

European Cultural Studies: Pathways in an Unbound Geography

By Ferda Keskin

This collection of texts derives from the international conference ‘Current Issues in European Cultural Studies’ arranged in Norrköping, Sweden on June 11-13, 2011 by the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS). The particular focus of the conference, which was not exclusive, naturally privileged a framework in which current issues and perspectives pertaining to interdisciplinary, critical and cultural research in Europe were taken under scrutiny. The explicitly stated intention of this exercise was ‘to point at the tensions and contradictions that together serve to map key contemporary directions in this complex field’.

The following texts are thus rather a set of conference reports than conventional research articles. They reveal that no internal or internalist account of the tensions and ambiguities constitutive of this complexity, which is manifold, can lay claim to be exhaustive or can justifiably be isolated from an externalist account operating at various levels. In other words, the critical aspect of cultural research and specifically of cultural studies fully appears only within a context relentlessly informed by multifarious relations of power and therefore thoroughly political. This certainly applies to the reflection of cultural studies on itself as an interdisciplinary field and hence to its claims of proximity and distance vis-à-vis established academic disciplines in terms of discursive practices and of the epistemic/methodological procedures they involve. But it also applies to its self-reflection in terms of nondiscursive practices that determine degrees of institutionalisation, strategies of demarcation, geographical designations, and even linguistic monopolies.

It certainly would be impossible to do justice to the ways in which the contributions present in this volume meticulously illustrate and problematize this self-reflection in relation to different cultural and academic configurations. Some reiterations, however, might serve to outline a preview, albeit an incomplete one, of the concern outlined above. Mica Nava’s contribution, for example, relates, in the first person singular, certain aspects of the historical relationship between cultural studies and history in the United Kingdom, in order to contextualise the specificity of cultural history through the mediation of her own work on cosmopolitanism. Hence her detailed effort to distinguish her project from sociology, postcolonial theory, conventional as well radical history, feminism, political economy and psychoanalysis works as a demonstrative illustration for the concluding statement that

‘all theorists [...] produce theoretical propositions as part of their engagement with or against other theorists and bodies of thought in specific historical and political contexts’.

The contacts and conflicts inherent in the intradisciplinary, extradisciplinary, and interdisciplinary dynamics that invest the practice of cultural studies re-emerge on further grounds that might even take the form of institutional recognition. Udo Göttlich and Gönül Pultar point out that no official chair or professorship exclusively dedicated to cultural studies can be found in Germany or in Turkey, thus leaving the researchers in this field in some kind of awkward professional ambiguity, if not under the tutelage of established academic traditions. This difficulty seems to be further complicated if such traditions are endowed with an authoritative claim to hold definitive power on the notion of culture, as Göttlich emphasises in his account of the challenge of *Kulturwissenschaft(en)* and *Kultursoziologie* to the formation of cultural studies in the German speaking world. The picture gets even more complicated, complex or ambiguous when one is reminded that there is no yet decided-upon rendering of ‘cultural studies’ into Portuguese and Turkish (and possibly into other European and non-European languages as well), and that translation still depends on inconclusive interpretation of the nature of the kind of research in question.

The question of translating ‘cultural studies’ is not just a question of conceptual adequacy, and ‘language’ appears to be a much broader and deeper problem for researchers in the non-English speaking world. The problem seems to be multi-layered. In the specific case of Turkey, as Pultar argues, it may take the form of a ‘language divide’ or ‘divorce’ between Anglophone scholars and those who are merely Turcophone. This divide is elevated to a higher order, the argument goes, when the two sides mutually disdain each other either because one finds what is published in the local language theoretically uninformed and therefore uninteresting or because the other finds what is published in English irrelevant to Turkish studies. The most pessimistic aspect of this account is revealed in two further claims: that the latter judge the work of the former as ‘more often than not demonizing Turks and Turkey’; and that ‘one cannot but sense’ in the stance of the former ‘a whiff of neo-colonization [...] that translates in action into unconscious neo-colonialism’. This indeed is a difficult position for multilingual scholars who are supposed to be unconscious neo-colonialists (possibly demonising their own culture) even when they are trained and work in intellectual traditions of a radically self-critical nature.

The problem would, of course, not be resolved even if English were taken as the main medium of communication and publication. For, as Sampaio quotes from Álvaro Pina (Pina 2000), there often is the dilemma of having to choose between, on the one hand, writing on a local topic and thus reducing the chance to appear on the international scene, and writing, on the other hand, on what is relevant to the English-speaking world and failing one’s responsibilities as a public intellec-

tual where ‘public’ presumably serves as an adjective to qualify the local. The same concern is expressed by Anne Scott Sørensen who emphasises that ‘Cultural Studies from non-English speaking countries and in other languages have to either translate themselves into English – or accept their desolation and absence from international dialogue’. That this is an obstacle not only for the academic career of individual researchers ‘but for the very production of knowledge’ in the so-called peripheries of a transnational setting is a fact that is already identified in an article by Johan Fornäs and Mikko Lehtonen that Sørensen brings to attention (Fornäs & Lehtonen 2005).

The line drawn by language is not, however, exhaustive of the divisions to be performed when critical and cultural research in Europe is to be situated. Hence the spotlight sessions of the conference that culminated in this collection had gathered scholars into panel discussions organised on the basis of a geopolitical division of Europe into five regions: central, east, north, south and west. However, as the ‘Introduction’ to the conference readily admits, the fact that one of these regions was ‘actually limited to British cultural studies’ indicated that these designations are far from standing for ‘innocent concepts’, and that there is ‘need for strong critical debates around the very idea of dividing Europe in this manner’. Hence the division, far from being ‘prescriptive or definite’, was expected to serve as a ‘heuristic tool to start discussing the inner diversity of cultural studies in this part of the world’.

The difficulty of dividing Europe into well-defined regions and delineating the practice of cultural studies within geographical borders emerges as a fundamental problem in the case of Northern Europe, as Sørensen indicates that a variety of significantly different constellations appear even when one attempts to limit alternative classifications to the categories ‘Nordic countries’ and ‘Scandinavia.’ The theme of geographical markers is equally important for Aljoša Pužar not just as a spatial category, but also as a discursive rule engendering identity.

One may think that a possible corollary to this line of reasoning is that the ideas of European cultural studies and of ‘regional studies’ as established categories are to be called into question and contested from various perspectives.

It has been argued above that an internalist account of the complexity of ‘European cultural studies’ cannot justifiably be isolated from an externalist account. No externalist account, meanwhile, can claim to be exhaustive, and one would have to observe that the relations investing this kind of research require a *global* perspective. It is in this respect highly instructive to remember Sampaio’s emphasis that relatively recent developments such as the Bologna process and the emergence of ‘cultural-turned-creative industries’ as part of a shift to the ‘new economy’ have in Portugal opened alternative ways of understanding cultural studies. Positive as they may seem, such alternative understandings elevate, according to Sampaio, ‘culture to a key economic activity’, and ‘in a context of high academic instability, where job scarcity and precariousness reign supreme’, they impose

pressures ‘on academics and researchers to become increasingly more ‘productive’, seriously damaging their chances to commit to a more encompassing, truly interdisciplinary and socially-grounded intellectual project’.

It is not hard to see, under this description, the tendency of neoliberalism to extend the logic of market economy and its pervasive principles of entrepreneurship beyond the realm of market itself (an excellent account of this process can be found in Dardot & Laval 2009). Also not hard to observe, on a larger scale, is that the serious threat humanities and social sciences have been facing within parts of Western academia, has already taken the expected global dimension using the Bologna process as a means to retuning higher education according to the demands of the ‘new economy’. Pužar’s text bears further witness to this change in the structure of the academia with a special emphasis on the South.

Mapping key contemporary directions in such complexity is still work in progress, and we cannot but be thankful to Johan Fornäs and Martin Fredriksson for the organisation of the ‘Current Issues in European Cultural Studies’ conference that made this precious selection possible.

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