

What is Transnational Cultural Studies?



The God's Must Be Crazy

Alan O'Connor

A decade or two ago, transnational cultural studies would have meant something quite different. It might have meant research from Latin America which stressed the role of transnational corporations in shaping a global culture of consumerism. The best known example of this research genre is probably Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck*:

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 retreat of many intellectuals from Marxism during the past 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 intellectual formations of the 1968 generation in the United States) the generalized 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 Italy, 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 inflection is somewhat different in each nation, the activity is recognizably 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 as *East of Dallas*. A collaborative research project alone does not create a new collective identity. However the break-up and reformation of political collectivities is of central importance for cultural research. Consider, for example, a recent issue of the 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 1930s, 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 writers as diverse as George Orwell and Raymond Williams tends towards a sense of English culture and experience. With this implicit assumption in place, the names of activists and intellectuals such as C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon 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, in this emergent moment, to pause and carefully access their intentions, styles and arguments.

Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) is characterized 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 Iain 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, utopia 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 racist 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 Fanon 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 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 diasporic and therefore transnational cultural practices. Reggae music is clearly a movement between different parts of the world. Although fragmentation, carnival, borrowings and cross-overs are the themes of Gilroy's narrative of Black culture, he also demonstrates that there are bloody limits to the notion of carnivalization (which has entered cultural studies through the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin). Gilroy's narrative describes the deliberate blocks placed by racist whites and the state against a carnivalized cultural exchange between blacks and whites. White women who were fans of Black British



musicians and dancers in the late 1940s and early 1950s were 'protected' against their will by dance-hall owners and other white men. Sharp limits were imposed on trans-cultural exchange by the dominant culture and the state. As the patterns are laid down, blacks see no good reason to allow just anybody into their language, practices and spaces. Trust has to be earned. Thus, cultural studies based on notions of postmodern fragmentation, transnational exchange and carnivalization badly needs to remind itself of diaspora, exclusion and policing.

An equally important book of transnational cultural studies is William Rowe and Vivian Schelling's, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London and New York: Verso, 1991). The most extensive book on Latin American cultural studies in any language, it provides the first map for cultural studies in Latin America. They incorporate, but move some distance from, the earlier critical work on transnational culture. Rowe and Schelling very carefully distinguish what they do from studies of folklore and popular culture. They insist, with Gramsci, that the understanding of culture cannot be separated from relations of power. In Latin America this includes colonization and resistance as not only military movements but also as cultural practices.

A number of topics have emerged in Latin American cultural studies. Rowe and Schelling include indigenous beliefs and culture in the Andean region, Mexican handicrafts, festivals and popular theatre, Brazilian *literatura de cordel*, the *telenovela*, alternative media, carnival and Samba music, and Brazilian soccer. By any standard these are reasonable choices. What makes Rowe and Schelling different from the American tradition of popular culture studies is that they are not attempting to provide a comprehensive survey of topics in Latin American popular culture. They deal with topics from popular religion to *telenovelas* in their emergence. They are not topics so much as instances of how modern culture is layered over other memories of Latin America. In each case they show how a form of popular culture such as Samba music is historically transformed and how its commercial and hegemonic appropriation is in part resisted by committed cultural producers.

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, the PRI in Mexico and the Peronists 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 as alternatives the examples of cultural transformation in revolutionary Nicaragua, the emergent challenge to the nation by indigenous movements throughout Latin America,

and the rejection of macho militarism 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 Sánchez are neither one nor

the other, but are fictional essays or explorations of processes of culture and hegemony.

The strengths of *Memory and Modernity* are similar to those of British cultural studies influenced by Gramsci. The book offers a detailed historical and political framework in which to situate the transformations of popular culture. Rowe and Schelling have concentrated on providing a map of the field rather than engaging in theoretical debates. Nonetheless, it would be useful at this point to have clarified the quite different theoretical positions of Latin American writers such as Nestor Garcia Canclini, Jesús Martín-Barbero and others. Rowe and Schelling offer only a brief critique of the *Journal of Popular Culture* approach to the subject. They give no theoretical assessment of semiotics in Latin America. 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

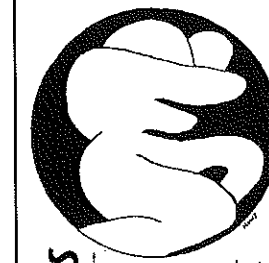
is not given separate emphasis but is integrated throughout the book. The very important issue of the collapse of the public sphere under military dictatorships and its painful reconstruction is touched upon in a discussion of Chilean *arpilleras*. Here again, a full treatment of this issue would require a discussion of the economics of information and culture industries in the current economic crisis and under neoliberal economic policies.

There is a diversity of politics and intentions in emergent works of transnational cultural studies. An unresolved tension exists between the work of Paul Gilroy and a cultural studies based on the work of Gramsci. This is summarized in the following diagram.

Gilroy	Gramscian Cultural Studies
race as fundamental	social class category
non-negotiable demands	coalition politics means moving away from a corporatist position
control of field: immediate satisfaction of desires	coalition-building: long-term "war of position"
body, spirituality	intellectual discipline

Gilroy's point is that a Gramscian politics, or the creation of a national-popular culture in England, has frequently been at the expense of the resident "non-British" population. It has been created on the foundation of white working-class racism. The tension between an analysis based on Alain Touraine's theory of social movements and Antonio Gramsci's theory of coalition-building remains to be resolved both in theory and in practice. But we must conclude by noting yet again how much *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* and *Memory and Modernity* have moved away from the assumption that culture is a national culture.

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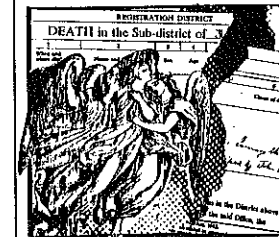
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