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New Europe, new cultural studies?

Joke Hermes, Ann Gray and Pertti Alasuutari

Editors, European Journal of Cultural Studies

We have recently received a number of strong articles emanating from areas of Europe previously underrepresented in this journal, the majority being authored by academics local to the regions. At the instigation of our Assistant Editor, Pekka Rantanen, we have gathered them together into this themed section. With the recent enlargement of the European Union (EU), it seems timely to address the existence of a new Europe. Arguably, the political developments leading to the expansion affected not only the new EU Member and Applicant States but the whole of Europe, which itself is a concept evading exact geographical definition. As can be seen from the articles in this collection, the work of cultural studies scholars in these countries provides us with a lens through which to look at the ongoing development of the New Europe. In addition, it addresses the question of the use that cultural studies will be in understanding processes of transition in the new Member States and what could be called 'the Balkans'. In these regions, consumer culture is developing at a great rate and political frameworks are being rethought. Therefore, the themed section in this issue aims to do two things: it follows local researchers as they take up the theoretical canon of cultural studies in order to understand what is happening in their countries; and it offers a first step towards rethinking and challenging this very canon and its often unwitting Western Eurocentrism.

Generally, three thematic concerns are addressed across the articles. The first is a discussion of (practices of) representation and the construction of identities. Thus, as Andrew Hammond's analysis of British and American travel writing shows, observers coming from the West find little to recommend in the Balkans other than savagery and backwardness. From a diametrically opposed perspective, Zala Volcic reports on interviews with 60 Serbian intellectuals and how they use the metaphor of the West to structure their self-image while resisting, yet reworking, such imagery.



A second thematic area is constituted by practices of consumption and changes wrought in popular culture. Keller, Yasar and Vidmar-Horvat all address the recent introduction of new media and cultural forms and practices. Their case studies range from mobile phone advertising in post-socialist Estonia, to football in Turkey and reception of the American television series *Ally McBeal* in Slovenia. Here, we can see many similarities between Western Europe and post-socialist nations regarding the politics of popular culture and consumption. Thus neo-liberal economies are reshaping patterns of popular culture and everyday life.

A third and intertwined theme is the political dimension, both in practices of representation and in (new) popular cultural practice. In 'western' cultural studies, politics has become an article of faith whereby left-wing, progressive politics are good and conservative politics are bad. The work emerging from nations in transition questions these simplistic oppositions and it is clear that 'western cultural studies' can learn much from this work.

One immediate and obvious challenge is the need to address our notion of the political. While cultural studies has broadened notions of the political to include the politics of everyday life and practices of inclusion and exclusion, very little attention has been paid to state politics and questions of governance, policy and administration. There are strong arguments for rewriting this agenda, especially in relation to the New Europe. If cultural studies is to be of any relevance for newly-developed local research practices, it needs to engage with politics anew. That is, beyond a naive, if hopeful, understanding of 'progressive' politics to include issues of governance as part of changing everyday practice and popular culture.

There is more. What this group of articles clearly demonstrates is the need for further reflexivity when using the familiar categories and concepts developed within cultural studies. Through their interviews with intellectuals and the life-stories of refugees, Volcic and Huttunen respectively demonstrate that existing categories must be questioned in order to understand practices of representation. As for Hammond's travel writers who resort to established images, it is all too easy to speak of either the Balkans, or of the West as 'the Other', but the challenge is in reflexively applying such terms. To revisit a valuable part of the neo-Marxist legacy, this is to denaturalize and demythologize accepted notions and knowledges. For example, as Huttunen notes, we would do well to question assumptions that the war in Bosnia was fuelled by ancient hatred. Instead, we might question notions of 'home' and belonging in relation to their elasticity and the ways in which these may be politicized and depoliticized. Strong categories, like strong identities, hardly benefit multicultural understanding. This is a reminder, of course, that Europe is far from being a unitary system of nation-states but is in transition to a multicultural space contested by, among other things, global flows of



people. There is, then, an urgent need to rethink what nationalism in Europe might mean in the future.

The remaining three papers in this section look at western-derived popular forms. Yazar argues that football formed one of the domains through which the New Right in Turkey assured its hegemony, and that political development was not unlike that in the US or the UK. She argues that individual politicians, rather than the success of a national team, initially established the popularity of football. It was then taken up by media in developing a consumerist ideology within the context of fandom.

Keller and Vidmar-Horvat too address notions of individualism as an integral part of recently-introduced western media formats. Keller examines the advertising of mobile phones in Estonia, and Vidmar-Horvat explores the reception of *Ally McBeal* by young women in post-socialist Slovenia. The articles in this themed section are indicative of the value of empirical work and reflexive research practice. More ethnographies which explore the experience of local people in Europe are needed, so that the texture of lived cultures can be revealed. In this, and other forms of research, the legacy of cultural studies can be discussed and contested in these transitional and fluid contexts.

There is much to learn and reflect upon, as work emerging out of new formations of Europe holds up a mirror to the old Europe. In the spirit of promoting dialogue and the reinvention of what cultural studies might be, we thank our contributors and wish you pleasant reading.