

Editorial

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Where Does *Open Cultural Studies* Come from?

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Our new journal draws on a venerable history, even as it takes its inspiration from new technologies and desires of publishing and new interdisciplinary modes of thought and research.

The word ‘culture’ derives from the Latin *colere*, a verb to describe tending and developing agriculture. With the advent of capitalism’s division of labor, culture came both to *embody* instrumentalism and to *abjure* it, via the industrialization of farming, on the one hand, and the cultivation of individual taste, on the other. Eighteenth-century German, French, and Spanish dictionaries bear witness to a metaphorical shift from agricultural cultivation to spiritual elevation. As the spread of literacy and printing saw customs and laws passed on, governed, and adjudicated through the written word, cultural texts supplemented and supplanted physical force as guarantors of authority. With the Industrial Revolution, populations urbanized, food was imported, and textual forms were exchanged. An emergent consumer society produced such events as horse racing, opera, art exhibits, and balls. The impact of this shift was indexed in cultural labor: *poligrafi* in 15th-century Venice and hacks in 18th-century London wrote popular and influential conduct books. These works of instruction on everyday life marked the textualization of custom and the development of new occupations. Anxieties about cultural imperialism also appeared, via Islamic debates over Western domination.

In today’s humanities, theater, film, television, radio, art, craft, writing, music, dance, and electronic gaming are judged by criteria of representativeness and quality, as framed by practices of cultural criticism and history. For their part, the social sciences focus on the languages, religions, customs, times, spaces, and exchanges of different groups, as explored ethnographically or statistically. So whereas the humanities articulate differences within populations, through symbolic norms (for example, providing some of us with the cultural capital to appreciate high culture) the social sciences articulate such differences through social norms (for example, legitimizing inequality through doctrines of human capital).

An aesthetic discourse about culture sees it elevating people above ordinary life, transcending body, time, and place. Conversely, a folkloric discourse about culture expects it to settle us into society through the wellsprings of community, as part of daily existence. And a discourse about pop idealizes fun, offering secular transcendence through joy.

The connection of market entertainment to social identities has led to many varied reactions. Theorists from both right and left argue that newly literate publics are vulnerable to manipulation by demagogues. *Bourgeois* economics assumes that rational consumers determine what is popular culture, but concerns that people can be bamboozled by unscrupulously fluent ones have recurred throughout the modern period. Marxism has often viewed popular culture as a route to false consciousness that diverts the working class from recognizing its economic oppression; and feminist approaches have moved between condemning the popular as a similar distraction from gendered consciousness and celebrating it as a distinctive part of women’s culture.

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Cultural studies has been a productive progressive response to the phenomenon. Historical and contemporary analyses of slaves, crowds, pirates, bandits, minorities, women, and the working class have utilized archival, ethnographic, and statistical methods to emphasize day-to-day non-compliance with authority, via practices of popular-cultural consumption that frequently turn into practices of production. For example, UK research has lit upon Teddy Boys, Mods, bikers, skinheads, punks, school students, teen girls, Rastas, truants, drop-outs, and magazine readers as its magical agents of history—groups who deviated from the norms of schooling and the transition to work by generating moral panics. Scholar-activists examine the structural underpinnings to collective style, investigating how *bricolage* subverts the achievement-oriented, materialistic values and appearance of the middle class. The working assumption has often been that subordinate groups adopt and adapt signs and objects from dominant culture, reorganizing them to manufacture new meanings. The oppressed become producers of new fashions, inscribing alienation, difference, and powerlessness on their bodies.

Meanwhile, popular culture has become ever more central to economic and social life. A prosperous economic future lies in finance capital and ideology rather than agriculture and manufacturing—seeking revenue from innovation and intellectual property, not minerals or masses. The global trade in culture increased to US\$624 billion in 2011.

As a consequence, the canons of aesthetic judgment and social distinction that once separated humanities and social science approaches to the popular, distinguishing aesthetic tropes, economic needs, and social norms, are collapsing in on each other. The media are more than textual signs or everyday practices. Popular culture offers important resources to markets and nations—reactions to the crisis of belonging and economic necessity occasioned by capitalist globalization. It is crucial to advanced and developing economies alike, and can provide the legitimizing ground on which particular groups (e.g. African Americans, lesbians, the hearing-impaired, or evangelical Protestants) claim resources and seek inclusion in national and international narratives.

There remains a paradox and possibly a contradiction in cultural studies' engagement with the popular, because commodified fashion and convention learnt to respond almost gratefully to subcultures. For instance, even as the media and politicians announced that punks were folk devils and set in train various moral panics about their effect on society, the fashion and music industries were sending out spies to watch and listen to them as part of a restless search for new trends to market. Whenever the politics of spectacle is used effectively by social movements, advertising agencies watch on and parrot what they see. Capitalism appropriates its appropriators.

The need for an awareness of this double-edged investment in commodities, as objects of resistance whose very appropriation can then be re-commodified, makes socioeconomic analysis via critical political economy a good ally of representational analysis via close reading. A certain tendency on both sides has maintained that the two approaches are mutually exclusive: one is concerned with structures of the economy, the other with structures of meaning. But this need not be the case. Historically, the best critical political economy and the best close reading have worked through the imbrication of power and subjectivity at all points on the cultural continuum.

At a moment when the Global North uses culture as a selling point for deindustrialized societies, and the Global South does so for never-industrialized ones, we should focus on a nimble, hybrid approach that is governed not by the humanities or the social sciences, but by a critical agenda that inquires *cui bono*—who benefits and loses from such governmental and corporate maneuvers, who complains about the fact, and how can we learn from them?

Cultural studies' commitment to social justice as well as academic theorization and research has proven magnetic to many subordinate groups entering academia for the first time over the last fifty years. Hence the appeal of studying popular culture not only at the conventional scholarly metropolises in the US and the UK, but in Colombia, Brazil, Turkey, India, and other important sites that are all too accustomed to being theorized and analysed; and all too *unfamiliar* with being regarded as the *sources* of ideas, not merely places for their application.

Open Cultural Studies is thus a neat title, because it captures not only the desire of the publisher and editors to engage in the newest ways of sharing knowledge, but also matches cultural studies' own project.

We are especially happy to be able to assist authors whose first language is not English and are under pressure from their universities and governments to publish in this increasingly hegemonic academic form.

I want this new project to bring together the questions of subjectivity and power that animate our field, and to grapple with the difficult intellectual and political issues of our time as well as others. As populism rises in many parts of the world; as cosmopolitanism struggles with resurgent ethno-nationalism; as new military and immigrant crises emerge; and as a massive, new middle class forms even while inequality spreads, understanding how we live together—and struggle together—can enlighten us all.