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## CULTURAL STUDIES IN COLOMBIA

### Cartographies of encounters, tensions and conjunctures

*This article presents an always risky cartography of the institutionalization of the field of Cultural Studies in Colombia in the 1990s. The article starts with a personal narration on how the author was introduced to this novel field by entering the first graduate programme in Cultural Studies in Colombia. Here, it locates the major tensions, stereotypes and loud silences characteristic of the social sciences in Colombia in which this institutionalization was infused and also threatened by the 1990s. But far from thinking that this recent event inaugurated an intellectual project thanks to the importation of theories and methodologies at this moment, the article describes previous intellectual traditions like the one influenced by the works of Orlando Fals Borda that had challenged positivist and neutral intellectual approaches to major problems in Colombia. Also, it highlights the influence that the work of Jesús Martín Barbero had through his paramount work on media and mediation since the 1970s. Afterwards, the article succinctly contextualizes the institutionalization of Cultural Studies in the 1990s through the emergence of the Ministry of Culture and the multicultural mantra and a whole scholarly and state's concern for cultural industries and culture policies. Finally, it describes the 'perverse confluences' between these new events and the arrival of neoliberal policies that had radically changed and challenged Colombian public and private universities. The article concludes with a contrasting image between a multiplication of interests, programmes, departments, conferences and publications in Cultural Studies in the larger universities in Colombia and their rampant transformation through the new scripts of audit cultures, indexation and the whole quantification of knowledge production.*

**Keywords** academic disciplines; conjunctures; *Estudios Culturales*; Cultural Studies; institutionalization; neoliberalism; Colombia

## Introduction

In a key article intended to grasp the specificity of the intellectual trajectories of Cultural Studies, Grossberg (1997, p. 244) starts his argument with a

paradoxical enunciation: the absence of any definition becomes key to understanding its nature. Despite the different reactions that this argument might provoke, the author defends his introductory statements by employing a further argument throughout the article: the inescapable need always to contextualize our intellectual projects according to the answers, problems and methodologies sought, as well as our desire to transform complex and diverse social and cultural hierarchies (see also Mato 2002). Grossberg argues, further, that this burden implies that the definition of the intellectual and political project behind Cultural Studies is intrinsically mobile, constantly refashioned within an ever-changing set of questions and answers, problematic, and contexts: that it *matters*. And it is to be hoped that, while recognizing the complex ways in which the label of *Estudios Culturales* Cultural Studies has become fashionable enough in Colombia for undergraduate and graduate departments in Colombia to mushroom in less than seven years, we will be able to create more critical agendas than the ones merely imposed by the radical transformation of the universities in the country during the same period. And even though these vectors and this array of desires and frustrations within the established disciplines have placed Cultural Studies strategically at the core of the larger public and private universities, I remain interested in retaining Grossberg's (1997) call to reaffirm the Cultural Studies project *per se*: that is, that what we do matters within the economic, political and cultural formations, contexts, conjunctures and contingencies of Colombia and Latin America.

Certainly, many pages could be written on what exactly Grossberg meant by his statement that the Cultural Studies project or its definition *matters*. How does it matter? What matters? Why does it matter? Who matters? Indeed, radically different intellectual and political projects may proceed depending on the answers to these questions. This article does not and will not explore this aspect. However, it will enquire into the different answers these questions have received in Colombia and that have become definitive landmarks in the provisional (and very risky) cartography I am attempting to provide here of the history of Cultural Studies in Colombia, and more specifically, of its rapid academic institutionalization in the country. Nor do I wish to claim that many of the central points on the trajectory I outline were necessarily considered by their authors to be contributions to the Cultural Studies field, or conversation. Quite the opposite in fact: both in the Latin American and Colombian academic fields it is much more common to encounter a rejection of the Cultural Studies label, for many different kinds of reason (Mato 2000). These include the rejection of other intellectual practices outside the immediate academic site, the marginalization of previous Latin American academic traditions and dependency on metropolitan academic ones and the increasing academic focus and the consequent depoliticization of the intellectual project (Mato 2000). And even though the usual suspects (yes, the hard core disciplines of the social sciences) have spearheaded these debates in papers,

conferences and in the corridors of many universities, the fact is that the rapid institutionalization of Cultural Studies in undergraduate and graduate programmes poses crucial questions and implies serious paradoxes not only because of Grossberg's admonition, but in general, for the contemporary intellectual projects in Colombia that wish to stick with the label.

The article starts by offering a brief description of the frustrations that the cohort of students I formed a part of felt while undertaking our undergraduate studies and the reading assigned us. Succinctly, it describes the readings, problems, loud silences, internal colonialisms and provincialisms that characterized our vivid debates. It also refers to the larger context of the rapid transformation affecting the public and private universities in the country and how these converged with the establishment of new networks with PhD and Master's programmes overseas. This section also indicates unacknowledged critical and intellectual traditions that not only made it harder for public intellectuals to perform a neutral role, but also expanded the range of what were considered serious research objects, introducing topics such as popular culture, media and globalization to academic study in Colombia.

The second section follows some of these trends to set out the contours of the discussion concerning the possibility of developing a Cultural Studies conversation in Colombia. Quite clearly, as Martín-Barbero (1997, p. 53), one of the central actors of this story has highlighted, 'Latin America [and Colombia] did not adopt Cultural Studies once it had become a fashionable label; it has a very long and different history'. This section discusses the previous traditions of critical thinking in Colombia that the Cultural Studies conversations encountered soon after they became institutionalized. I would argue that although trends in popular education were crucial for these encounters when they were finally occurred in Colombia, they were in no way similar to the approach developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University in the UK,<sup>1</sup> which was aimed at a particular pool of students that included workers, professionals, teachers and so on. As I describe in the following sections, this conversation has been institutionalized in the larger public and private universities in Colombia right from the beginning.

By illustrating the efforts of individual scholars and the organization of conferences and research centres, I also attempt to delineate the most important networks that spearheaded this academic institutionalization in the country. I am interested in showing how these articulations forged in different moments and institutions were significant in orienting the problems, research agendas and methodologies that Cultural Studies programmes have undertaken from their origins until today. In my conclusions, I discuss what I consider to be the potential for cross-dialogues between different focuses of critical thinking and action both in Latin America and elsewhere, and in the academic and non-academic worlds. I am aware of the dangers of setting Cultural Studies up as everything and nothing. But I want to insist on the tremendous

opportunity that our research and our intellectual, political and pedagogical projects signify for Colombia if we are to be able to draw from different literatures and areas of knowledge and encounter the best intellectual tools with which to diagnose and transform social, cultural and economic hierarchies. Thus, moving away from a stable definition of the Cultural Studies project in Colombia, I wish to examine the potential that these different conversations might have both for theorizing power structures and their residues and for advancing critical pedagogical projects within and outside the academic site in Colombia.

### **The notorious ‘postmodern debate’ in Colombia**

I speak as a member of a generation of students that, as young undergraduates at the end of the 1990s, received its initial exposure to literature outside the cluster of canonical texts habitually assigned in social sciences departments. We studied at private universities, generally in anthropology departments, where we experienced a sense of generational bias and frustration at the literature and research projects that were legitimized by our disciplines. My location was even more paradoxical, as I studied within the archaeology programme that formed a part of the larger Department of Anthropology at the Universidad de Los Andes. There, Cristobal Gnecco, a new professor who came from the public University of the Cauca in the south-western city of Popayán started teaching a course on ‘Archaeology and Multivocality’. It was the first time I had been assigned readings by Foucault, Jameson, Lyotard, Feyerabend and so on, together with discussions spearheaded by post-processual archaeologists such as Ian Hodder, Christopher Tilley and Daniel Miller. Yes, we had had our Marx in the first years of undergraduate studies, but not much of Gramsci or Althusser or the neo Marxists, not to mention someone like Stuart Hall. Surprisingly, a Colombian anthropologist, Arturo Escobar, someone we had barely heard of, was quoted by George Marcus (1995) one of the apostles of the postmodernism debate through his classic co-edited *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) in his article on the multi-sited ethnography.

The translation of Escobar’s *Encountering Development* (1995) in 1996 was very significant to our debates and also for Colombia anthropology. Several collections of books and research agendas produced by the Colombian Institute of Anthropology were labelled under the guise of the ‘anthropology of modernity’. These developed many of Escobar’s insights for approaching what were, for us, new research objects, such as the State, the development apparatus, discourse, social movements and globalization (Uribe and Restrepo 1997, Archila and Pardo, 2001). Perhaps because of the violence that affected

the whole country and made long-term fieldwork almost impossible, perhaps because we rejected the traditional study of exotic objects and people that had been the norm in Colombian anthropology, or perhaps simply because we were fascinated by the novelty of these approaches when compared with the rigid customary division between disciplines, we embraced these new perspectives together with a very superficial initial reading of Foucault and other metropolitan authors. And very certainly, at that time, we had read very little of the rich and complex Latin American intellectual tradition, with the exception of one or two brief mentions of Orlando Fals Borda's (1979, 1981, 1984, 1986) four volume work on the 'Double History' of Colombia's Caribbean Coastal Region (*Historia Doble de la Costa*) and Jesús Martín Barbero's *De los medios a las mediaciones* (1987). I read Néstor García Canclini's *Culturas Híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1989) during my class on 'Peasants' while studying for my undergraduate degree, and enthusiastically appreciated how neglected objects of study such as popular cultures, artisan products and museums could also become full-blown anthropological objects if the researcher was prepared to move away from the binary notions of tradition and modernity.

But though it remained true that at this point the Colombian undergraduate programme consisted of an intense training in the discipline that lasted five years, academic, our academic careers only really began in the last years of our undergraduate studies. Many of our central reading assignments (e.g. *Writing Culture*) had been published almost 10 years previously, while others were merely superficial caricatures. We were starting to discuss problems concerning the politics of the past, state and nation-making processes, heritage issues and ideology. As undergraduate students of anthropology, we were also concerned with steering the traditional study of Colombian anthropology away from indigenous studies to something different that we had not quite identified but that we felt sure would involve the fashionable worlds of power, regimes of truth, postmodernism and processes of normalization. I can still remember how from the windows of their classroom the hard-line archaeology undergraduates threw sheets of paper at us, covered with information about the Sokal affair, the science wars and so on. We did not understand exactly what those flying accusations were all about. In this very provincial academic environment, we believed that we were the only ones reading this *avant-garde* and that we were living through our own local version of the science wars. I believed or was made to believe (I cannot remember which) that the older faculty members at our university, and even more the teaching staff at the public universities, were still unhealthily dominated by figures we characterized as old Marxists or liberal positivists.

Not surprisingly, we neglected (or did not even read) the work of Colombian anthropologists such as Luis Guillermo Vasco, who had already said and written many things about his experiences working with indigenous

movements in the 1970s and 1980s (Vasco 2002), that resonated with our own novel and exciting discoveries. Not to mention the effort of many anthropologists who had connected their study of indigenous groups with issues of violence, modernization, globalization and so on (Correa 1993). We were repeatedly scolded for reading *postmodernism*; worse: for being *bourgeois* and *postmodern*. Needless to say, at that time, we had not figured out the different legacies and radical distinctions between these debates (*the postmodern debate*) and the more rigorous and material research agenda that characterized the Birmingham Cultural Studies tradition (Grossberg 1996). But the postmodern label has stayed in place until today and has been used erroneously by academics to characterize poststructural agendas such as that of Arturo Escobar (see Figueroa 2009) among others, whose work has been focused precisely on the material and real effects of the development apparatus. But in the corridors of many social science departments in Colombia, the term *postmodern* would be used to describe and to stereotype many of the vectors I will set out over the following pages.

I want to underscore how these readings and discussions also spearheaded processes of (self or collective) identification that constructed enemies and adversaries by recourse to long periods of loud silence. It was more a sense of pride than of mature and well established research agendas, of dialogue with students in other programmes or of projects what we were seeking to advance. And more, as one learned over the years, these debates were advancing in the complete absence, or in conscious ignorance of, previous critical intellectual traditions that had developed in different places, and even in Colombia. And from the moment in which we were exposed to these new literatures, some students began to look for Master's or PhD programmes overseas to continue developing their insights. This search coincided with the overall restructuring processes that our private university was undergoing and that in a couple of years would extend to other private and public universities as well. This process included, among other radical transformations, the need to increase the number of staff within the faculty pool with PhDs. As there were just a few or no graduate programmes – with the exception of the recognized PhD programme in History at the largest public university, the *Universidad Nacional* and it was more or less difficult to find grants and fellowships, many of my cohort of students emigrated, to start their graduate studies in the US and the UK. I was to take that path almost 10 years later. In the meantime, with the new desires and expectations about the need to undertake graduate studies that were starting to extend to a whole generation of middle, upper-middle and upper class students, I had to wait for a couple of years so that *something* that seemed to be what we were looking for appeared in Colombia. This did not necessarily need to be something with the *cultural studies* label, but it was important that it had some sort of connection with the major authors we were proud of having read and who we characterized as *postmodern*.

## Old and new articulations: the committed intellectual tradition and the critique of social sciences

Needless to say, this very parochial and provincial history, which is characteristic of Colombian academia with very few processes of dialogue and almost as few research agendas. This situation persists today; it is a clear distorting factor, and at times results in blindness to the range of extremely rich and mature research initiatives developed in other Colombian academic institutions. But almost at the same time, we were exposed to these new readings, to national and international congresses and networks of international and national scholars that had already established the *Cultural Studies* label in the country. Spearheaded in the main by individual faculty and independent research centres within the larger universities, several congresses and symposiums had already begun to advance critiques of the established disciplines and epistemologies of the social sciences long before we took our classes. Most of these initiatives did not use the Cultural Studies label at all; but their critique of the established social sciences and humanities converted them into landmarks of the kind of intellectual work I am interested in delineating here. For example, there was a long-established tradition of the committed-intellectual established with the foundation of the Sociology Department at the *Universidad Nacional* (National University) by Orlando Fals Borda and the radical priest Camilo Torres in 1958. From this point on, against the parochial views of the infamous period known as *La Violencia* (1946–1958), they launched the first major empirical book on violence in Colombia, which questioned many of the silences and arguments that were employed in an attempt to explain this violence (Guzmán *et al.* 2005a, 2005b). The book narrated the horrible massacres, rapes and displacements of the period, which had been left unregistered in the official memory of Colombians. In the second volume the authors discussed many of the intense and often violent reactions that the first volume had generated in the public sphere, amongst political parties, in the academy and in government sectors (Guzmán *et al.* 2005b, see also Guzmán Campos 2007 for a review of these reactions). For the first time in the country, the more than 300,000 murders produced by a partisan violence that had often been ordered to further class and regional conflicts and to advance the concentration of land in private hands (Bolívar 2003, González *et al.* 2003), became publicly known, launching furious reactions by government sectors.

Within this rejection of a passive and neutral social science tradition, one could also point to the First Symposium on Participatory Action Research held in Cartagena in 1977. The symposium was organized by Orlando Fals Borda and a whole network of international and national scholars who had been involved in similar discussions, including Mohammad Anisar Rahman from Bangladesh, Rodolfo Stavenhagen from Mexico and Marja Liisa Swant from Finland (Cendales *et al.* 2005). The event was repeated 20 years later in 1997,

also in Cartagena, after it had been held every two years in other locations in different countries. Remembering the discussions in 1977, one commentator would argue that ‘we had studied sociology or anthropology or economics (instruments of analysis which we had picked up more or less successfully at university) but none of these were of the slightest use in our attempts to understand what was actually happening before our eyes’ (Molano 1998, p. 5). He also insisted that ‘as we sat there by the Caribbean, the Social Sciences were trying to break free of a Positivism without principle and at the same time become a critical, and thus all embracing, discipline’ (Molano 1998). Paulo Freire (1998) sent a message to the 1997 Cartagena session about the principal problems the participants should deal with: ‘above all we must fight against the power of the dominant neoliberal ideology that keeps on offending against and attacking human nature while reproducing itself socially and historically, threatening dreams, utopias and hopes’.

On other fronts, and from the 1970s onwards, Jesús Martín-Barbero had already established research agendas at the Communications Department of the *Universidad del Valle* in the city of Cali, researching popular culture, media and communication. He would be the head of that department between 1975 and 1995; as he repeated in presentations at several venues, this was the first department to take Colombian soap operas seriously as powerful narrations of nation-making processes. All the while, he insisted, the social sciences would continue to neglect TV and popular culture as serious research objects. As he explained to the audience when describing his intellectual trajectories in one of our Cultural Studies colloquiums at the *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana* (‘the Javeriana’) around 2003, he was much influenced during his graduate studies in Europe by the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams on popular culture; not to mention of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Indeed, Barbero’s influence on the institutionalization of Cultural Studies in Colombia was materialized several years later when he headed the Academic Committee of the International Program of Latin American Cultural Studies launched by the Center for Social Studies (CES) at the *Universidad Nacional* in 1997. Under the inspiration of Carlos Rincón, a Latin-American literature theorist working then, and now, at the Freie Universität in Berlin, this programme (which adopted the Cultural Studies label) had as its main objective ‘to support and disseminate the theoretical and methodological innovations of the literary and Cultural Studies field on an international level’ (Arango 1998, p. 9).

The Program of Latin American Cultural Studies headed by the CES under the direction of Martín-Barbero initiated a series of major conferences that brought international and national scholars together to reflect upon popular culture, media, cultural industries, globalization, the state and the problem of regions. Right from the beginning, the programme was well funded by the larger cultural institutions of the country and the region, including the recently created Ministry of Culture, Bogotá’s District Institute of Culture and Tourism,



the Executive Secretary of the Andrés Bello Convention, the Luis Angel Arango Public Library, the Ministry of Education and the Economic Council of the Presidency of Colombia. Needless to say, this important support from important cultural institutions established a focus of discussion in Cultural Studies in which the problems of neoliberal globalization, multiculturalism, cultural industries and the state received particular emphasis.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, these connections would open up a new space for academics to find a role and employment outside the academy and to influence public policies, institutional transformations, budget relocations and so on. As the major transformations that were occurring in the few large universities in the country had made it almost impossible to find a stable job within academia, it became increasingly common to find academics working in non-academic locations, including NGOs. The first event organized by the Program of Latin American Cultural Studies, *The Situation of Literary and Cultural Studies*, was held at the Luis Angel Arango Public Library in 1996 with the attendance of international scholars such as Jean Franco, William Rowe and Doris Sommer. In 1997, due to the positive results of the first event, a second and larger event with the title *Culture, Politics and Modernity* was organized, with international scholars such as Beatriz Sarlo, Nelly Richard, Carlos Monsivais and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht coming to discuss works in the field of Cultural Studies and communication. A commentator described the event in the following terms: 'The results of this second colloquium exceeded our expectations. With forty one papers and more than three hundred participants from different universities, and the presence of a public of different ages and generations . . . the increasing interest in the problem of culture in the country became clear' (Arango 1998, p. 10).

In 1998, a third conference on *Culture and Globalization* counted with the participation of international academics such as Martin Hopenhayn, George Yúdice, Renato Ortiz, Hugo Achúgar and Beatriz González Stephan, alongside national scholars such as Zandra Pedraza and Ana María Ochoa. There was a certain convergence of disparate positions showed a certain convergence, including the need to break up or reinvent the traditional modern disciplines, the need for cross-disciplinary approaches which would make it possible to assess the new challenges of neoliberal globalization, and to establish new dialogues outside the university locus (Restrepo and Jaramillo 1998, pp. 10–19). Several books would collect many of the papers given at these conferences (Restrepo *et al.* 1998, Martín-Barbero & López de la Roche 1998, Martín-Barbero *et al.* 1999, Martín-Barbero *et al.* 2000). Some years later, in 2002, the CES would organize another event, this time using the label of Cultural Studies, where the keynote speaker was the Brazilian anthropologist Jesus José Carvalho. It was the first time I was exposed to Stuart Hall's classic *Representation and Signifying Practices* and Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

In the meantime, another research centre at the *Universidad Javeriana* was in the process of being organized by young professors who had finished or were about to finish their graduate studies in the United States and Europe. The

most important role was played by Santiago Castro-Gómez, by that time a young philosophy professor who was completing his doctorate in Germany. He came from the ranks of Latin-American philosophy, as he demonstrated clearly in his 1996 book *Crítica de la razón latinoamericana* (A Critique of Latin American Reason, Castro-Gómez 1996). As he explained in an interview about his own intellectual trajectories, he was called on by the Dean of Philosophy to start an interdisciplinary group on Latin American philosophy, but the group failed utterly (Humar 2009). He was, however, about to start something different with other colleagues: the *Instituto Pensar*. As he explained in the interview, a range of Latin American intellectuals including Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel and Roberto Follari was invited to give conferences that would outline the agendas the research centre would follow, and to convince the administration of the importance of this institute that existed parallel to the established disciplines.

Interestingly enough, the *Instituto Pensar* involved a different strain of scholars and conversations to those that characterized the events organized previously by the CES on popular culture, cultural industries and the state. Other Colombian scholars involved in this effort at the Javeriana were Oscar Guardiola, Alberto Flórez and Carmen Millán-Benavides. Inspired by critical theory, the Gulbenkian Commission, and an array of Latin-American scholars, mostly philosophers and literary theorists, they matured a critique of the established disciplines and epistemologies of the social sciences while advancing transdisciplinary agendas inspired by postcolonial studies and the emerging conversation on modernity and coloniality (Castro-Gómez 2000, Quijano 2000). A paramount event entitled *La reestructuración de las ciencias sociales en América Latina* (The Restructuring of the Social Sciences in Latin America) was organized in October 1999 with the participation of Colombian and international scholars such as Walter Mignolo, Jesus Martin-Barbero, Edgardo Ladner, Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, Ana María Ochoa, José Antonio Figueroa, Guillermo Hoyos and Zandra Pedraza, among many others. For Castro-Gómez (Humar 2009), this event, whose papers were to be published one year later (Castro-Gómez 2000), became a crucial platform for advancing these debates.

What was particularly decisive about the *Instituto Pensar* was the fact that it developed and matured a series of networks, publications and events that would some years later turn into the first formal Cultural Studies programmes offered in Colombia. For instance, a key partner in this effort came from the Center of Latin American Studies at Duke University with which the *Instituto Pensar* started a project on the 'Geopolitics of Knowledge' (Castro-Gómez and Guardiola-Rivera 2000). Mabel Moraña, a central figure in the Latin-American Studies tradition at the University of Pittsburgh, came several times to the *Instituto Pensar* to deliver lectures. The PhD programme in Latin American Cultural Studies at the *Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar* in Quito, headed by Catherine Walsh would also join the network and establish conversations with Duke University and the *Instituto Pensar*. Between 1994 and 1998, a series of

conferences on the genealogies and founding conversations of Latin American Subaltern Studies were held in different universities in the US and Puerto Rico. With the publication in 1998, of the first volume of the journal *Nepantla*, with articles from John Beverly, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Lawrence Grossberg and Ileana Rodríguez, the intersection between the South-Asian Group and the nascent Latin American Subaltern Studies group was cemented (Rodríguez 2000, Beverly 2004, Coronil 2008).<sup>3</sup> But through the existence of the creative triangle of Duke, the *Instituto Pensar* and Simón Bolívar, other authors such as the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo and Arturo Escobar played a central role displacing the South-Asian postcolonial trend and cementing the conversation on Modernity, Coloniality and the Geopolitics of Knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

For several years now, this articulation with the Quito-Duke-Chapel Hill conversation has been consolidated through links established by graduate students, conferences and joint publications, and has played a crucial for some, even *hegemonic* role in the conversation about Cultural Studies in Colombia. Although the Cultural Studies label had been previously used by other institutional initiatives such as those of the CES at the *Universidad Nacional* years before, it was in the *Instituto Pensar* that the country's first programme in Cultural Studies was initially offered. To put it in bold terms, from the study of popular culture, media, citizenship and globalization, the new trend steered the discussion towards issues of modernity and coloniality, decolonization and the geopolitics of knowledge. But as Castro-Gómez explained in the interview mentioned earlier, the jealousies and internal competition that characterized the established disciplines were to impose serious limits on this initiative. Because the internal organization of the university only permitted the research centres to offer outreach courses and not graduate programmes, the *Instituto Pensar* decided to launch a first diploma in Cultural Studies: that is, the first diploma using that label. The diploma targeted the population in general, and 300 people, including undergraduate students, activists, community workers and non-specialists, enrolled. After this successful experience, as Castro-Gómez recalls (Humar 2009), enough synergy had been created for it to be possible to think about a master's programme in Cultural Studies at the Javeriana.

### **Unlearning and re-learning Cultural Studies – *Estudios Culturales***

At that time in the Faculty of Social Sciences there were some discussions about launching a doctorate in social science but several years would have to pass before these plans finally came to fruition in 2009. The dean behind the proposal was very interested in what was happening in the *Instituto Pensar* and soon invited Castro-Gómez to join the Faculty with the mandate of launching a

graduate programme in Cultural Studies (Humar 2009), thus establishing a simple connection that would set in train the Cultural Studies conversation within the faculty (Humar 2009). But the fears of the established disciplines would cause the master's degree to be postponed for some years. The faculty relieved the pressure for the moment by creating and offering a specialization (*especialización*) in Cultural Studies rather than a full-blown master's. That was a fairly easy solution, but, as it has been evident in recent faculty searches in my own department, the difficult part was to find professors in Colombia capable of teaching a Cultural Studies programme at all. After being rejected by several national funding agencies for support that would have allowed me to start my graduate studies overseas, I received by chance a flyer on the *Especialización en estudios culturales*. Although I do not remember the exact visual language used, the image, the flashy colours and messy images of Che Guevara, Marx and Simón Bolívar caught my attention immediately, and grabbed me even more when I started to read the description of the programme.

Castro-Gómez interviewed me personally during the application process and I registered for a programme that I had not managed to entirely figure out but that echoed many of my initial insights and curiosities. We were approximately 10–12 students from very different backgrounds, from public and private universities, graduates in different disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. Our classes were taught four days a week from 6:00 to 8:00 pm. Almost all of us had part or full time jobs during the day and could barely keep up the pace of the reading. Today, I am sure no one exactly knew what the programme was about. Faculty also came from different backgrounds and disciplines. No one had a degree in Cultural Studies; the closest would certainly have been Victor Manuel Rodríguez, who was finishing his PhD on Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester under the direction of Douglas Crimp. Right from the beginning, he became crucial at least for me in my efforts to understand the complexities and sophisticated debates on the politics of representation and the geopolitics of knowledge. For almost a whole month, during his course, we sustained a discussion on the basis of readings of Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Morris' *Banality in Cultural Studies*. Some years later, Rodríguez would leave the programme to work at Bogotá's District Institute of Culture and Tourism where he sought to advance the discussion of Cultural Studies within the larger debates on cultural policies and cultural politics in the city of Bogotá.

Meanwhile, Castro-Gómez recruited other faculty members including Ingrid Bolívar, a young, avant-garde, political scientist with whom we read Thompson, Elias and Bourdieu, and Alberto Florez-Malagón, who taught us 'transdisciplinarity', complexity and critical theory, the Sokal affair, post-coloniality and the debates concerning science and technology. Today, I wonder how all of these people could mesh together in the programme coming from so many different backgrounds and experiences. Some of them seemed to have emerged more from the tradition of *pensamiento latinoamericano* while

others appeared more comfortable within the 'Cultural Studies' label. There was no course on Birmingham or Stuart Hall, although we certainly read texts that had emerged from the CCCS in our courses. Some professors were philosophers, historians or political scientists, while others, such as Victor, came from Visual and Cultural Studies. All the classes and discussions were very heterogeneous, even contradictory and somewhat loose. Chloe Rutter, a North American professor who had finished her PhD on Literature at the University of California at San Diego taught *Fronteras Raciales y Sexuales* (Racial and Sexual Frontiers) in the second semester. I read Butler in her class for the first time, together with urban lesbian and gay novels. Jesús Martín-Barbero taught another joint-course on new technologies that was shared with the master's degree in communication studies. And Eduardo Restrepo who had just finished his taught courses in the PhD programme in anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill under the guidance of Arturo Escobar, Walter Mignolo and Lawrence Grossberg taught a course on social movements.

As I like to tell my graduate students today, a certain schizophrenia characterized the end of every semester: there was no settled answer to the simple question of what Cultural Studies is about? We certainly recognized the differences between the established Social Sciences. But it was much harder to define the kind of intellectual project in which we were involved. There were vivid discussions between faculty members that were echoed within the different cohorts of students. As is characteristic of almost all academic programmes, camps formed around different professors whose intellectual backgrounds soon became clear. Some students who began with me quit during the first semester, while others remained, continuing to participate actively in intense debates during the next semesters. Sometimes we were antagonists, at other times adversaries, but in the end we continued our debates with beer in the bar next to the university. One fellow student told me that it was just too much for her at her age to accept the incessant critical attitude that Cultural Studies applied to everything that was near and dear to her. Over the years, some left academic life while others have continued their studies in various graduate programmes and have constructed brilliant academic careers in a variety of Colombian universities. In the end we finished our degrees, some taking more time than others. I finished with a thesis describing the power effects of the human rights and humanitarian apparatus established since the mid-1990s to protect the internally displaced population in Colombia (Aparicio 2005).

I graduated some years later in 2004, and left for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to pursue my PhD in anthropology. The Javeriana *specialization* finally turned into a Master's degree. Eduardo Restrepo replaced Castro-Gómez as the head of the programme. He would give courses on Stuart Hall and taught an 'Introduction to Cultural Studies' pushing the intellectual direction of the programme towards the core of both Hall's and Grossberg's

concepts, focusing on problems such as radical contextualism, materialism, articulation, relationality and anti-essentialism. For a couple of years, they employees of the *Instituto Pensar* were the only two professors with stable employment. The Master's degree had no fixed home and floated within the Faculty of Social Sciences, with no department to provide back-up and without stable teaching staff or research agendas. For most of the time, the other faculty members (including myself some years later) would be hired just to give one course under very flexible and loose hiring conditions. This meant that in any given semester only one or two of the teaching staff would have any job security. The rest of the slots were filled with young adjunct professors who were returning to the country after studying for their PhDs. At the same time, Rutter and two British colleagues Gregory Lobo, who had also finished his PhD in Literature at the University of California at San Diego, and Nick Morgan who was to leave in 2007 to go to Newcastle University arrived at the *Universidad de Los Andes* to strengthen the undergraduate modern languages programme, recently transformed into the Department of Languages and Sociocultural Studies and which, for several years now, has been the only full-blown department with stable faculty offering an undergraduate focus on Cultural Studies, an emphasis more recently expanded since the first semester of 2008 to include a Master's degree in Cultural Studies. I was to join the department in August 2008.

### **Balancing acts, auditing cultures and new directions**

The *Universidad Nacional* would also open its Master's programme in Cultural Studies during these years, with faculty drawn from different departments including anthropology, arts and sociology. Other programmes such as the *Maestría en Investigación en Problemas Sociales Contemporáneos* (Master's Research Program in Contemporary Social Problems) at the *Universidad Central* in Bogotá was also host to many discussions, as well as to professors who migrated between the nascent programmes. Other programmes such as the course at the *Universidad del Rosario* on *Gestión Cultural* (Cultural Administration) have also started. An old undergraduate classmate now heading the anthropology department at the *Universidad ICESI* in Cali, invited a group of colleagues from Bogotá to discuss the intersections of Cultural Studies with anthropology. At the University of Popayán in Cauca a PhD in Social Sciences has been established, which is closely linked to these debates. The VII Hemispheric Event on Performance and Politics was hosted by the *Universidad Nacional* during 2009. The title of the event was *Ciudadanías en escena, Performance y Derechos Culturales en Colombia* (Citizenships under the Spotlight: Performance and Cultural Rights in Colombia), bringing together different kinds of

academics with varying degrees of investment with the event's title, such as the Chilean Nelly Richard and the New York based Diane Taylor, the performer Guillermo Gomez Peña, Jesús Martín-Barbero, and numerous artists, cultural producers and a group of graduate students from New York University.

In a period of less than 10 years, five graduate programmes in Cultural Studies and other closely related courses have been created (at the *Universidad Javeriana*, the *Universidad Nacional*, the *Universidad de Los Andes*, the *Universidad Distrital* and *Universidad del Rosario*); one department of Languages and Sociocultural Studies (*Universidad de Los Andes*); several national and international conferences have been organized along with biannual student colloquia at the *Universidad Javeriana*, the CES conferences on Cultural and Literary Studies, and the Hemispheric event; faculty and graduate students have published articles and books in Colombia and abroad; and networks and exchange programmes with US and South American Cultural Studies programmes have flourished. The graduate programmes at the *Javeriana* and *Universidad de Los Andes* are currently part of the Latin American Network of Graduate Programs in Cultural Studies. But at the same time, these developments have revealed the highly centralized academic dimension that this conversation has had in the country: almost all these initiatives have been located in the larger public and private universities of Bogotá.

This provisional and risky cartography has mentioned some of the crucial landmarks that have characterized the Cultural Studies conversation in the academic spaces that have used the label. Its emergence has clearly coincided with the rapid transformation of higher education that has created new demands for faculty with PhDs, established networks with overseas universities and research centres, and challenged the classical 'academic ethos' with new demands that come from an audit culture now focusing on outcomes, indexed articles, internal rankings and so on. This demand, which has been felt more directly in the private universities, with a slower (but no less driven) development in the public universities, has changed the whole atmosphere of higher education in less than 10 years. The increasing needs or desires of a changing economy have generated pressure for a more qualified labour force and compelled universities to offer new programmes at graduate level. The Cultural Studies conversation has arrived in the country with what Evelina Dagnino calls when describing the connection between the arrival of neoliberalism and the rise of multiculturalism in South America a 'perverse confluence'. With fewer opportunities to fund students in these programmes in Colombia, a sizeable portion of the younger generations has emigrated to the US and Europe but also much more recently to Argentina and Brazil. However, for many different reasons, other students prefer to stay in Colombia and enter the programmes described here: perhaps because of their lack of English, difficulty in obtaining loans,

economic burdens, the high reputation of Colombian universities, the perceived exhaustion of the disciplinary focuses of the traditional disciplines and, finally, the fact that the Cultural Studies programmes themselves their faculty, research agendas, graduate courses and institutional support are perceived to be 'good'.

I use the quotes because one does indeed wonder how to evaluate the academic institutionalization of Cultural Studies in Colombia. The growing and established departments and graduate programmes in Cultural Studies amount to no more than two or three initiatives. But the landscape is a surprising one given that just a few years ago no programmes, research agendas or faculty staff in the country would have used the label to describe their academic endeavours. And there is more. With an estimated population of almost 45 million, a poverty rate of 45,5%, extreme poverty of 16,4% and a Gini coefficient of 0.578 according to the latest figures of the National Statistical Institute (DANE 2010), one wonders why there should be a continuing growth in applications to Cultural Studies programmes. Indeed, Marx (1990) told us long ago about the existence of the available industrial reserve army, always ready to be exploited by capital. In Colombia, certainly, one strategy of the more privileged ranks of this large reserve army, drawn both from public and private universities, involves increasing professionalization to maintain the hope of landing one of a shrinking proportion of well (decently) paid and stable jobs. Across the disciplines, and especially in the hard sciences, the growing number of applicants every year, even for the private universities, is notorious. As I have said, for Cultural Studies programmes, although the numbers of applicants are certainly minimal compared to graduate programmes in the hard sciences, the increase in the numbers of applicants is surprising, especially when you turn up, bearing these statistics in mind, to teach a class between 5:00 and 8:00 pm, to exhausted yet enthusiastic students who have worked all day to pay their bills.

## Conclusion

As I was discussing this article with two colleagues who had participated in events organized by the CES in 1998 and then by the *Instituto Pensar* at the Javeriana, we concluded that Colombia has a unique history even in Latin America because of the growing scope of graduate and undergraduate programmes, publications and research agendas currently using the Cultural Studies label. As my colleagues said, the adoption of the label is peculiarly significant given that in other conversations in Latin America it has been openly rejected. Thus, from the trends of the Southern Cone's *Culture Critique* conversation (Richard 2002) to Mato's (2002) call for *Studies and Other Practices in Culture and Power*, there have been persistent trends in critical thinking and



action that have refused the *Cultural Studies* label at all in Latin America. They consciously reject its use because of the way in which it has become highly academicized and depoliticized in the US. However, they *have* employed certain trends (such as that exemplified by the CCCS at Birmingham) as critical sources for establishing horizontal dialogues with other conversations and intellectual practices in Latin America. Furthermore, as Richard (2002) argues, these traditions from abroad which include the work of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and others have become strategic influences for rethinking academic disciplines and for opening up new research problems and methodologies. It must not be forgotten, though, that they arrived in a country where they encountered already established critiques of the social sciences and humanities that had been developed at least since the 1950s.

I outlined some of these previous intellectual traditions already present in Colombia and that had established a critique of social sciences when I analyzed Latin American formations and contexts. Other traditions I have not mentioned, but that have certainly nurtured these debates in Colombia include the works of Mariátegui (1973) on the indigenous problem in Perú and of Fernando Ortiz (1963) and Pablo González Casanova (1969) on internal colonialism and cultural, economic, social and political hierarchies and dependencies. Indeed, in many ways, Ortiz's (1963) central concept of *transculturation* preceded García Canclini's (1989) *Hybrid Cultures*, offering both a fruitful approach to understanding and analyzing the concrete articulations and strategies involved in entering and exiting modernity. The central work of Rama (1984) on the *Lettered City* also highlighted these inequalities from a cultural perspective, informing the *structuration* of new and old lines of domination and inequality. From Argentina, the works of Laclau (1986) and others who emerged from departments of communication studies (Grimson and Varela 2002), confronted populism and the media with key concepts such as articulation and hegemony, which were later incorporated into the heart of Hall's theoretical armatures (Daryl Slack 1996). Also, Escobar *et al.*'s book (2001) on social movements, which employed the insights of Raymond Williams and Hall precisely to highlight that struggles over meanings constitute a key site of tension between social movements and the state, has become a decisive *tour de force* helping us understand why, finally, 'culture matters' and how it has turned into a decisive arena of struggle.

Certainly, as Mato (2002) argues, these academic and intellectual traditions – along with many others that I do not have enough space to describe – exist simultaneously in Colombia with other intellectual practices of knowledge and power. These other sites of knowledge production have included social movements, cultural producers, NGOs and, to a much lesser extent, national governmental and municipal institutions. These dialogues have given the conversation in Colombia a crucial interventionist drive that, while not always winning positions, has nevertheless positioned these sites as key actors in a long-lasting war of manoeuvre. Explicit policies, budget allocations,

legal decisions or even artistic interventions in the public sphere are some of the ways and forms in which the Cultural Studies label or its alternative genealogies in Latin America have migrated from the academic site in order (hopefully) to alter, transform and disrupt hegemonies and their visceral, material effects.

Indeed, the brutal effects of neoliberal policies and the long-lasting coloniality of power seem to sediment and extend themselves to all areas of social life in the country including the larger public and private universities where the Cultural Studies programmes are currently located. To a great extent, the confluence of the different traditions of critical thinking and action that currently exist within the departments and programmes in Cultural Studies in Colombia have approached and analyzed these formations. The immense and incomplete task is to forge even more radical alliances with other actors to foster and nurture more enduring and sustainable transformations. Here is where the radical evaluation of the Cultural Studies label or of the associated conversations should occur. Thus, notwithstanding the 'perverse confluences' in which these debates and programmes have matured and been institutionalized in the country, the Cultural Studies label and/or conversation in Colombia does offer sufficient sources of local critical thinking and action with which to fight the battle and construct alliances. Against new and old hegemonies that today send critical thinkers to jail, disappear students, and close spaces for critical thinking in the country; given the challenges ahead, we cannot afford the banalization of Cultural Studies in Colombia. Perhaps we will be obliged to enter this debate in years to come. Or perhaps not.

## Notes

- 1 Although I am using this label, I also want to be cautious about the homogenized effect it can bring to describe what were different and heterogeneous understandings of the intellectual and political work that the centre simultaneously encompassed (see Grossberg 1997).
- 2 Larry Grossberg and Toby Miller (Packer 2003) have also underscored this peculiarity for the British and Australian Cultural Studies where the State, cultural industries, cultural policies and so on have become crucial problems and research objects vis-a-vis North American Cultural studies where they believe these interrogations have not been so central. But noteworthy, there were also differences in those approaches that related to the way Foucault and/or Gramsci were introduced in these traditions in relation to previous frameworks. For Colombia, see Ochoa (2003).
- 3 For a further discussion on these cross-dialogues, see Rodríguez (2000).
- 4 A recent number of *Cultural Studies* introduced this conversation in a very clear and systematic way.

## Notes on contributor

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