

The idea of cultural studies in Brazil – redefining frontiers

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British and North American Culture and Institutions courses have been taught in Brazil since the early 1980s. They are designed to give support to English Language and Literature courses, providing students with some degree of cultural awareness which is an important element for the language and literature pedagogy.

The present paper offers some reflections on how we have been trying to improve these courses; it aims at sharing some experiences we have been accumulating in the area of British and American Studies. In opposition to the theoretical aridities that have been bombarding this relatively pioneering field, the main concern in this work is to explore practical, didactic problems as well as some political implications of working in this interdisciplinary and ideologically charged practice. We hope that we can develop future cooperative projects and widen the debate around this area.

Culture abhors simplification.
Fanon

This paper has a conversational tone. It is not a piece of complicated scholarship squeezed within the necessary space limitations. My basic interest is to raise some points for further discussion and to share the experiences we have been accumulating, so that we could foster some kind of network for future cooperation and development of this relatively new area of teaching and research in Brazil.

The issues I will attempt to explore (rather superficially, given the nature of this paper and the range it covers) fall into two categories; a didactic, and a political one. I will be dealing with problems we face at the very beginning, i.e., when we try to define what the field is, and which materials, syllabi, and teaching strategies are we supposed to adopt, in order to work with cultural studies. I will be also exploring some political aspects related to the much talked about internationalization of scholarship. Nevertheless, my main concern is with the implications and the relevance of working with British and North American culture in Brazil.

I must also comment that there is a tension underlying the whole work – I might even say that this conflict is present throughout my

academic life-between a more evident pedagogical interest and my constant «wrestling with the angels», to borrow from Said. I am always concerned with how to use theory so as to make it help us effectively, instead of reading theoretical works as a mere intellectual (and sometimes quite painful) exercise.

British and North American Culture and Institutions courses have been taught at UnB (and in some other Brazilian universities as well) since 1980. They are compulsory courses for the students of Translation and are designed basically to give support to English Language and Literature courses, but they look beyond language and literature to provide students with some degree of cultural awareness, which is an important component for the language they are learning to translate. They were (and to a large degree still are) taught in the so-called life and civilization fashion, i.e., the study of British/ North-American history and institutions. Similar courses are now taught at graduate level and they form a part of our MA programme in English.

Bearing in mind Horkheimer's and Adorno's verdict that to talk about culture is a violation of its very meaning and an affirmation of the classifying approach which is anathema to it, we shall nevertheless try to 'anatomize' this mushrooming field for practical purposes.

We know that the labels Cultural Studies, British Studies, British Cultural Studies, American Studies stand for connected but distinct fields. In this paper however, I will be classifying them as British/ North American Cultural Studies – BACSSs, whenever referring to my academic experience of these studies.

If we analyse some basic definitions of this field, we can see its discouraging/challenging complexity. Let's begin by quoting Stuart Hall, one of the «founding fathers» of Cultural Studies, together with Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart (I cannot help observing that Cultural Studies apparently had no mothers). For him, Cultural Studies is «a discursive formation in Foucault's sense. It has no

simple origins, though some of us were present at some point when it first named itself in that way. It has multiple discourses and a number of different histories...[It is a] set of unstable formations ...[It has] many trajectories ...[It is] constructed by a number of different methodologies and theoretical positions, all of them in contention ... [It] refuses to be a master-discourse or a meta-discourse ... [It is] always open to which it does not yet know» (Hall, 1992:278).

I keep repeating these brilliant words, trying to incorporate the wisdom of its definition; however, I wonder if it is possible for us mortal teachers to translate all that into the everyday reality of teaching BACSS down here in our universities.

Culture, as we understand it today, is also defined by Richard Hoggart as « the whole way of life of a society, its beliefs, attitudes and temper as expressed in all kinds of structures, rituals, and gestures, as well as in the traditionally defined forms of art» (Hoggart, 1969:3).

As I admire the herculean, gargantuan task these scholars face while trying to analyse this challenging field, I keep wondering at how teachable all this is, especially when you are dealing with a culture which is not your own.

There has been much discussion about the definition, function, and use of BACSSs. Scholars and teachers tend to require a very precise specification of their object of study, as well as typical methods and academic approaches for it. BACSSs has necessarily fluid boundaries; it escapes precise definition and demands a multiplicity of investigative perspectives, taken from such different disciplines as literature, political science, anthropology, sociology, media studies, history etc., because the different elements of a culture are inextricably connected. We feel that never the concept of intertextuality was better suited than in this all-encompassing, interdisciplinary atmosphere of BACSSs.

Different from the utopian, traditional unity of the literary object, for the definition of which Antony Easthope recalls the Latin

individuus = *undivided*, hence *individual*, BACSS has a comprehensive, ubiquitous quality which requires a transgressing of useful and comfortable intellectual confines and academic hegemonies. In his presidential address to the American Studies Association Annual Conference, Paul Lauter characterizes American Studies not as a discipline but « a framework within which people engage in those most significant of intellectual ventures» (Lauter, 1995:126).

We have to admit that no responsible scholar will be able to do all this on his own; as our colleague Maria Elisa Cevasco remarked, «I can't specialize in everything». I had already written about this dilemma of the "Jack-of-all-Trades" teacher of BACSS in a paper I presented at the 1992 National Seminar for University Professors of Literatures in English.

Everyone involved in this somehow pioneering field is faced with a two-fold, Janus-like, course of action. Scholarly work tends to be specialized; this traditional research attitude takes us away from the broadly defined area of BACSS which requires eclectic, interdisciplinary, or even antidisciplinary, practice. Moreover, we tend to be prejudiced against «Johannes Factotum» teaching activities. I believe that cooperation is a key practice for trying to reconcile these conflicting interests. It is not easy to abandon the usual practice of individual research and teaching practice in order to develop boundary-breaking research and partnership with colleagues from different Departments.

I believe that several Brazilian universities have already established alternative structures to the traditional departmental divisions. At the University of Brasilia, where I work, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies was created some ten years ago and is now thriving, with around fifteen different nuclei, organized on an interdisciplinary basis around specific themes, such as Women's Studies, Environmental Studies, etc. We are in the process of creating one such nucleus, around the American Studies theme .

We must establish a dialogue bridging the competent islands of scholarly work; nevertheless, I believe that we also need to acquire some degree of competence in other fields. Personally, I am developing some research projects connecting literature and history, and literature and film.

I also think that it is extremely important to be honest with your students about the inevitable gaps in your mastery of such a vast and complex field; they never respond negatively, but rather engage in a more active role in the course activities. I usually count also on external help, by inviting colleagues from different departments to help me cover important aspects which must be included in the wide spectrum of BACSSs but with which I am not much familiar.

The nature of this challenging field poses some problems when we have to decide about the core of BACSSs – what it really is, and how to make sense of it. I would say that the process of designing a syllabus is quite problematic because we have to "encapsulate" such a broad and complex field within the rigid framework of the credit-course system. Post Modernism has given us the awareness of the collapse of the «grand recits». Post Structuralism has also provided us with a protean, ideological, discursive construction of power, language and culture. This atmosphere has encouraged a healthy reconceptualization of many important topics and the establishment of different paradigms for the interpretation and representation of British/North American Culture. Without being able to discuss this issue further at this stage of my presentation, I want to tell you that my strategy for coping with all this is to negotiate the syllabus, not only at the initial stage of the course but throughout its development, at the end of which they are required to provide an evaluation of the whole process.

Another problem which we will not be able to explore further here is related to the choice of material, especially now that we are witnessing the healthy expansion of the notion of text and textuality. And here I should just comment in passing that sometimes I miss the

comfort of the long gone normative textbook. However, the multifaceted nature of BACSSs requires that it be taught as a plurivocal experience conveyed through a variety of sources, both academic and non-academic.

Unfortunately, we have to rely more heavily on (mainly written) texts than on first-hand experiences. Other problems are related to the difficulty of getting primary sources and the variety of material that we need to incorporate in our courses, from a variety of fields such as TV, songs, films, academic books, literary texts, advertisement, newspapers, etc. And we all know that it is not that easy to keep this material up-dated, and that the limited resources in our universities impose severe limitations on our courses. On the other hand, we must be extremely careful to prevent our knowledge about these cultures from being restricted or filtered through particular ideological forces. The students lack material and opportunity but they do not lack intelligence and strongly react against any kind of sanitized information. One cannot help calling to mind Phillipson's notion of the «ethics of aid» which he develops in his book *Linguistic Imperialism*.

Encouraging an increasingly active, critical role on the part of the student has been proving quite rewarding. We can always cultivate an atmosphere in the classroom that might stimulate revisionist readings of authoritarian materials, the deconstruction of some ageold stereotypes and heritage myths. I always try to put into practice the concept of «parallax»; this «cryptic word» which recurs in Joyce's *Ulysses*; he borrows it from astronomy to illustrate the nowadays widely held belief that objects vary in appearance depending on the position of its viewer. Try, for example, to make your students learn one specific subject, say, some aspects of British education, as explored by sources as divergent as, for example, Anthony Sampson's *Anatomy of Britain*, Asa Briggs' *A Social History of England*, HMSO's *Britain in View*, and Monty Python's film *Clockwise*.

Moving to the realm of theory, what we witness today is a kind of «changing of the guard» in the academia, in the sense that, fortunately, we don't have to have our little gods any more, like when we were asked whether we were a Lacanian, a Foucauldian, a Derridean, a Marxist, Post Marxist, a Feminist, etc. On the other hand, I feel at pains to keep pace, without much success, with the theoretical revolution (or rather, «theoretical proliferation», «theoretical noise», as Stuart Hall puts it) that is taking place in our field in the last 25 years. As our Brazilian intellectual Roberto Schwarz well remarks, we have been moving fluently, perhaps also meaninglessly, through the several theoretical innovations that are designed in Europe and in the U.S.A. and supermarketed to the other countries in the world.

I sometimes feel uncomfortably unable to follow all this brilliant intellectual production because we have an importation timelag that hinders the reception of these new fashions; however, if you allow me a little joke here, I keep telling myself that our belatedness might be of some use in a near future, when we all hope that this new neoliberal fashion is out-moded before our country embarks in it full force.

Here, it is worth repeating Lentricchia's comments about theory; although he criticizes what he sees as the «smoke-screen of esoteric terminology», the «phlethora of critical vocabularies», he also remarks that to be against theory is to be against self-examination. (Graff & Gibbons, 1985:109)

As I firmly believe, like so many of us do, that we must politicize the aesthetics, that we must enrich the walled-in, platonic comforts of the campus by incorporating the challenging arena of politics, I would like to follow this line at this point in my paper and I would begin by quoting Stuart Hall (1992:278) in this respect:

«I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we have been able to

change anything or get anybody to do anything.» Concerned as he is with the marginality of the critical intellectuals who make very real effects in society, he adds:

What happens when an academic and theoretical enterprise tries to engage in pedagogies which enlist the active engagement of individuals and groups, tries to make a difference in the institutional world in which it is located?» He then claims for the «wordly affiliations» of Cultural Studies, i.e., the return of «the project of Cultural Studies from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below.

I have to confess my great difficulty in understanding some theoretical works but from what I have understood from my (not extensive) readings of Foulcaut, Gramsci, Althusser, Adorno, Bennet, Benjamin, Pecheaux, the British «trinity» Williams, Hoggart and Hall etc., I feel that apparently everything under the sun of theory and method can somehow relate to culture, civilization, power, hegemony, ideology, and their derivations. And these concepts have undergone a radical change, receiving a revolutionary, libertarian dimension. Nevertheless, we must try to translate this phenomenal production of knowledge into concrete praxis, or else this intellectual exercise might become just a sort of 'intellectual voyeurism'.

At this point I would like to formulate my political-theoretical preoccupations in two directions: the importation of knowledge produced abroad and the exportation of the knowledge that we produce about British/North-American culture.

The contemporary global setting has been increasingly described in terms of its geographical, social and economical interdependence. However, when we focus this notion down to our everyday academic experience, what we still observe is the usual practice of having these so-called new paradigms for BACSS produced in England and the U.S.A. and exported worldwide. We must keep in mind Stuart Hall's remarks that «Cultural Studies is also in the process of being more

widely institutionalized and commodified» (1992:293). We agree with him when he sees this institutionalization as a moment of profound danger, because that might affect the distinguishing characteristic of Cultural Studies as it was initially formulated, that is, its ultimate ideological purpose, trying to acknowledge the voice of the other in an engaged form of analysis.

We do not share a critical dialogue that would be extremely rich to both sides (i.e., us – them) and that would more faithfully reflect the much discussed post colonial status of hybridity that characterizes the contemporary world. Instead, we observe a monocular vision that has been adequately described as chauvinistic or provincial. In a book entitled *Exporting America: Essays on American Studies Abroad*, the American historian Robert Walker characterizes this scholarship as «dependent and derivative, a pale reflection of the genuine article»¹ (7).

I do not believe that British/North American scholars would very easily acknowledge the other-than-British / North American critical perspective, even though they write about the importance of developing cross-cultural awareness. However, I believe we should strive for the development of a different kind of international scholarship, one that would truly incorporate other perspectives which would formulate much richer questions and critiques.

Some of our Brazilian critics (unfortunately I do not know many, but I'll mention Antonio Cândido, Silviano Santiago, Eduardo Portela, Roberto Schwarz, Jorge Schwartz, of whom I think Oswald de Andrade was the brilliant forefather) have been working on what we could describe as the «criticism of transplants». Actually, several of our colleagues in some Brazilian universities have been further developing this extremely relevant aspect of our work; there is an

¹ Robert Walker, quoted in Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Dominguez, «Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism», *American Quarterly*, vol. 48, N° 3, Sep. 96, pp. 483.

increasing concern, I would even say an increasing impatience, and reaction against some attitudes of unquestioning subservience to eurocentric models, which sometimes function as if they were our superego. In this process of developing a more independent position on the part of our intellectuals, I believe we should try to make the most of the prevailing academic atmosphere which emphasizes the need for the legitimization of the voice of the other; our reading public should be expanded overseas to the same degree that we so enthusiastically welcome foreign (intellectual) production.

Some transnational discussions now made possible through internet are expanding this interchange. I believe we should make our voice loud enough to be heard because, as Césaire (1972:11) remarks in his book *Discourse on Colonialism: Exchange is oxygen*. A critical interface between different perspectives would, I believe, reveal otherwise hidden or ignored dimensions to the cultures involved in this dialectical exercise.

I would like to introduce the second political argument in this paper by quoting from Said's *Culture and Imperialism* : «the history of such fields as comparative literature, English Studies, cultural analysis, anthropology, can be seen as affiliated with empire and, in a manner of speaking, even contributing to its methods for maintaining Western ascendancy over non-Western natives.» But he also adds: «Our interpretative change of perspective allows us to challenge the sovereign and unchallenged authority of the allegedly detached Western observer» (Said, 1994:59). And it is to this second part of his statement that I think we should devote some attention.

Said expands Marcuse's notion of the one-dimensional society and Adorno's consciousness industry and throughout his fascinating book he argues for an epistemological revolution and for the development of what he calls a «hermeneutics of suspicion», for a «restorative interpretation» that would read the «cultural archive... not univocally but contrapuntally» (Said, 1994:308, 212, 59).

Things are more easily said than done. Unfortunately I do not have a magic formula that would translate these preoccupations into effective teaching strategies and research materials. Nevertheless, these preoccupations definitely inform/affect my regular academic activities, be it course design, choice of material, research interests, etc. But I believe we should advance further in this direction. We cannot pretend that we believe in the non-political nature of our work. We must free ourselves of the myth of academic freedom, according to which educational concerns can be divorced from social, political, and economic realities.

Said (1994:368) has commented on the «practice of self-confinement of the libertarian theoretical capital produced in the West». I believe that it is our turn to transform this extremely sophisticated theoretical capital into effective action of the sort that might benefit us as well.

I would like to finish my paper by quoting from professor Sergio Bellei's article «Brazilian Culture in the Frontier», published in the *Bulletin for Latin American Research* in 1995. He elaborates on this apparently very comfortable notion of mediation, according to which we have been promoted overnight, i.e., we are not imitators any more, but mediators; therefore, we do not have to feel guilty in continually and increasingly importing from Europe/U.S.A. He then concludes his argument (which is not as simple as I have made it here, of course) by warning us that «mediation may be very comforting but unfortunately unable to change existing social and economic conditions... Emphasizing mediation rather than open resistance tend to preclude rather than promote change.» (Belley, 1995:59).

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