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Latin American Cultural Studies: When, Where, Why?

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Since the mid-1970s, the moment in which I joined the Rómulo Gallegos Center of Latin American Studies (CELARG), in Caracas, the phenomenon of cultural penetration, censorship and self-censorship, the definition of national cultures, the analyses of the discourse of power and of the symbolic manners in which popular resistance was expressed, constituted a compact agenda of research for scholars working both inside and outside of their own countries. “Latin Americanism” was not perceived as a transnational field with its centers and its peripheries, at least not as much as today, but there was an awareness of the need to integrate experiences and resources, to discuss agendas and share projects. The CELARG was precisely that: a meeting place and a platform for research and analysis, where, with great scholars like Domingo Miliani, Nelson Osorio, Carlos Rincón, Beatriz González, Hugo Achugar and others, we engaged in team-work and other kinds of professional and political collaboration.

Studies about culture, which incorporated the rich and complex critical Latin-American tradition, were based on a direct knowledge of the studied realities. Power and culture were, without a doubt, the axes of the analysis, which integrated the socio-historic tradition as well as poststructuralism, semiotics, etc. In the same way, we shared a great interest in the revision of Latin American historiography and the transformation of critical paradigms.



When cultural studies burst into the North American academy in the 1980s and from there started to radiate toward the South, the memory of those previous critical developments was still present in Latin America. Yet, it was astonishing to realize that the work that we had fulfilled in previous decades was virtually unknown here, either due to ignorance or theoretical arrogance. This lack of recognition was one of the reasons for the resistance that many of the culturalist positions provoked in Latin America, where cultural penetration had been experienced throughout its whole history, since the Discovery. In many cases, “Latin America” has been produced as a *construct* that maintains little connection with “the real thing,” and that constitutes a *locus of desire* which provides raw cultural and symbolic materials to be processed in the centers of theoretical industrialization of the North. Thus, conceptual differences and alternative ways of naming the practice of cultural studies were established from the beginning within the domain of Latin American studies.

In the volume of *Hispanic Issues* that I recently edited, entitled *Ideologies of Hispanism*, a prominent group of Peninsularists and Latin Americanists discuss matters related to the constitution of Hispanism as a field of study. They analyze some of the ideological conflicts that have been part of this field from the start, conflicts that have to do with the imposition of certain languages, the marginalization of regional cultures, the subalternization of cultures dominated by centralist hegemonies, etc. Transnational academic debates (especially now, when the porosity of borders, the phenomenon of massive migration and the relativization of the concept of national culture are undeniable) are fundamental tools for intercultural understanding and the elaboration of multiple perspectives for the understanding of cultural “otherness” and the hybridizations that result from the infinite exchanges that characterize a globalized world.

Transnationalization should contribute to the integration of individuals, ideas, projects, etc. and to the reduction of discursive privileges emerging from places with greater resources, where work produced in more modest institutions is ignored or subalternized. It should also impede the reproduction of a discourse that conceives and interprets Latin America as a laboratory product that one sees through a microscope (a telescope, in some cases), and through which aseptic and distant conclusions are often drawn. On occasion, these conclusions are more at the service of personal interests than linked to a real plan of cultural integration or to the creation of platforms where egalitarian discussions could take place.

Latin American intellectuals should also avoid, at all costs, the temptations and risks of fundamentalism that legitimize only

interpretations produced within Latin America, because without the contributions of foreign scholars, or of Latin American intellectuals who reside outside of their native countries, there cannot be a true and integral advance of knowledge in our field. As has been noted by many, a great part of Latin-Americanist discourses were produced outside Latin America, from a productive distance—sometimes nostalgic, but generally balanced—capable of weighing these realities from wider perspectives. A defensive attitude regarding discourses produced outside of Latin America is understandable if one considers the long experience of cultural penetration, but it also demonstrates weakness and the inability to exchange ideas, and is an attitude doomed to sacrifice fundamental contributions to our field of study.

Moreover, as it is well known, there have been disagreements regarding the implications of different designations for the newly oriented studies of culture: cultural studies and cultural critique were only some of them. These practices were characterized and compared on different grounds, in order to elaborate on the distinctions between studies of culture in different academic, geocultural and ideological contexts.

In some cases, these designations incorporate the critical Latin American tradition that starts with the Creole *letrados* and extends to Antonio Cornejo Polar, Néstor García Canclini, Beatriz Sarlo, Ángel Rama, Nelly Richard, Roberto Schwarz, Jesús Martín Barbero, Carlos Monsiváis and so many others. In other cases, the distinction is more theoretical than historiographical, and proposes, on the one hand, cultural studies in the Anglo-Saxon manner, and on the other, cultural criticism, thus indicating that the former would have an orientation more inclined to the social, and the latter would focus more toward the studies of language, symbolic resources, etc.

In any case, I believe that the designation is not fundamental. Certainly, much more important is the work that was done in different domains, and the areas of study that, in spite of this proliferation of tendencies and theoretical practices, did not receive sufficient attention either in Latin America or in the U.S. academy. Just to give an example, the field of politics (not to mention economics) has been largely neglected or minimized. A frequently shallow analysis has been noted in these fields of study, one that often fragments excessively the studied realities, or puts upon them a theoretical load which is so heavily elaborated that beneath it objects of study can no longer be perceived, and assumed positions, proposals, and alternatives remain in the dark.

Having said so, we need to recognize that these criticisms are not meant to discredit in any way the great contributions that cultural studies



have made to the humanities and social sciences (mainly in the fields of communications, anthropology, literary criticism, and the like). Cultural studies started by questioning these disciplines' fundamentals, methodologies, and discourses of legitimization, thus causing a very productive catalyst at both the intellectual and ideological levels. Latin American studies will no longer be the same after these contributions, which should not stop us from having a critical, or self-critical, position in respect to these processes.

The fact is that, despite the value of the contributions that have been made in this field from the perspective of cultural studies, one of the problems that should remain at the center of our work is the reconstruction of a political articulation capable of coping with (and coordinating) distinct agendas, subjects and programs that exist in Latin America and consequently in the international field of Latin Americanism. Perhaps one should analyze not only the causes of the progressive exhaustion of cultural studies, but above all the alternatives to it in order to launch, from what it remains of its foundation, a joint effort for the reconstruction of political platforms in order to approach society and culture.

It is worth pointing out that the question of aesthetic representation has been poorly treated by cultural studies, even though it is an interesting and fundamental question worthy of a productive debate in our discipline. Involved in the task of dismantling enlightened thought, the bourgeois status of the humanities, the vices and omissions of liberal historiography, the colonialist fundamentals of anthropology, the lack of creativity and methodological inertia of the social sciences, etc., cultural studies almost ended up throwing out the baby with the bath water, as they say.

Paradoxically, from the great academic centers of the North, in many cases the reaction against the lettered discourse was often so strong as to end in a sort of organized boycott against the canon and, in the formation of a counter-canon which included texts that in the past were considered (from an elitist vision of literature) as marginal or non-literary. The problem was that the fair inclusion of the latter texts, which forced the system to modify the very notion of literature, ended up constituting, in the same process of their consecration, an equally monumentalized repertoire, one co-opted by the same critical-theoretical tendencies that highlighted its *otherness* and alternative value. The category of "lettered city" suggested by Ángel Rama—with all of the criticism that it has received—was so efficient that it managed to become popular throughout literary studies, and was to become a critical commonplace. Therefore, *all* literature was considered by some critics as

the main aim of their attacks, because it revealed bourgeois consciousness reflecting upon itself and consolidating, by means of literary discourse, its hegemonic and exclusivist projects and agendas.

Even if one were to accept this generalization, I believe that within the discourses of power—and bourgeois literature can without a doubt be included in this level—it is fundamental to distinguish the existence of distinct, simultaneous projects and literary systems that. For, as indicated by Antonio Cornejo-Polar, they coexist controversially within a common cultural realm, crystallizing by means of subject matters, styles, and ideological (sometimes conflicting) proposals which should be identified and recognized in their diversity and, from the starting point of their substantial differentiation, be analyzed and contrasted. Nothing is achieved by crushing with a theoretical stroke of the pen centuries of production that have been at the very foundation of the construction of national and continental cultures, and by means of which not only programs and dominant imaginaries are expressed, but also conflicts, tensions, and struggling subjectivities which constitute the very fabric of our culture.

On my part, through my academic, pedagogical, and editorial work, I have intended to promote a program which is plural and openly critical of the literary canon and of the critical-historiographical tradition of Latin America, trying to propose re-readings of authors, theories and criticisms of the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world, from the perspective of recent debates which revitalize these texts which are central to our cultural history and which, are not going to disappear just because we ignore them in our work.

I believe that there is a fundamental pedagogical task to complete in this sense. One cannot return before having departed. One cannot make students ignore or devalue a canon before knowing it and learning from it; neither can one go on proposing the same repertoire of theories and analytical resources, because too much water has passed under the bridge along political, theoretical, and historical lines, for us to continue thinking as we did forty years ago.

In my opinion, every time that we explore *the aesthetic* we are approaching, by sometimes mediated, sometimes oblique fashions, *the political* (the processes of cultural institutionalization, the twists and turns of official history, the problems of textual truth, the cultural politics and the material conditions from which the texts are produced and read in different contexts). But the relationships between aesthetics and politics, which have always been in the horizon of Latin American reflection, are much more complex and contradictory than one could cover in this brief account.



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