye. I don’t know what those camps are. We would call them Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, or whether you are talking about individuals sometimes, in which, at least in the United States, it has sometimes filtered down. But another example would be black and white in the United States. What cultural studies suggest is it is never that simple. You can’t divide the world into binaries. It is always

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1 The interview was reviewed by Lawrence Grossberg. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Lawrence Grossberg for accepting our invitation to speak at our Individual Development Planning course event and for granting us permission to publish the interview with him.

more complicated and complex. There are always multiplicities, as the term is commonly used. They are not just conservatives and liberals or black and white. There are many ways of being black. There are many ways of being white, and they divide amongst themselves. The great Italian Marxist Gramsci compared what he called a "war of maneuver" to a "war of positions". Politics is defined by two great homogeneous camps in opposition to each other. There are lots of different camps, and they have different relations to each other. Cultural studies tells us to try to begin to look at the divisions and relations within some population or amongst some people, not in terms of a simple opposition or a simple dichotomy, but in terms of opening it up to the variations, to the multiple differences that are being hidden by the fact that you come in and you think it is simple. I will give you one example in the United States. We tend to think of the United States as polarized between the right and the left. Recently, we have had struggles around abortion rights. And what we know is that the percentage of women who support the right to abortion must include women who support Donald Trump. That means that there is a division within the people who support Trump because some of them support abortion rights. The Trump camp is not some simple but a homogeneous group of people. There are divisions within it, and we can use those divisions to reorganize politics, but only if we understand that the country is not simply polarized the way we tend to assume. The second thing, the second question, then, is about how we build relationships. We tend to think of "building relations". The phrase that communication studies people tend to use is "building bridges". You have two people, like you and me. We are different. We come from different cultures. We have different histories, traditions, and beliefs. We are going to build the bridge but how do we do that? Well, that is a mistake according to cultural studies.

It is even a mistake if you think about the metaphor of "building bridges" because when you build the bridge between two pieces of land, you change the land. When you build a bridge between two islands, you actually change the landscape of the islands. Cultural studies teaches us, at least in the vocabulary I use for it, the concept of articulation which means that when you make a new relationship, each of the terms of the relationship changes. When you try to establish an alliance or establish a relationship, what you have to do is enter into the relationship knowing that you are going to change. You are going to have to change. You are not going to say, "Accept me as I am", and it is sufficient for you to understand me and for me to understand you. No, that is not going to work, because if the question is simply understanding

how we differ, well, we are going to end up differing. And truth be told, if I don't like you that isn't going to establish a relationship. We are both going to have to change in the process of building that relationship. That means we are going to have to be willing to commit to the relationship in a way that we are willing to risk changing ourselves to build that relationship. I think that is a very different sense than most people have of building a relation, of creating an alliance. Most people think building an alliance is, "I'm going to stay with what I am and you're going to stay what you are" and then we are just going to accept one another somehow. I think cultural studies says that this is never going to work, because, in the end, the alliance is going to break apart when it reaches some turning point, such as when there is a conflict over whether the struggle for immigrant rights is more important than the struggle for women's rights. No, that is not going to work. What we must do is to change the struggle for immigrant rights and the struggle for women's rights so that they are redefined in the process of building that alliance.. I think that is what articulation or composition or assemblage means, as there are lots of different terms that people use. It is about re-understanding the nature of constructing relationships. I think cultural studies helps us think about that. It doesn't quite tell us how to do it. If it did, I would be running for president.

Given your emphasis on building relationships, what strategies can be used to build relationships or alliances across differences?

Lawrence Grossberg: "Cultural studies is an intellectual project". It is not a political project. It is an intellectual project in the service of a politics of hope, a politics of trying to change the world. But it is an intellectual project that believes that if you want to change things, you have to understand them better. The reason we have such problems building alliances and finding strategies that enable us to fight more effectively against the growing power of authoritarian, illiberal, inhumane forms of governance, I would say, is that we don't understand what is going on very well. We are not thinking! Cultural studies is not a political campaign. I'm not a political consultant who can tell someone how to run an effective campaign. What I can do is say, look, this is what's happening in all of its complexity. You are playing the wrong game. You are operating with the wrong set of tools. Here are the rules of the game you should be operating with. Here are the places where I think there are weak spots, there are points of hope. There are openings that could be taken advantage of. The choice belongs to the people. It is not my place to tell people what to do. It is my place to tell them what might be possible. I'm an intellectual, not a priest and not a politician. I get in a lot of trouble for this and

I will admit it's a minority position. I have my moral code. I have beliefs about what is right and wrong, but I am not my student's priest to convince them that what I believe is right, they have to believe is right. I'm an intellectual, and I tell them, here's what's happening and if you believe this, you might want to do it. You might want to think about this. If you believe that there are other possibilities. I think Martin Heidegger once said something to the effect that the most unthinkable thing about this unthinkable world is how little we actually think. And I think he was right. We don't think much. We don't understand what is going on very well in the world. We tell stories that are too simple. We tell stories that are too repetitive. We tell the same old stories that we have been telling for 200 years. We think, although they have never worked in the past, that they are going to work in the present. Because we don't do the hard work of analyzing all the complexities of the world today, analyzing the context and how they have changed, that is required for us to begin to think about the strategies.

You can't understand the strategies until you understand the context in which you want to come up with the strategies. And I think that is what cultural studies does. It tries to understand the contexts, and it may point to the possibility of some strategies. But, it's my job to tell them what the possibilities are. Jean-Paul Sartre called it as a "field of possibilities".

You propose here in your work, moving beyond stories (you just mentioned stories that we have been hearing for many years). So, you propose moving beyond stories of fixed identities toward more nuanced understandings of belonging. Given your emphasis on the need for better ways to think about belonging, how can we create narratives that make everyone feel included, even if they have different experiences or identities in this multicultural world?

Lawrence Grossberg: I think that is the challenge we face today. We have stories. People live inside stories. We tell ourselves stories. Or, the media tell us stories. Our families tell us stories. Our teachers tell us stories. Our churches, synagogues, and mosques tell us stories. We live in those stories or at least we live in those stories where we can find a place for ourselves, where we can find an identity that we feel comfortable with, that makes sense of our lives and our experiences. That is how we come to define ourselves. Now, you can begin by realizing that actually people live inside many stories. No one lives inside one story. If they do, they are either very boring or very fanatical, and you probably can never reach them. People live inside many

stories, and they have different relationships to different stories. And those stories provide them with multiple identities. No one has a single identity like, I am only black or I am only Jewish. I mean, I'm Jewish, sometimes I'm an old man, and sometimes I'm a husband. But, you know, I am not playing out my old man identity here. At least I hope not. We have multiple identities, and those identities interact. Sometimes they contradict themselves. Sometimes they change. Sometimes they are fluid. I mean, I am Jewish and I have to tell, with what is going on in Gaza, my being Jewish is rather chaotic at the moment. And I'm not quite sure what being Jewish means and what story of being Jewish I'm living in at the moment. If you begin to take this sense that we live inside multiple stories, and those stories have different relations to one another and they're constantly changing, you can begin to have a sense that the notion that someone has an identity is an inadequate way of describing how people belong in the world, describing people's sense of who they are and the relations that define their sense of belonging with and against others, to particular places. I have stories that define my belonging to New York, Illinois, North Carolina, Israel, Russia, all sorts of places, all these stories make up who I am. That is a very different sense of identity. If you begin to understand that and try to tell stories that take that into account, that begin to try to enable people to move between those stories and to see the relations between them, then you can begin to hopefully let people see that their identity is a much more fragile, fluid, and temporary thing that is constantly changing. Sometimes they find themselves in stories that they actually are not very comfortable with when they think about them. I will give one example that I keep trying which sometimes works and sometimes doesn't. You may know that a part of the so-called right political right in America is a Christian right. I am always trying to find stories to tell that connect up to the stories of Christianity that a lot of the Christian right is telling and that these people are living in. I'm trying to tell stories of Christianity that both speak to them but also might move them because one of the commitments of cultural studies politically is that the story you tell always has to begin where people are, but it should never end where people are. One of the great mistakes, I think, that let me, for the sake of simplicity, say the left in the United States often makes is starting their stories by labeling other people as racists or fascists or totalitarian, with all these negative terms. Well, if you start by calling someone a racist, they are never going to listen to you.

You have to start where people are. You try to understand the stories they are living in such that they find racism to be a comfortable position. But you

don't stop there. You don't condone their racism. You then try to move them into other stories that are going to be less racist, maybe even nonracist. You have to understand the context in which people find racist stories comforting, compelling, and something they can live in. You have to understand it before you can change it. You start where people are, and then you recognize that they live in other stories as well. And you can use those other stories, the contradictions, the compliments, in order to change them, in order to move them.

I would like to move on to another specific question regarding the power of emotions. How does your concept of "affective landscapes" help us understand populism and social movements in the digital age?

Lawrence Grossberg: It's a big question, so let me break it into pieces. My concern with what I call affect, which includes emotions, but it includes a lot more like moods and sentiment, started because I was interested in two things early on in my career. One was popular music, in the fifties, sixties and seventies. I came to realize very quickly that the tools of cultural analysis, which were mainly concerned with meaning, representation, ideology, things like that, were not very useful in understanding popular music. Popular music was all about things like feelings, emotions, and moods. When MTV was first invented, one of the inventors described it as a mood enhancer. It seemed very accurate to me because, what music does is it enhances or changes your mood. If you just broke up with your partner, what music to put on to either wallow in your sadness or to change your sadness into anger. You know what music to put on to change or enhance your mood. We didn't have the vocabulary to talk about these kinds of things. Music affects your emotions. It makes you joyful, it makes you angry, it makes you sad. And so, I started to study affect. The second thing I was interested in was the election of Ronald Reagan. I know it is before all your time, but this was the beginning of the rise of illiberalism and the kind of new conservatism that we have in the world today. And I argued, I came to realize that it wasn't about ideology. People supported Reagan not because they agreed with his politics, but because he made them feel good. His slogan was "Morning in America". And this was a time when most Americans were sort of, like today, cynical. They didn't feel very good about the future of the world or the future of the country. And here came Reagan, and everything was hunky dory. Everything was going to be all right. This was a new morning. America was going to sail off into a new beginning. People liked that, they felt good about Reagan. And again,

I needed a vocabulary to begin to describe this. So, I developed a theory, if you will, a vocabulary to talk about affect. Over time, I came to a hypothesis, conclusion, or argument, not sure which. In most societies, affect and meaning are closely tied. That is, you have some meaning, like family. You have some set of meanings around family, and you have some emotions, some moods, some affects that are associated with family. You love your family, you worry about your family, right? These things are intimately connected. Your partner. It's a certain set of meanings, and you have a certain set of affects that are invested in it, that are tied to it. Your country. We call that patriotism. Your country has certain meanings. America used to mean freedom and democracy and equality, and you love those things that the United States supposedly meant, and therefore you loved America and you were patriotic and so on.

But something happened—is happening, has happened—to this bond between meaning and affect. It probably started with consumer capitalism. It took a leap forward in the 1950s and the explosion of popular media in the US. It took a bigger leap forward in the 1970s. It took a giant leap forward with digital and social media (although I must admit that I am a stranger to the latter). Those two aspects of our experience, the meanings we give to the world, what a good leftist would call ideology, and the affect with which we invest became increasingly separated. I had to find a way to describe this. I had previously talked about everyday life. We live in the world of everyday life, and everyday life is characterized by all sorts of relations, including relations of meaning and relations of affect and economic relations, etc. But now I wanted to argue the relations of meaning and the relations of affect were increasingly being torn apart so that the things that mattered to you, the things that you loved, the things that you hated, were increasingly not about meaning. And meaning became less and less important. And what was becoming increasingly important was how passionate your emotions, how strong your emotions were, how strongly they mattered to you. While it used to be that you were patriotic in America because America meant something. I think I have evidence for that. Now I think being patriotic about America doesn't mean anything. America doesn't mean anything. This is the difficulty of fighting against the right. You have to love America. But they won't say what it means. What are you supposed to love about America? They are destroying democracy. They don't believe in tolerance. They don't believe in equality. What is it that you're supposed to love if it has no meaning. You just have to love it. Absolutely! I think the same is true more and more about everything. You invest in things not because you invest in the meanings they

have, but because it's the emotion, the investment itself, that is important. And so, I had to find a way to describe what happens when you increasingly separate emotion, mood, mattering investment, what you care about from the world of meaning and ideology. I called it an "affective landscape".

Now I back up. The thing about affect is that when most people talk about it, they think it's unorganized. They think affects are just kind of wild things. You love things and you're apathetic. These things just happen randomly. And I wanted to argue that affect is as organized and as constructed as meaning is. You have to be made to care about something. You have to be made to be apathetic about something. You have to be made to be angry. You're not just naturally angry at immigrants. You have to be made to be angry. You have to be made to care about being patriotic, even though you don't know what it is that you're patriotic about. You have to be made to care about being black. You have to be made to care about whatever it is. Being Jewish now, you know, suddenly all these people I know who are Jewish, who for the past 50 years have never really thought about being Jewish, are being reconstructed to care about being Jewish. But they are very careful that being Jewish has no meaning, right? Because if it had meaning, they would have to stand against Israel. Because whatever Israel is doing to Gaza, it isn't being Jewish, I can assure you. Right, I will defend being Jewish, but I won't defend what Netanyahu is doing. But their being Jewish leads them to defend Israel, because Judaism, in this instance, they are being made to be Jewish without any meaning. It is being constructed. Affect is as much a construct as being a man is. I could define the structures of an affective landscape, and I have tried to do that, in my book on Trump, I do it in a new book that I've just finished.

For example, particular forms of narcissism seem to me to have been constructed and occupy a very serious dimension of the affective landscape. Narcissism has a long history, but insofar as it is now been freed of its relations to the worlds of ideology and meaning, it's being reconstructed. And I can describe that. I think the digital media, which I don't understand very well, is taking that to a whole other level. I think the narcissism, from what I can see, which is very limited, and what I can understand, which is even more limited, the digital media is the most narcissistic form of communication I have ever seen in my life. I mean, self-revelation becomes an obsession. No, I'm not saying it's bad. I'm saying it's a re-articulation of narcissism as pure affect. It is not about the meaning. No one cares that you just had diarrhea, or no one cares that you just baked an orange meringue. I mean, it's just the

obsessiveness of narcissism. I can trace out, and I try to do that, some of the constructions of affect and how they are being articulated to the political struggles of the contemporary world.

You are currently finishing up a book titled “We Would Build A New World If We Only Knew How (On the Way to Politics)”. I would like to ask a more specific question regarding your work. The post-war period you focus on has witnessed a significant transformation in the media landscape. I would like to focus on the impact of technology and your concept of the decoupling of meaning (ideology) and affect (emotions). Do you think the separation of meaning and affect continues with social media? How do you see this concept evolving in the digital age?

Lawrence Grossberg: As I said, I do not understand digital and social media. Beyond email and some limited texting and web surfing, I do not use it. I tend to believe the fact that you should only study things that you love or hate. I certainly don't love social media, and I don't understand it enough to hate it. And I've learned over the years that older generations should never hate the media of younger generations. My parents hated our media. I'm sure their parents hated their media. From the little I know, I would say if you wanted to design a medium for the purpose of driving a wedge between meaning and affect, you would end up with digital media. My sense is that it is almost impossible to have an intelligent, meaningful conversation on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or whatever. But they are all very powerful, affective media. Now, I realize there are things like podcasts and things where people do have intelligent statements, but the effect of that is that there is so much information out there with no ability to filter the stupidity from the intelligence, that the only thing you can do is go to the people that you already know are smart. So that doesn't help you, because they are telling you things you already know. And that's not a real conversation. That's like a sermon. So, I think digital media are the perfect media for the separation of affect and meaning. I don't think it was intentionally done, but I'm not sure if it's inherent in the nature of digitality or whether it's just given the context, and the way in which these media have been taken up. I mean, is it that the context was already strongly shaped by the separation of affect and meaning, and therefore, these media entered into that context where they were taken up by that separation and then further enhanced it? I don't know. I don't understand the infrastructure, and the technology, both as a material technology and as a coding technology, well enough to know what the constraints of the technology

are. But it seems to me to have fit very well into this context in which we are increasingly living into this separation. And this separation, because you raised it before and I didn't address it, fuels polarization and populism. Polarization is an absolutely affective phenomenon. We are polarized, the right and the left. Now, if you ask people what is the right, they just list empty and purely negative terms. They are not really ideologies. These are affective terms. Polarization and populism have become affective terms, and social movements are affective terms. Black Lives Matter is an affect of politics. It doesn't offer a serious analysis of policing. Black Lives Matter and defunding the police was not a serious political and ideological critique of policing. Black Lives Matter was an affective politics. And therefore, to some extent, it was both successful and doomed to failure. This kind of affective politics has become, I think, the dominant politics on both the left and the right in the United States. Because I'm a contextualist, I won't speak to anywhere else in the world. I spent 60 years trying to understand the United States. It would take me 60 years, presumably, to understand somewhere else.

Then I would like to go back to the topic of popular politics and populism, because you differentiate between popular politics and populism, emphasizing the importance of speaking in "the languages that people understand". What's the difference here? How can we avoid falling into the trap of populism? And instead, how can we build a more hopeful and inclusive political movement?

Lawrence Grossberg: Yes, good question. Populism is a version of polarization. It is a version that divides the world into two camps, them and us. It assumes a kind of homogeneity of each of the camps. The difference between polarization and populism, or the specificity of populism, is that it defines the difference in terms of a relation between elitism and authenticity. The fight in populism in the United States is between the real Americans, and the elitists who have taken control. The elitist can be the government. They can be the meritocracy. In some versions, they can be the white majority or minority, but they're defined as an elite versus the real authentic people. Polarization doesn't necessarily take that form. A racial polarization doesn't claim elitism, necessarily. Class polarization doesn't necessarily claim populist division. Popular politics is very different. First, and what I was describing before as cultural studies, I think, advocates for popular politics first. It advocates against the kind of binary division of the field, to see multiple divisions amongst the population and multiple possibilities of alliances that can move and change. But as you pointed out, it demands that you start by addressing people where they are and understanding where they are. To do that, you have to understand their everyday life. You have to understand their common sense and what they

take for granted, what they feel. One of the founding figures of queer theory in the US, Eve Sedgwick, once said, the left has to stop telling people what they should feel and start understanding what they do feel. To do that, you have to understand the languages they speak, and the logic they use to make the decisions that they're making. How do they decide that they're willing to sacrifice this in order to gain that? This is a question that has befuddled many people. How do Christians in America decide that they are willing to vote for Trump, who by all accounts is the devil? You know, he is the sinner. He is the absolute sinner. Whatever ten commandments you want to take, Trump has broken it. How do Christians claim to be Christians and decide to support Trump? What logic are they using to make that calculation? Don't just assume they're hypocrites. Don't just assume they're ignorant. Don't just assume they're being duped by the media. Don't just assume they're greedy. Don't make assumptions. Understand them. You don't have to pat them on the back. You don't have to tell them they're right. You don't have to tell them it makes sense. You have to understand them if you want to change them.

You have to understand their languages in order to change them. Popular politics is all about change, right? It's about changing people. But as I said, you know, when we first began, if you're going to change people, you're also going to have to change! Like building a bridge! Instead of building a bridge, you're changing. They're changing and you're changing. If you enter into a conversation, if you enter into a relationship with people who are so different from you, that is going to take real work for you to begin to understand them and real work for them to understand you. You're going to change in the process and they're going to change as well. I will give you an example, if I may. I live out in rural North Carolina. Rural North Carolina is Trump land. People out here vote for Donald Trump, except for a few of us scattered around. One of my neighbors two houses down, who unfortunately has recently passed, was a huge Donald Trump supporter, used to have these giant twelve-foot signs in his yard for Donald Trump, well before the 2020 election. My wife and I would take walks up and down the road, and as we walked, we would pick up garbage on the roadside. And because we picked up garbage once in a while when we walked past their house, he would look at us and he would nod at us. This was a step forward because they had never even acknowledged our existence before. We were the crazy commies down the road, right? Okay. They nodded. One day we were walking and we noticed they were putting up cameras in front of their house. We stopped and we said: "Wow, why are you putting up cameras?" And he said: "Because

people are tearing down our Trump yard signs." I don't know if they do this in Türkiye, but for elections, people put signs in front of their houses for the candidates they support. He said: "People were stealing our yard signs and we wanted to catch them. We're putting up cameras. It is these commies and Jews and blacks who are tearing, stealing our signs." And my wife said to him: "You know, that's interesting because people have been stealing our signs for Biden." And he looked at us and said, "really?" And suddenly we had a topic of conversation and we started to talk about how the world was going crazy and this country was supposed to be about freedom of expression and no one seemed to care about it anymore. And at the end of an hour's conversation, he said to us, "you know, if you ever need protection, come to our house." And what he was saying is, if any right-wing nuts ever attack you, come to our house and we'll protect you because we are right way nuts and they won't attack our house. That was an extraordinary moment. We established at least the beginning of the relationship. Both of us had changed somewhat. That's what I mean. We understood how they were thinking a bit more. They understood how we were thinking a bit more. And we both changed in that process a bit. That's a popular politics; people misthink that if you try to understand where someone is, then you're condoning it. You are not, you are just trying to figure out how to change it because if you don't understand it, you are never going to change it.

Professor, thank you for sharing this experience (this story) with us. One last question if I may. Before closing the interview, I'm curious to hear your thoughts on how cultural studies can contribute to building a more just and democratic society.

Lawrence Grossberg: As I said before, I think cultural studies is an intellectual enterprise, if you will. It is a political intellectual enterprise. It is a way of being an intellectual. I think it is a different way than the academy has traditionally allowed us to be intellectual, partly because it is so radically interdisciplinary and partly because it is so radically contextual. I think the academy, again, I can only speak about the United States and maybe a touch of Europe, but I don't think the academy knows how to deal with those two commitments. They pretend they do interdisciplinarity, but they don't really, and they have no idea how to think contextually. All they know is certainty and relativism. It is a different way of thinking, and I think it is a way of thinking committed to finding and using the best tools you can to find, the best stories you can tell about what is going on. It believes that there are always better stories

to tell about a particular context. But as the context changes, so the stories must change. No story will ever be complete because the world is always more complicated than any story can handle. And therefore, I think it's a kind of humble intellectual practice. Now, I have to admit I'm not very good at humility, but I think cultural studies tries to be humble and always accepts that it could be wrong, but it could be better. It is always incomplete. I think the academy is also not very good at that, especially these days. Therefore, cultural studies are sort of committed, like the American pragmatists, to the idea that intellectual work is an ongoing conversation and that ongoing conversation demands democracy, freedom, and equality. You can't have an ongoing, open-ended conversation unless people are free to contribute and everyone has equal access to the conversation, which doesn't mean that everyone is equal in it, but they have to have equal access to the conversation. Therefore, I think there is inherent in the very practice of cultural studies, on the one hand, the idea of better understanding of what's going on so that we might see the pathways to bring about a more democratic society. But also inherent in its practice is the idea of a democratic and equal conversation. If you want to practice cultural studies, you have to accept the ideas of a democratic and equal conversation. If you close the conversation to some people, if you declare the conversation over, then you're not doing cultural studies. Now, as I said, it doesn't mean all contributions are equal. Someone who comes in and just claims to have truth with certainty, with no basis, with no reason, you say, okay, thank you for your opinion, but, you know, I'm going to take it very seriously because you haven't done the work.

His Career

Lawrence Grossberg grew up in New York and attended Stuyvesant High School. He then went to the University of Rochester for his undergraduate studies, majoring in both Philosophy and Intellectual History. After that, Grossberg furthered his education at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England. He studied with Stuart Hall in England and completed his PhD at the University of Illinois, studying with James Carey. Grossberg started his teaching career at Purdue before spending over 20 years at the University of Illinois. In 1994, he joined the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a distinguished professor, helping to develop their cultural studies program and fostering an interdisciplinary approach. Throughout his career, Professor Grossberg has guided over 50 doctoral students. His achievements extend beyond research, as he takes

particular pride in the awards he has received for his exceptional teaching and mentorship from organizations like ACA, ACS, and UNC. He received the 2019 Diamond Anniversary Book Award from the National Communication Association for his work titled "Under the Cover of Chaos: Trump and the Battle for the American Right". He is an expert in cultural studies, focusing on both the theories behind culture and the current state of American politics and economics. He has published more than 100 articles and essays, and he has written about the specificity of cultural studies, developments in contemporary theory, U.S. popular music, youth culture and politics, the changing conditions of children in the U.S., the rise of new forms of conservatism and capitalism, countercultures, value theory, modernity, the state of progressive oppositional struggles in the U.S. and the rise of populist conservatism. He was also editor of the journal Cultural Studies from 1990 to 2019. He has made significant contributions to the field of cultural studies. Currently, he is Emeritus Professor of Communication at the University of North Carolina.