

## **Cultural Studies in the United States and Multiculturalism**

Meyda Yegenoglu

The last decade has seen an enormous explosion as well as a rapid institutionalization and professionalization of cultural studies as a distinct academic field in the US. Although cultural studies is far from being a homogenous and uniform enterprise, a number of strands can easily be outlined today as its defining characteristics. As these are examined, it becomes clear that some have led to positive contributions, while some of the others carry potential risks and negative implications. After briefly discussing the positive aspects, I analyze in this article those trends within cultural studies that tend to reveal a negative nature.

First of all, one of the important gains of cultural studies is that it has provided a new approach. Its interrogation of the conventional distinction between high and low cultures has led to the widening of the definition of "culture" in such a way that the term now refers to a whole way of life. Consequently, various practices, from media and popular culture to sports and ethnic studies, that had traditionally been excluded from the canon by the high vs. low culture opposition have become legitimate topics of study.

Secondly, the advent of cultural studies has furthered the extension of critical methods developed in various fields by questioning the already established disciplinary boundaries and attempting to undo them. This attempt should be regarded as an effort also to interrogate and examine the nature of traditional disciplines themselves. An understanding of what these disciplines include and exclude gives insight into the production of knowledge effected within the context of power. It is a fact that this contribution of cultural studies has helped blur the division, after all artificial, between the humanities and social sciences, thus creating an interdisciplinary approach which in turn tolerates the use of different theoretical and methodological approaches.

Thirdly, the concept of culture as a field of monolithic and unified shared experiences has been challenged. Instead, a new notion of culture has been introduced, adjudging it as multiple and heterogeneous as well as a contested terrain. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, "culture [has now become] a name that is negotiated in different ways, for different purposes, given to different kinds

of things in different situations" ("Reflections on Cultural Studies in the Post-Colonial Conjuncture" 77). This has resulted in the acknowledgment of culture as an intermingling of different histories, languages, experiences and voices. Such a view has brought about the realization that certain voices, experiences and codes had been ignored by the monolithic definition of culture. The new understanding of culture afforded the perception that within the US, as well as between Western and Third World societies, inequalities and subordination created by the hegemonic culture were mapped out along lines of gender, race, and class. In other words, the recognition of multiplicity has provided an opportunity to consider the issue of "difference" against the hegemonic and ethnocentric codes of culture. Thus cultural studies has also become a handy name and tool for a fundamental challenge to the entire tradition of Western epistemology and the quest for certainty.

After this brief look at these three positive aspects of cultural studies, I wish to examine in the following pages some of the potential problems encountered in recent cultural studies debates, especially in those concerning multiculturalism, and the relationship of cultural studies to postcolonial criticism. I suggest that despite the important gains achieved in the proliferation of cultural studies, there are several risks and dangers in the way such discussions are staged. I would like to identify these as "moments of danger."

One of these "moments" may be identified as the trend toward the institutionalization, reification, and marketing of cultural studies as a distinct academic field. Such a trend carries the risk of converting cultural studies into one of the traditional disciplines. One indication of this tendency is the increasing number of cultural studies programs and job advertisements for candidates specialized in the field of cultural studies. Although cultural studies is neither a distinct field of study nor an area of specialization, such reification carries the risk of forcing it to conform to the terms and protocols of existing conventional disciplines. While one of the fundamental reasons for the wide attraction of cultural studies is its interdisciplinary character, such professionalization might serve to mitigate this.

Another "moment of danger" has to do with the ways a variety of notions, such as "otherness," "authenticity," "marginality," "voice," and "experience," have been appealed to in cultural studies discussions. In the remainder of the article, I would like to engage in a critical dialogue with the ways in which such notions are evoked in these debates.

The increasing awareness of the different experiences of marginalized groups and the varied dimensions of the histories of these groups has led to the realization of the need to hear their hitherto suppressed voices. On the other hand, it has also been suggested that the recognition of different cultural identities constructed around the categories of race, class, and gender is crucial to destabilizing the traditional Eurocentric conception of culture and identity. While admitting the importance of

such recognition, I would like to point to a risky and unhealthy tendency in privileging the *authority of experience* in such debates.

The acknowledgment of different lived experiences offers the opportunity for marginalized "others" to join everyday and academic life, and to insert themselves into canonical historiography. However, it has led rather unproblematically to a particular form of politics, by which experience is regarded as the ultimate ground for measuring whether one is entitled to speak on behalf of a particular marginalized group or not. Such a politics is fraught with many difficulties. First of all, to accept the authority of experience as the ultimate ground of cultural difference and identity is to neglect the fact that identities are complex, contradictory, and have shifting grounds. Secondly, it implies establishing a direct correlation between one's racial, ethnic, or gendered identity and the (political) position one adopts. This carries the risk of reiterating the essentializing gesture of Eurocentricism which cultural studies wants precisely to combat. Thirdly, the privileging of experience has resulted in highlighting the personal through a confessional or testimonial politics. However, appeals to notions of authenticity and to the autobiographical and confessional testimonies of marginalized groups as the ground of cultural politics carry the risk of a new Orientalism (see Said). The privileging of one's own authenticity and voice as documents of marginality has led to discussions about who is entitled to speak. Increasingly, a confessional voice in the form of "as a black woman, I ... ", "as a third world person, I ... " is heard. The question of "speaking as" implies generalizing oneself and making oneself the representative of the group that one identifies oneself with. In the ideology of "speaking as," marginality is made identical with determining whether one is sufficiently marginal or not, thus leading to tokenization, which in turn leads to another form of silencing by the hegemony.

Parallel to the emphasis on "speaking as," the ideology of "listening to someone as" has also become a widespread trend in cultural studies. Yet, when hegemonic and privileged people desire to hear the marginal groups "speaking as," a serious problem arises: these groups are used as token figures, and as an alibi to deflect much deeper problems. It is difficult to deny that tokenization goes hand in hand with ghettoization. Such tokenization may be witnessed, for example, in the recent academic hiring processes. Today almost every university department in the United States is eager to hire at least one ethnic, woman, gay or lesbian faculty member so as not to become the target of criticism for racism, sexism, or homophobia. While the welcoming of members of these groups into these establishments has several benefits, their acceptance nevertheless serves as an alibi for managing to evade the truly difficult questions of reforming the ethnocentric, racist and sexist structure of institutions and traditional disciplines. Thus those groups who have privileged access to such institutions can comfortably continue to occupy positions of privilege without encountering any veritable challenge. For, after all, their departments and institutions have allocated space for minorities to voice interests

and concerns, thus implying that such interests and concerns are not really the problems of the privileged.

Moreover, when one is perceived as a token and is entitled to speak only in a clearly delimited space, one is paradoxically silenced in a particular way. My own experience in the United States as a Ph.D. student is a good illustration of what I mean. As a Turkish woman, I was constantly asked to speak about my culture, the women in my country, and so on. My dissertation was about representations of the veiled Oriental woman in Orientalist discourse. Hence my object of study was not Muslim women at all, but, rather, how the West represented them historically. Despite this, I was required to transform myself into a "native informant" and expected to provide knowledge about these women, to the scrutinizing gaze of "Westerners." In and of itself there is nothing wrong with the desire to learn about other cultures, of course. But what I am questioning here is the desire to position me in a particular way-I was eagerly given space in so far as I enacted the role of the representative of Third World or Muslim women. In other words, what was expected of me was to speak for and represent Muslim women or Turkish women and thereby speak in the "native voice." Such a desire may be seen as the symptom of an ideology in which "others" are merely a group of people from whom information has to be retrieved, reported and investigated; an ideology which completely avoids the challenge of being investigated by those "others." When I refused to be positioned in the way wanted of me, and began to speak theoretically about the West's relation to its "others," I realized that I was being denied many of the privileges granted to those who agreed to perform the role of the "native informant." The problem here is that Third World people or minority groups are not considered entitled to speak in a general theoretical language, for this is believed to be an exclusively Western provenance. This is what I mean by paradoxical silencing.

The prescription of a restricted space for the Other has other implications as well. For one, the sanctioning of nativism in the name of recognizing the voice and the cultural difference of minorities makes particularism gain the upper hand. In other words, when minorities try to avoid the pitfalls that Eurocentricism and essentialism pose for them, by particularizing their own identities and interests, they are not without running into other serious problems. It is important to be vigilant about the fact that the critique of Eurocentricism or Orientalism cannot be accomplished by privileging particularism, for particularism and Eurocentricism are never in real conflict. On the contrary, they reinforce and supplement each other, and exist in a mutually supporting and complementing relationship. That is to say, they are intimately tied to each other as accomplices. In this sense, particularism can never provide a serious critique of Eurocentricism or universalism. Put in another way, particularism (such as the privileging of nativism) and Eurocentricism are two sides of the same coin, for both are based on an essentialist notion of identity. Consequently, criticism of one cannot be made without the criticism of the other, for particularist politics continues to imprison

other cultures within conventional disciplinary boundaries, namely area studies, and thereby keeps the Orientalist problematic intact.

I propose, instead, a critical examination of the myth of "authenticity." Such an examination entails a vigilance against the restoration of the idealist belief which sees the native as an absolute entity. It also implies interrogation of the assumption that Eurocentricism would wither away if the truth of the minorities were restored, since such an "inner" truth would provide a better, and more correct understanding of "others." What I am saying is that, in its effort to critique Western Eurocentricism and its disdain for the culturally different, cultural studies should avoid turning the disparaged Other into an object of glory and admiration, for this would only augment the ideological premises of Eurocentricism. The glorification not only keeps intact the premises of Eurocentricism, but more importantly implies assimilating the voice of the Other to the project of Orientalism. Thus, rather than try to restore the lost authenticity of the Other in a benevolent gesture, cultural studies scholars should acknowledge the radical untranslatability of the Other if they wish to avoid being an accomplice in the transformation of this Other into a manageable and comforting reverse image of the West. The basic question is not whether the Other can be given its authentic origin back or not, but what the fascination with the native implies. As Rey Chow points out, with the attempt to retrieve the native voice in the name of challenging Eurocentricism or universalism, "we step far too quickly into the silent and invisible place of the native and turn ourselves into the living agents/witnesses for her" (37). What then is the gain in attempts to resurrect the authenticity of the native? Such attempts, far from rendering the native audible, enrich the studying subject with a surplus value, a value that results from substituting the negative image of the native with a more positive one, while retaining the hegemonic status of the studying subject. Such a substitution cannot go beyond a mere reversal, and keeps intact the opposition between the subject and object of investigation. In other words, whether with positive or negative images, the construction of the native as an object of investigation continues. Spivak, Indian postcolonial critic, is addressing this problem when she proposes to protest against both the object formation and the subject constitution, resulting in either the subaltern's protection from her own kind or her achievement as a voice assimilable to the project of imperialism ("Can the Subaltern Speak?").

From Spivak's "project of imperialism," I want to move on to the relationship of cultural studies with postcolonial criticism, and the status of cultural studies vis-à-vis the international context. Although there are attempts to take this context into consideration, it is difficult to argue that cultural studies has also become a study of the contemporary global culture. Yet, the phenomenon of migrants in metropolitan space, and the neo-colonial relationship the West has with various Third World countries have made cultural studies a relevant area for the study of colonial and postcolonial discourse. However, as Spivak indicates, cultural studies, with its sophisticated vocabulary for cultural descriptions, can, on the contrary, sometimes

sanction global ignorance if it fails to distinguish between the patterns of exploitation and marginalization of disenfranchised groups within the US, and the various operations of colonization in the rest of the world ("The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Cultural Studies"). Although the US is acknowledged as a multicultural society, composed of groups who are differentially located in relation to centers of power and privilege, the insular multicultural debates are not a reflection of the global picture that Spivak continually wants to bring to our attention. For this reason, Spivak suggests that "we negotiate between nationalism (uni- or multicultural) and globality" ("The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Cultural Studies" 792).

Therefore, another potentially negative aspect of cultural studies debates in the US can be regarded as the limitation of the discussion of marginality and Otherness within the national context. In such cases, "imperialism," as a transnational phenomenon, is dismissed as irrelevant. This is part of the ongoing new anthropological tendency to de-emphasize the colonial situation.

Related to the above, one last "moment of danger" this paper pinpoints has to do with the issue of who claims marginality and becomes identified as "postcolonial." The identification of the Third World with the experience of the minorities of US nationals, and the conception of the experience of the indigenous Third World elite as representative of the Third World, fail to distinguish between the nature of the subordination of national minorities and the ways in which colonization and imperialism operate in the Third World. The danger here lies in sanctioning global ignorance and making ethnic, racial, Third World, and colonial studies an alibi for not developing an understanding of the international context.

After briefly outlining the positive contributions of cultural studies in the US, I have indicated "moments of danger" in ongoing debates that afford implications of negative developments. In lieu of conclusion, I would like to express a wish: it is only when marginality is not used as a handy signifier, and when a sense of the problematic of neo-colonialism is developed, that cultural studies can start furthering a cosmopolitan and global understanding of "culture."

### **Works Cited**

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