
RESEARCH TRADITIONS IN DIALOGUE

COMMUNICATION
STUDIES IN LATIN
AMERICA AND EUROPE



EDITORS

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The International Nature of Cultural Studies

Leonardo Custódio⁵⁶
Miguel Vicente Mariño⁵⁷
Leonarda García-Jiménez
Manuel Hernández Pérez
Filipa Subtil
Marta Rizo

Cultural studies is one of the most contested themes in this book in historical, epistemological and sociopolitical ways. Its history is contested. Most authors tend to pinpoint the birthplace of cultural studies at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) after the 1950s in Birmingham. However, some scholars have challenged this “distorted narrative”, as the European chapter in this section describes it. Different voices (e.g. Ang, 1992; Chen, 1992; Wright, 1998; Shome, 2009) have called for the challenging of the narrative of British origins and the decentralization of the Anglo-American cultural studies so that a plural, transnational epistemological process can take place.

Its epistemological validity is also contested. For example, in Ferguson and Golding (1997), multiple scholars – mostly sympathetic to the field – reflect on internal and external criticism to cultural studies and its ‘textualism’ (focus on cultural production rather than on the social, political and economic structures and dynamics surrounding them), theoreticism (built on linguistic affectation) and methodological eclecticism (as if cultural studies, as the saying goes, is a jack of all trades, but master of none).

Finally, critics of cultural studies have questioned its societal and political value. In resemblance to the criticism to how identity politics is fragmenting the chances of building a healthy democratic environment, some identify and worry about the over-emphasis on identity-related social phenomena too specific to contemporary subcultural groups, as tackled in the Latin American chapter. One example to reactions to these claims is Pepo Leistyna’s edited volume (2005) in which contributing authors make a deliberate joint effort to build new cultural studies approaches that bring multiple identities and social justice concerns together in a unified epistemological and political unity.

In these contesting circumstances, the two preceding chapters make an important contribution to the historicization of cultural studies as

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an epistemological field. While acknowledging the importance of the British cultural studies, the chapters provide an overview of cultural studies in Europe and Latin America that displays the diversity and plurality that has characterized its international establishment across the world. In fact, perhaps the best way to appreciate the importance of the two chapters is by reading them as complementary to one another. Together, they characterize a critical overview that opens different paths for present and future transnational collaborative efforts between Latin America, Europe and other world regions.

From a Latin American perspective, Marta Rizo starts from the British activities and then contrasts them to how cultural studies rose along with other existing intellectual efforts from the region focused on understanding the interplay between social nuances, culture, media, politics and resistance in Latin America. Rizo proceeds to make an important analysis of the relationship between culture and communication. She also presents an overview of the institutional status of cultural studies as an academic discipline in Latin America before ending with a review of some critical voices to the field.

Leonarda García-Jiménez, Manuel Hernández-Pérez and Filipa Subtil, authors of the European chapter, started their text by bringing French and British research centers together as places that simultaneously contributed to the formation of cultural studies. After that, they made an overview of cultural studies in Southern Europe (Italy, Spain and Portugal). They followed with some of the themes that shaped the development of cultural studies in Europe – from Marxism to theories of power and identity – to conclude with the results of a bibliometric survey to evaluate the reference publications in the field.

In this synthesis chapter, we look at some of the issues similarly raised in both chapters, some of their differences and some insights that could fuel joint efforts to make cultural studies a truly international epistemological field.

Multiple contexts, multiple origins

One important aspect shared by the chapters is the acknowledgement and highlight of the contextual embeddedness of cultural studies despite the predominant narratives of origins. In Latin America, as Rizo points out, the colonial histories and postcolonial contemporaneity, the indigenous heritage and the popular culture have led to different currents of inter- and multi-disciplinary cultural investigations in the

region since the early decades of the 20th century.

Other authors also find peculiarities of cultural studies in Latin America especially in contrast with other contexts. In the introduction to the edited volume “Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies” (2003, p. 1–10), editors Stephen Hart and Richard Young corroborate Rizo’s remarks. One reason for the difference, they argue, is that cultural studies arise from the region as efforts to grasp the regional historical dilemmas, social contestations and recurring crises. Some scholars from the region refuse to use the term “cultural studies” as a form of resistance to the imperialist character of the Anglo-American academic expansion. For the authors, Latin American cultural studies also covers other research activities and methodologies including feminist cultural criticism, studies of popular culture, subaltern studies and even Latin American investigations of modernity. In short, Latin American cultural studies are organized around the notions of power, subaltern action and interculturality, as Rizo describes following García Canclini’s definition.

In García-Jiménez, Hernández-Peréz and Subtil’s chapter, the regional diversity also contributes to challenging that the potential automatic treatment of the British as the primary European context for cultural studies. For many readers, it might come as a surprise that not only the Centre d’Etudes de Communications des Masses (CECMAS) existed in France, but also that it maintained regular communication and exchanges with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the United Kingdom. Actually, even the academic community lacks narratives about the history and the state of cultural studies in French despite the involvement of so many celebrated scholars, as the European chapter demonstrates.

As a possible explanation, the French scholar Anne Chalard-Fillaudeau (2009) argues that despite having cultural studies sensibility in investigating the combination of human and social, these investigations were not conventionally labelled cultural studies. This happens, according to her, for three reasons: academic parochialism, scientific protectionism and the claims of “the ‘epistemo-political’ illegitimacy of Cultural Studies approaches” (p.834). Chalard-Fillaudeau is optimistic that this situation will change and further international academic exchanges will follow. However, the European chapter in this volume already describes how French studies of culture had an earlier influence in Southern Europe than the British cultural studies.

Perhaps the remainder of both chapters in what concerns the history of cultural studies is that the field’s development in different contexts – independently of whether they were homegrown or influenced by

foreign traditions – can provide us with more nuanced histories and contemporary descriptions. After all, cultural studies have come to be in consequence of the academic urges to grasp the intersections between culture, communication and social changes. Much of the problems of the mid-1900s remain or, in many cases, have increased: exacerbated media consumption, social inequalities, resistance for the survival of traditions and the formation of identity-based communities are few examples. Therefore, cultural studies are still relevant and the more we know about transnational nuances, the better equipped the field will be to grasp contemporaneity and its complexities.

Cultural Studies Counter-Flow: From Latin America to Europe

This dialogue between Latin America and Europe creates another opportunity: to reflect upon how scholarship from one of the regions has influenced cultural studies in the other. In general, discussions most often happen about how the British cultural studies spread to other regions. Raising this issue is not necessarily an acritical reproduction of the distorted narrative. In the Latin American chapter, Rizo takes this “rather orthodox approach”, as she describes, to the history of cultural studies, but she also displays how Latin American scholars have been critical to how the field has been historicized. These local contestations are important. However, they do not often contemplate processes in which Latin American cultural studies influenced debated in Europe.

The European chapter briefly mentions one example of these processes of epistemological dialogue. In the very beginning of the chapter, García-Jiménez, Hernández-Pérez and Subtil briefly describe the relevance of the concept of *hypermediations* by Spain-based, Argentinian scholar Carlos Alberto Scolari. This concept, as the authors describe, is a step forward from the concept of *mediations*, by Colombia-based, Spanish scholar Jesus Martin-Barbero. This example indicates an existing actual dialogue between the regions that happens not only in international exchange processes of individual scholars, but also institutionally. The existence of the Iberian-American Communication Association (ASSIBERCOM) shows that for decades there has been room for joint, transatlantic epistemological developments.

What has historically been missing – albeit recent remedying efforts like the ALAIC-ECREA initiatives including this book – is a wider recognition of Latin American epistemology in the dominant English-

speaking sphere of international scholarly knowledge. From a cultural studies perspective, the debate about the importance of Jesus Martin-Barbero's groundbreaking book "From Media to Mediations" illustrates how the dominant canon in English can silence and appropriate relevant voices from the margins. As Scolari (2017) describes, Martin-Barbero published his book in 1987. Six years later, it was translated into English, but it did not get the recognition as an important contribution it had within Latin America. It was only recently, however, when Western and Northern European scholars have developed the concept of *mediatization* (Lundby, 2009; Couldry and Hepp, 2013) that Martin-Barbero's work gained some recognition outside Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula. To this, British scholar Nick Couldry (2017, p.113-114) admits and argues:

"Sin embargo, hasta ahora su influencia no ha sido tan fuerte como debiera. La causa principal es clara: la desigualdad provocada por el mundo de las editoriales en el que sigue dominador el pensamiento que se publique en inglés, o al menos en francés. Pero ahora contribuye también otra causa: el hecho imprescindible de que todas las investigaciones de hoy sobre los medios de comunicación ya asumen, como su punto de orientación, exactamente un interés en los procesos de mediaciones. ¿Cómo se pueden comprender de modo alternativo las complejidades de nuestras vidas a través de redes sociales y digitales? Como ya insistía Martín Barbero en el año 1987, anticipando nuestras necesidades de hoy – cuando todos los investigadores están buscando nuevos recursos para analizar una realidad extrañamente cambiante – ya tres décadas antes del hecho: *'no se trata de 'carnavalizar' la teoría...Sino de aceptar que los tiempos no están para la síntesis, que la razón apenas nos da para sentir...Que hay zonas en la realidad más cercana que están todavía sin explorar'*". (Emphasis in the original.)

Cultural Studies, Communication and Contemporary Political Transformations

Nick Couldry's words provide a suitable transition to our last point in this chapter – cultural studies can and must contribute to the

understanding of our contemporary world. Recently, we have seen three major sociopolitical phenomena: the global (re)turn of reactionary national projects, the political polarization and extremism in everyday life, and the increased relevance of communication to social life, culture and politics on digital platforms and environments.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, an increasing number of societies around the world have seen the rise of populist rhetoric – on the Left and now predominantly the Right – shaping local political landscapes into a growing global mosaic of (resembling or de facto) authoritarian national leaderships. In many ways, this is a known phenomenon in Latin America, Africa and Asia, regions in which countries have historically had charismatic and/or violent leaders centralizing federal governments around themselves. Currently, the surprise in international debates seems to be on how similar political movements have almost simultaneously reached different levels of political power in the Northern Hemisphere. From Brexit to the Southern European nationalist movements, from the rise of Donald Trump to the xenophobic parties in the Nordics as well as in Central and Eastern Europe, a baffled world has seen these changes and asked: what is happening? How culture and communication are shaping the current construction of social meanings?

The same questions arise among observers or insiders in processes of political polarization in everyday life that fuel the rise of populist movements. The narratives about how long-term friendships and family ties have been broken for politics have crossed the boundaries of national states. Take the US and Brazil as an example. Even though the demagogue businessman Donald Trump and newly elected demagogue former-military Jair Bolsonaro represent different types of populism, what is happening around them is a comparable, if not similar, social phenomenon. Both cases saw the uses of digital technologies (Facebook in the US, WhatsApp in Brazil) to disseminate right-wing propaganda constructed on false information and fear mongering. Both countries also saw the voluntary engagement of millions of people in support of xenophobic, racist, sexist and homophobic values openly expressed in the politicians' rhetoric. Moreover, both Trump and Bolsonaro enjoy high popularity among supporters despite their contradictions and their dismissal of science and reason. Consequently, despite their borderline extremist and fundamentalist worldviews, Trump and Bolsonaro enjoy great attention by media corporations and enjoy strong centrality in public debates.

In these circumstances, how can cultural studies contribute to a

more in-depth and nuanced understanding of these contemporary political changes around the world? Both chapters in this section hint at the strengths cultural studies retain as epistemological lenses to a complex and changing world. As mentioned earlier, the chapters are complementary to one another in terms of displaying the strengths of cultural studies. By looking and problematizing between communication and culture, cultural studies has a lot to offer in terms of explanations of the reasons, contradictions and characteristics of populist and retrograde ideas in the information age.

The chapters also highlight some historical debates in cultural studies that would be suitable and necessary frameworks to understand today's world. García-Jiménez, Hernández-Peréz and Subtil, for example, dedicate a whole section to discussing the influence of Marxism, the relationship between culture and political and symbolic power, and how the concept of identity plays a role in the original foundations of cultural studies as an epistemological field. What the world shows us today is that the interplay of these three theoretical constructs – Marxism, power and identity – remain relevant to explain the world. The questions that prove the contemporary relevance of cultural studies can be endless. How do social class hierarchies relate to identity-based struggles? How do these identity-based struggles constitute or fragment political action in socially unequal contexts? How do demagogue politicians thrive in politically fragmented and polarized societies? How does communication play a role in the symbolic and material construction of power structures in party politics and everyday life? Such multi-dimensional questions demand interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and creative methods to produce answers. As a field, cultural studies is equipped to face this challenge.

In a critical review of the field, Néstor García Canclini (2003) reflects on how cultural studies relate to the changes in a post-Cold War world. He described how cultural studies originated as “transdisciplinary readings on the hidden connections between culture, economy and power” (p. 12) and wondered if these features remain and how they relate to a time of globally shared cultural phenomena despite societal differences. In response to these questions, he argued:

“Placing ourselves at this new stage requires returning to a key historical feature of cultural studies: the development of empirically based socio-cultural theory in order to understand the evolution of capitalism critically; not the assertion of politically

correct positions, but *the tense relationship between a utopian imaginary, that is only partially political, and an intellectual and empirical exploration that sometimes goes along with it and sometimes contradicts it.*"
(Emphasis on the original)

In other words, just like in its origins, cultural studies can and must constantly be (re-)constructed as a field via the intensive connection between epistemological production grounded on in-depth empirical evidence and praxis. In this sense, transnational dialogues like the one in this book are crucial to maintain the diverse, refreshing and thought-provoking approaches to social life and culture that has historically characterized the field.

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