

Introduction

Global Cultural Studies?

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It is the fall of 2022 as we are getting this collection of essays ready for publication. A global pandemic is still gripping the world after three long years, while brutal wars are raging on most continents. As global warming is manifesting itself undeniably and right-wing populisms are continuing their comeback, young people around the world are politicized and radicalized at levels long unseen. In this time of crises, the once-celebrated notion of an interconnected world has taken on a negative connotation. “Globalist” is now a slur in many political contexts. While the notion of one dominating whole is being rejected, the proximate – local and national – is cultivated instead. Concerns about the reliability of supply chains and energy autonomy add a pragmatic dimension to these re-energized local and national orientations.

The result is the sense of a battle between the local and the global in which the image of the patriotic, grounded, and traditional national citizen is pitted against the similarly idealized notion of the just, equality-minded, and forward-thinking global citizen. This begs several questions: What does it mean to be conscious of global problems and is that even an actual possibility? Is our sense of the “global” ever more than our perspective and interests projected onto the wider world? By the same token, can one root oneself within local frameworks without involvement in a bigger picture? And most importantly: Is it moral to prefer one to the other?

Cultural studies has a particular responsibility to take on these debates. It might not be within our power to “solve” such large issues altogether, but we can at the very least try to address them on our home turf: the analysis of cultural productions and practices. Taking its departure from the concept of “positionality,” perhaps the most important single term in cultural studies, this book attempts to shine new light on localisms and globalisms alike by re-engaging with key texts and propositions in cultural studies thinking. Rather than relying on “expert” elucidations by established scholars, our book has young researchers and students from India and Germany tackle questions of positionality and transnationality from their own positions within various local, global, and, not least, disciplinary networks.

The essays have emerged from two seminars designed to make young scholars expound, debate, and ponder their ideas in dialogue with seminal thinkers in cultural studies, from Stuart Hall to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. As the output of a

community of thinking, first developed in the seminar context, the essays represent diverse ideas and movements that not only have the potential to shape further work in cultural studies, but also already create important output along intersectional lines and across gender, religious, cultural, and continental boundaries.

Ours is of course not the first publication to ask if there can be a global cultural studies. In an important mid-1990s take on this question, Jon Stratton and Ien Ang responded in the negative. “On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies” (1996) was a wake-up call for the field, and the essay proves more relevant than ever in the present day. As the two scholars point out, the academic cultures of cultural studies are far from offering “an ‘ideal speech situation’ in which everybody holds the same power to speak and be heard.”¹ Upon closer inspection, they note, the much-touted “internationalism” of the field reveals itself to be an English-speaking and increasingly American-dominated hegemony.² These tendencies continue in present-day cultural studies and need to be interrogated, as our volume strives to signal with its questioning title: “Global Cultural Studies?”

However, this volume is not simply an exploration of such criticism from a purely theoretical standpoint. Rather, it performs a more substantial disruption of the Anglo-American monologue. The volume is divided into five sections consisting of two to three individual essays each. The sections and contributions have been chosen with freedom of thought and word in mind. Nothing can be more important in these times than providing space for independent, varied thought from a variety of sources as an opportunity for everyone to exercise agency through their own voice. Positionality served as a fitting and relevant issue of ignition within the seminar, and, therefore, also as a structural starting point for its resulting texts, provoking a number of highly personal essays that make up the first section, simply titled *Positionalities*.

At the same time, contributors also developed their ideas around more traditional topics, such as the theoretical roots of the discipline itself or the intricacies of the concept of feminism and what it means to different people in different places. Feminism proved to be a “hot topic” in seminar discussions, especially in terms of the different national and transnational frameworks under consideration. Thus, *Feminisms* was the logical choice for section two, encompassing a wide variety of experiences, ideas, and demands represented in two texts for the volume.

Using the plural in section titles reflects the diversity in the many spirited essays submitted as well as in the equally spirited seminar discussions. The plural also pertains to the activity of studying culture itself. Not only is it hard to reconcile the German *Kulturwissenschaften* with its English-language counterparts, but the Indian perspective especially prompted questions regarding the notion of a united global cultural studies. What do different schools in our field still have in common today? The discipline itself has, from its very inception, made a point of moving away from

¹ John Stratton and Ien Ang, “On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies: ‘British’ Cultural Studies in an ‘International’ Frame,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues*, edited by Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley (London: Routledge, 1996), 361–391, quotation: 362.

² See *ibid.*, 363–368.

its Marxist roots and establishing a *modus operandi* of constant evolution. It is therefore this issue, namely meditating on Marxism and what cultural studies is today and can be tomorrow, that was chosen as the third and once again plural section *Marxist Perspectives*, focusing strongly on established theories in dialogue with possible new directions.

To make sure that the volume's commitment to individual agency and the balance between larger frameworks and the granular detail of particular situations is maintained, the last two sections are dedicated to developing specific scholarly projects and personal perspectives on the collaborative work of the seminar and this publication project. Offering a glimpse into evolving projects, the fourth section, *From Theory to Practice*, offers a broad span of case studies: from a discussion of the cultural role of food in India as an indicator of societal standing to a film-focused analysis of the idea of female "suicidality" to matters of disability in Germany and across the globe.

In the fifth and final section, then, one scholar from Germany and India each was able to take the opportunity to draw their personal conclusions from months of scholarly work, in the form of essays that articulate the thoughts and theoretical developments of and among the participants throughout the debates they engaged in. These last contributions hopefully provide readers with insights into how an academic experiment like this one is able to operate, and how it can be continued. In this spirit, the final section is titled *In Place of a Conclusion*.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank every single participant of the seminars for their engaged contributions, some of which we have been able to feature here, but all of which informed and enlivened the project. In anticipation of the further series that this volume inaugurates, I was honoured to be tasked with the responsibility of editing its very first instalment. I do not consider myself a conventional candidate: A teacher by trade, having stumbled into the field of cultural studies only shortly before the conclusion of my studies, I would never have imagined myself editing a book like this a year ago. Thus, the process has been a source of growth for me – not only in my thinking, but also in my sense of connection to cultural studies as a community and in my understanding of the field itself. My conclusion: Cultural studies truly is a wide-open space of learning and debating for anyone willing and able to contribute. The list of people and institutions to thank for their role in making this volume a reality is lengthy and collected in the *Acknowledgments*. However, dear reader, I cannot finish this introduction without making sure to thank you as well. No text will ever come to life without someone reading it, devouring it, rearranging it in the way only an individual, unique reader can. I hope that you enjoy diving into this book as much as I enjoyed helping to create it. Fare well on your journey through a diverse critical landscape!