What is Transnational Cultural Studies?

Imperialist ideology in the Disney Comic (1975), originally published in 1971 in the context of Allende's radical government in Chile. Such studies of transnational corporations and US ideology no longer dominate the field. This is in part because of the retraction of many intellectuals from Marxism during the post-decade. It is also in part because of an increased sophistication in Marxist cultural studies under the influence of Gramsci and other writers who stress cultural processes and mediations rather than an imposition of ideology.

More than a decade ago a cultural studies that was transnational might also have meant the writings of the Frankfurt School when its members were in exile from Europe in the United States. Their shattered lives and the personal and cultural difficulties of Adorno and others in exile in the US entered into their writings on "mass culture." Although still of some importance (especially among intellectuals of the 1990s generation in the United States) the generalisation of cultural pessimism of the Frankfurt School seems to have made it increasingly irrelevant to later generations who understand popular culture to be a diverse and contested field.

Today what does it mean to speak of transnational cultural studies?

Most obviously, research activities calling themselves cultural studies now exist in many countries; not only in Britain and the US but in both Australia, South Africa and Canada. There are related activities in other parts of the world, in India it has the name of "Subaltern Studies." In Latin America there is a well-established line of writing on popular culture. In Sweden some work is done as sociology of communication. Although the infrastructure is somewhat different in each nation, the activity is recognisably cultural studies.

Beyond this, there is an increasing amount of research that is related to the emergence of regional blocs of nations, especially the European Community. An example of this is the collaborative international study of television drama, published on East of Dallas. A collaborative research project alone does not create a new collective identity. However the breakdown and reformation of political collectivities is of central importance for cultural research. Consider, for example, a recent issue of the Italian journal Media, Culture and Society which was dedicated to the problems of mass media in small European countries.

Nonetheless, a strong tendency remains for cultural studies to be grounded in a national culture. Although the internationalism of the 1990s, the experience of global war and support for independence of the colonies are not absent in the founding texts of British cultural studies, the emphasis in writings on diversity as George Orwell and Raymond Williams tends towards a sense of English culture and experience.

With this implicit assumption in place, the place of activists and intellectuals such as C.L.R. James, Franci Fasson and Edward Said are acknowledged but seem to belong nowhere on lists of cultural studies writers.

Recent books in Cultural Studies do move to an international or transnational focus. This is certainly to be welcomed but a careful review of these books reveals that their projects are quite divergent. It will be useful, therefore, to examine the emergent national, to pose and carefully access their intentions, styles and arguments.

Paul Gilroy's There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack (1987) is characterised by a blunt rejection of most of the trappings of actually existing cultural studies. In various places he distances himself quite sharply from Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson and Ian Chambers. Gilroy's work is a critical sociology drawing on Alain Touraine's writings on new social movements and Manuel Castells' studies of grass-roots urban movements. Although he distances himself, there is a dialogue with cultural studies, not only in his discussion of punk and Rock Against Racism in the late 1970s, but in a brilliant overview of diaspora, urban and cultural practice which makes up the longest chapter of the book.

There is a pressing intellectual tension set up within There Ain't No Black. On the one hand, the book is an important argument against any essentialist discourse on race. The book makes an argument against a politics based on Black cultural nationalism. There is a sharp argument against the keyword 'culture' itself, which has been articulated to resist political arguments that British traditions should be defended against people of other cultures. Gilroy's most important move is against such cultural essentialism. Nonetheless it is equally important for him to show that there is a foundation for grassroots movements against white racism in Britain. Such a notion of shared experience may owe more to Fasson than to Williams. There is no need for Gilroy to use the term culture, though others have used it at this point. This tension in Gilroy's work may be responsible for the different readings of There Ain't No Black. Where some have seen a hidden essentialism in Gilroy's work, others have seen voluntarist assumptions about apparently spontaneous protest movements.

The lengthy chapter on cultural practices is innovative in that it describes diaspora and therefore transnational cultural practices. Reggae music is clearly a movement between different parts of the world. Among fragments, carnivalesque, borrowing, with cross-cuts are the themes of Gilroy's narrative of Black culture. he also demonstrates that there are bloody limits to the notion of carnivalesque (which has entered cultural studies through the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin). Gilroy's narrative describes the elaborate blocks placed by racist whites and the state against a cannibalized cultural exchange between blacks and whites. White women who were fans of Black British
Popular culture creates collective identities of believers, participants, fans.

This emphasis on cultural transformation, hegemony and resistance leads into an important examination of populism in Latin American politics. Popular culture creates collective identities of believers, participants, fans. Political parties including Apra in Peru, PRD in Mexico and the Peronistas in Argentina, have attempted to articulate such collective identities with a populist nationalism. Rowe and Schelling argue that the left should not seek to imitate this and they offer an alternative: the examples of cultural transformation in revolutionary Nicaragua, the emergent challenge to the notion by indigenous movements throughout Latin America, and the rejection of monolithic modernity by the mothers of the “disappeared” in Chile.

Whereas the division between high culture and popular culture was important for certain hegemonic versions of nationalism, Rowe and Schelling show that the distinction breaks down in recent Latin American novels. The writings of Manuel Puig and Luis Rafael Sanches are neither apologetic nor the other, but rather an exploration of the processes of culture and hegemony.

The strength of Memory and Modernity is similar to those of British cultural studies influenced by Gramsci. The book offers a detailed historical and political framework in which to assist the transformations of popular culture. Rowe and Schelling have contributed to providing a map of the field rather than engaging in speculative debates. Nonetheless, it would be useful at this point to have clarified the quite different theoretical positions of Latin American writers such as Néstor García Canclini, Jesús Martín Baró, and others. Rowe and Schelling offer only a brief critique of the Journal of Popular Culture approach to the subject. They give no theoretical framework of some of the Latin American practices. Nor do they attempt to resolve differences between a political economy of mass media and a cultural studies approach.

Clearly more research needs to be done for the smaller Latin American countries. On the other hand, Rowe and Schelling offer only a brief sampling of the very extensive existing literature on alternative media. Community radio is especially important in the Andean region and there is a powerful grassroots video movement in Brazil. The topic of women and communication is not given separate emphasis but is integrated throughout the book. The very important issue of the collapse of the public sphere under military dictatorships and its potential reconstruction is touched upon in a discussion of Chile.

The book is well written, clear, engaging and should be of interest to anyone concerned with Latin America, culture and politics.

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