

## Internationalizing cultural studies

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Ackbar Abbas and John Nguyet Erni (eds) *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.

John Nguyet Erni and Siew Keng Chua (eds) *Asian Media Studies: Politics of Subjectivities*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.

Ib Bondebjerg and Peter Golding (eds) *European Culture and the Media*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2004.

There is increasing recognition that what pass as the canonical theories and concepts in the media, cultural and communication studies fields are badly in need of a veritable paradigm shift, if not some more 'revolutionary' change (Curran and Park, 2000). Studies of core concerns, such as the relationship of the mass media to various forms of democracy or power, still tend to remain firmly framed around concepts and understandings produced by the quite specific experience of the US and a few European countries (Sparks, 2001). As with other domains of knowledge production, the canon in these overlapping fields has been firmly stamped by the socio-political and cultural contexts that framed and embedded its production. In sum, it remains peculiarly ethnocentric, not merely in the sense of being Western-centred. The relevant knowledge base, as conventionally defined by the 'leading journals', is even more narrowly focused around Anglo-US productions. Compared to other fields, such as human geography, there is little by way of fundamental or internally reflexive interrogation of how these particular fields of knowledge production have been framed, shaped or even co-produced by the international configurations of political-economic and cultural power in which they are embedded. This silence is all the more remarkable given the core concerns with 'communication', the production, distribution and exchange of meanings, and of cultural and other forms of knowledge.

Thus, there now is a growing sense that the canon remains locked in a certain time warp (or specific geopolitical fixation), especially when viewed in light of the increasingly international scope of communication research practices, not to mention the ever more global operations of the phenomena under study. For example, the old paradigms have remained largely untouched despite the remarkable (and welcome) growth in the numbers of scholars from Asia, Africa and Latin

America who participate in international conferences and populate the major centres of media studies in the core countries, especially the USA. For sure, there has been a massive growth of studies or even sub-fields focused on globalization, intercultural communication, multiculturalism and even international communication, as well as of published studies on media and cultural matters located in many more countries. Yet all too often these efforts seem to involve a particular application or refinement rather than any fundamental questioning of core conceptual or theoretical frames. For example, the presumed boundaries and distinctions between the remits of (national) communication and international communication studies may possess some analytical sense in a few core countries but not when applied to the operations and content of the media system in most other social formations. Besides, the field's collective burial of notions such as cultural or media imperialism over the past 25 years, and its ready embrace of woolly concepts related to the globalization rubric, have been particularly debilitating. This pre-empts the capacity to address key features and operations of state- and market-based power in the contemporary world – at a time when informational and cultural aspects comprise increasingly important dimensions of international economic, political and indeed military relations. In addition, the premature burial of such concepts also leaves the field insulated from ready engagement with important recent developments in the study of contemporary empire taking place in neighbouring fields (Preston, 2005).

In such light, one cannot but welcome a book entitled *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology* and edited by two Hong Kong-based academics, especially when the publisher's blurb defines it as 'a significant effort to re-present cultural studies as a truly international endeavor'. The welcome seems further justified when editors, Ackbar Abbas and John Nguyet Erni, inform us that the anthology builds on the premise that 'a basic course in cultural studies today should educate students to see "the big international picture"' (p. xxvi). The purpose is not only to enable students 'to understand the histories, doctrines and institutional structures of North Atlantic, canonical cultural studies' but to analyse and think critically about the subject as a whole 'without imposing any dominant dogma, direction or method' for thinking about the development of cultural studies in the international arena (p. xxvi). The editors' declared aim is to take cultural studies 'elsewhere, to internationalize the field a little further' without aspiring to the overambitious aim of 'a totalizing coverage' (pp. 2, 8).

Like others, Abbas and Erni treat the global transportability of cultural studies as 'a positive opportunity to perform critical comparative thinking', especially to 'cultivate the ground for comparisons over structured differences' as opposed to random differences (p. 5). The general introduction criticizes the frequent tendency to conflate the diasporic and the indigenous, one which operates to misrecognize and devalue critical intellectual work from Latin America or Asian locations. For Abbas and Erni, a critical international cultural studies is attentive to the fact that 'a diasporic voice wedged in a western cultural studies institution' and an indigenous voice active in a Third-World or subaltern cultural studies practice tend to tell very different stories (p. 6). For somewhat similar reasons, they also go on to criticize the common tendency to construct a singular 'origin' of cultural studies.

In their general introduction, the editors discuss the dual challenges of internationalizing and localizing or appropriating cultural studies. After Lévi-Strauss, they declare that cultural studies 'will have to avoid speaking about otherness the way TV evangelists speak about god – as our familiar' (p. 3). Abbas and Erni allude to older but still-relevant anthropological debates to address whether the key chal-

lence of canonical concepts and texts have 'more to do with epistemology (knowledge-as-betrayal) than with ethno-centrism'. They argue that in cultural studies domains, 'these priorities are reversed and reversible' because there is a different mode of otherness, one 'where the other is not merely an epistemological problem, but capable of looking back and talking back' (p. 3). The editors draw on prior work (e.g. Franz Fanon and Kuan-Hsing Chen) to discuss the challenges facing researchers from Third-World or other subaltern speaking positions (especially if trained abroad) with respect to the decolonizing of their intellectual work and navigating the often subtle structures of 'intellectual imperialism'. This calls for new cultural studies spaces between the Anglo-US canon and indigenization, where the canonical must be recast (rather than abandoned) and the international/local nexus must be 'rigorously contextualized' in relation to various historical and geopolitical positions and intellectual traditions (p. 4).

Such editorial formulations seem as good and promising as any for a more rigorous and reflexive internationalization of knowledge production (and internal communication practices) within the overlapping fields of media and cultural studies.

So how do this book's 44 subsequent chapters fare in terms of matching the promising agenda flagged in the general editors' introduction? The chapters are grouped around nine different themes or parts, with each theme edited by one of seven contributing editors (Abbas and Erni edit one each). The chapters are grouped under the following themes: 'Technocultures', 'Performance and Culture', 'Gender and Sexuality', 'Media Production and Practice', 'Popular Practices', 'Race, Ethnicity and Nation', 'Visual Cultures', 'Global Disaporas' and 'Cities and the Urban Imaginary'. The contributing editors were given the 'primary charge' to advance an assortment of positions for a specific cultural studies theme, 'regardless of where these editors reside or work, or their ethnic/racial/national belongings' (p. xxvi).

This reviewer found it difficult to understand the selection of many chapters in terms of engaging with the kinds of issues highlighted in the editors' introduction. In particular, the selection of some pieces by already widely published authors seemed somewhat incongruous, especially as work from seemingly important but much less-published authors (as noted in the editors' introduction and in some other chapters) were not included. This probably arises from a highly decentralized approach to chapter selection, whereby the nine editors of the rather broadly defined themes 'present their own take on what "internationalising media studies" means' (p. 9). In any case, this reader was left with a certain sense of a missed opportunity here – in terms of both cultivating the ground for more rigorous international comparisons of core ideas and in terms of better identifying 'structured differences' as opposed to random differences (p. 5). The editors declare that they want to avoid geographically defined sections, which might be considered fair enough. But absence of contributors' locational or biographical details (usually included in such collections), together with the coy discussion of the North American base of some section editors (p. 8), seem to jar with the kinds of contextual factors advanced in the editors' introductory chapter.

That said, however, this book offers some very interesting and valuable contributions for those interested in the internationalization of both cultural and media studies. For example, the first section, edited by James McGregor Wise, operates very well in terms of extending and challenging the usual frames and conceptual frontiers of work on 'Technocultures'. It includes an excellent chapter by Ashis Nandy on 'Science as a Reason of State', which examines how science and development have become increasingly important dimensions of state 'which

today demand enormous sacrifices from, and inflict immense suffering on, the ordinary citizen' (p. 21). Nandy also addresses several links and continuities between the Indian experience of an increasingly violent modern science – one that that encroaches upon other traditions of knowledge and social life – and the Western experience. The second chapter comprises an equally impressive historical and geopolitical interrogation by Vandana Shiva of the now dominant and 'magical' identities constructed between 'development = modernisation = Westernisation' (p. 31). Other contributions, such as the chapter by Stam and Shohat, complement the general editors' aims in identifying key intellectual resources for the cultivation of a more truly international field. These and several other chapters provide exemplary models or indicators of a cultural studies that is more fully and fluidly cosmopolitan in scope. All in all, this large book is something of a 'mixed bag' in terms of such objectives, but a valuable resource if read selectively.

In *Asian Media Studies: Politics of Subjectivities*, we are presented with a collection which aims to 'forge afresh the connection between media practices and the politics about the formation of subject positions' to be found in the transnational Asian context of today (p. 1). In their introduction, the editors argue that Asian media studies has a long history of questioning the unchallenged adoption of Western modes of inquiry despite the pressures to adopt 'accurate methods' in order to gain scholarly legitimacy in prior decades. They suggest that the recent history of Asian media studies has been constituted by three major moments of development: the politics of 'appropriation for legitimacy' (1960s to 1970s); the politics of 'self-legitimacy through rejecting western cultural imperialism' (late 1970s to early 1990s), and 'the politics of critical legitimacy through deconstructive postcolonial tactics' (early 1990s to the present) (p. 3). The editors also suggest that the development of 'postcolonial political consciousness in Asia has not necessarily led to genuinely original theory or method-building' but, nevertheless, local media researchers seek ways to 'decolonize their work' by adopting critical impulses from more mainstream Third-World political movements (p. 2).

Overall, the 12 contributions shed important light on media structures, professional practices and audience engagement within and between selected countries of this increasingly important world region. This collection is especially focused on the media cultures of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and it includes studies of other countries such as India and Malaysia. To this Western reader, many of these studies are relevant and interesting for their silences and sub-texts as well as what they explicitly address. Some chapters clearly reveal authors facing quite different institutional and discursive constraints (or structured freedoms) compared to those facing academics in most West European settings. They indicate authors confronting quite specific challenges, not least in negotiating tensions between translating and adapting the conventions of Western academic criticism on the one hand, and the local ruling elite's regime of favouring specific 'Asian' values or those related to national development goals – when it comes to the practices of both local media professionals as well as media researchers – on the other hand. This point is well made in the concluding sections of Sue Abel's study of '“Forward-looking” News?', which focuses on the presentation of television news in Singapore.

Two chapters on South Korea are interesting and relevant in other respects. Myung-koo Kang's chapter on the struggle for press freedom and the emergence of 'unelected' media power in South Korea is instructive, not only in terms of yet another study of how the media have abandoned their supposed watchdog function and themselves 'become an organ of power'. This study is also highly instructive

on how, despite the appearance of formal electoral democracy, relations between the institutions of the state, economy and civil society within neoliberal regimes may not only vary greatly but also matter very much with respect to the articulation of citizen interests. Keehyeung Lee's critique of an influential group of 'communicational' cultural studies researchers in South Korea, not least the failure to engage with the prevailing and dominant social discourses or pressing political questions impinging on the media, will have many familiar resonances for Western readers.

In general, this selection of studies succeeds in showing that 'there are many Asias', in terms of geopolitical spaces, media structures and practices and other cultural spaces – and in terms of media research practices (p. 12). As indicated, several chapters deserve close reading by those interested in a more genuinely international communication studies.

As the title suggests, *European Culture and the Media*, edited by Ib Bondebjerg and Peter Golding, has its territorial focus on Europe. The book's 12 chapters are based on conferences and research funded by the European Science Foundation addressing changes in media cultures, including the 'problematic role and prospects of public service broadcasting' and the 'failure of a European cultural space to emerge within the media' (p. 14). The core of this book is organized around three sections. The first, 'Globalization and the European Imaginary', comprises four chapters addressing 'different aspects of popular culture' (p. 15). These are centred on studies of Lego toys, how audiences respond to Disney products, the reception of Shakespearean and US TV drama programmes, and Belgian audiences' reception of reality TV. They tend to focus on the concepts and operations of mediatization, homogenization, popular imagination and culture, and their relation to the formation of cultural identities.

The second section, dealing with 'Citizenship and Cultural Identities', includes chapters on peer-to-peer networking and its implications for sense of identity, Slovenian coverage of refugees from Bosnia, and the introduction of the euro. The third section, 'Media Institutions in a Changing Europe', has two chapters focused on the precarious state of public service broadcasting and a study of the radical convergence of political and media power in Italy under Berlusconi. In sum, a mixed bag that will be of interest to dedicated students of the complexities of 'European identities'. Or those interested in the entrenched hegemony of 'banal nationalism' alongside the continuing dominance of US media industries, despite so much stress on cultural globalization or an increasingly integrated Europe.

## References

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