

Subaltern Culture

David Kerr has praise for an unconventional publication which attempts to address the imaginary subaltern reader. Forsaking the opaqueness of Althusserian theory, intellectuals at Durban's Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit look towards a more popular discourse

Rethinking Culture is a self-consciously unconventional publication. The bulky A4 format proudly displays its modestly non-typeset printing technique. The printing (typed and photocopied) articulates part of the message. In an introduction to one of the sections in the book, the editor describes the current situation of culture in South Africa as a battleground, with the power of the state attempting to appropriate channels of media and culture on one side of the battleline, and progressive intellectuals, workers and artists on the other. The struggle is 'for meaning, for language, for words, pictures, slogans, songs and gestures'. Tomaselli and the authors of the different articles in *Rethinking Culture* firmly ally themselves in the progressive camp.

The appropriate printing technique is seen as a weapon in this cultural guerrilla warfare, a weapon which has been explained in another article co-authored by Tomaselli about the journal *Critical Arts*:

We have been reluctant to tap institutional sources of finance which ... might ultimately lead to appropriation by vested interests. We have sought rather to produce the journal on a low budget ... to maximize our exploration of new discursive sites; often innovation is only allowed in through the back door via journals which do not compete on the basis of appearance and are therefore not generally seen as a threat by the establishment

Rethinking Culture like *Critical Arts* is closely associated with the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit at the University of Natal, and dissociates itself in a similar way from the form as well as the content of established organs from the South African literary industry. From example, the Unit is proud not to be a beneficiary of the SAPSE 110 University publishing subsidy policy.

The unconventional format extends to more than the cheapness of the print technology. There is an unusually generous application of graphics — cartoons, photographs, montages, reproductions of book covers, newspaper and magazine pages, hand-written scripts and axiom-like quotations from the text reproduced in bold script in the margin.

This constitutes more than a tampering with the conventions of book presentation; it is part of an attempt to make *Rethinking Culture* accessible to a much wider readership than that of University academics — 'to create a space for a strategic cultural studies in South Africa and to popularize this to students and community workers alike'. The popularizing project extends to the style of the various articles, which leads to a usually

After the crushing of the Black Consciousness movement in the 1970s, the emergence of the UDF and the increased power of COSATU, have given white radicals more confidence in the usefulness of their commitment.

Another manifestation of this has been the modifications made by the liberation movements to the notion of cultural boycott. The ANC now recognizes the need for selective support to those members of

Marx, and more emphatically on Gramsci and Althusser. This was linked with an interest in semiology as a tool for decoding the manifestations of apartheid culture as well as to rearm the progressive culture which aimed to resist it. Some of those papers tended to use a rigorous structuralist or semiological discourse which made them accessible only to academics. Since 1982 a policy has emerged at the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit of attempting a more popular discourse.

The earlier chapters provide as compact an analysis of the earlier theoretical achievements as could reasonably be expected. By Althusserian standards the language is not aggressively opaque. However, these chapters are on an altogether higher plane of abstraction to the following chapters. Take, for example, Johan Muller on culture. The short clauses, the repetition of an idea in slightly different words, the italicization of important phrases, and the constant resort to analogies and examples are part of a carefully worked out style to popularize the discourse:

First, culture is all around us; we live our lives by means of culture, just as a fish always swims in the sea. As a fish takes the sea for granted, so we tend to take culture for granted. When we do think about culture, we very often forget that it is an organic part of our life, and we talk about it as something external and removed from us. Consequently, we tend to think about culture as a set of objects — like musical instruments, or a set of traditional values — like religion. This means we usually think about culture as something handed down to us, finished and complete, something decided upon by others in the past.

I believe Muller has done a remarkable job of explaining in simple terms the history of South Africa and the impact which colonialism/capitalism had on the creation and perpetuation of class-based education and culture. The argument progresses through rhetorical questions and sub-headings, with difficult concepts such as 'kinship system', 'means of production' and 'community identity' explained at appropriate and carefully spaced moments.

A specialist may well complain of

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fruitful, but sometimes simplistic attempt to both broaden and radicalize the paradigm of South African cultural studies.

The academics at the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit are very aware that their attempt to popularize knowledge has many precedents in South African history, particularly in the Trade Unions and the Workers Education projects. Popular publications on history, economics, sociology, politics and education were written from the 1930s to the 1950s by Albert Nzula, Eddie Roux, Solly Sachs, and Albert Luthuli to mention only a few. There are several reasons why the publication of popular educational publications should have declined during the 1960s and 1970s. Among the most important was the increasing ethnicization of politics and culture in South Africa in the wake of apartheid legislation, some of which was aimed at cutting off intellectual support to black workers and students. Along with this came the increasing power of the state-controlled multiple media to penetrate subaltern culture, and the ghettoisation of the liberation movements' publications through censorship and exile.

The phenomenon in *Rethinking Culture* of white intellectuals mobilizing their intellectual resources for the struggle against state hegemony is to be associated with the re-emergence in the 1980s of an intellectual popular front.

the intellectual and artistic community who are genuinely putting their resources at the disposal of progressive forces in South African society. This position was clarified at the 'Culture in Another South Africa' symposium held in December 1987 in Amsterdam. An earlier statement of that position at a 1985 workshop organized by the Foundation for Education with Production in Gaborone is cited as the origin for *Rethinking Culture*. The challenge identified by the Foundation to produce a Cultural Studies Handbook was taken up by the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit and the Critical Arts Project of the Universities of Natal, Rhodes and Witwatersrand.

The University academics who have contributed to *Rethinking Culture* have taken as their starting point the body/mind division which privileges the educated in South African society. They are dissatisfied with the situation identified by Gramsci where 'the popular element "feels" but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element "knows" but does not always understand'. They seek ways of renegotiating that whole division.

The process of 'rethinking' is partly reflected in the structure of the book: The earliest papers which came out of the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit in the 1980-81 period were concerned to establish a theory of ideology based on

over-simplification of the issues — that too many generalizations about pre-colonial culture are extrapolated from the single example of Tsonga history, that the example of *Marabi* is not sufficient evidence for the distinctions between community, class and national identity, or that 'Some Sources I Found Useful' at the end of the chapter is an inadequate and unnecessarily coy substitute for rigorous bibliographic referencing. But anyone who has ever attempted to write correspondence lectures or any other popularization of complex ideas will know how extraordinarily difficult the task is, and Muller has managed to provide a coherent diachronic survey in vivid simple terms without patronizing the reader.

There is also an attempt to understand South African multiple media (radio, film, TV, newspapers and magazines) with a particular emphasis on journalism. The basic thesis is that state organs and capitalism collaborate (with some exceptions) in producing a media hegemony which masks the fundamental racial and economic oppression on which it is based. Graphics are particularly useful here to concretise the theory. One cartoon shows a television set (with a close-up of JR Ewing from Dallas on the screen) being tipped up by a group of barefoot black boys, who are opening the top of the set like a tea-chest, and finding it empty. Another, reprinted from a newspaper, has a bubble saying, 'Now just remember, Auntie's watching', coming from the mouth of a massive white virago (whose handbag is inscribed SABC) while she tweaks the ear of a 'BOPTV'-shirted black youth.

Problems remain in addressing the imaginary subaltern reader. Hitting the right tone is obviously not easy when the projected readership and its relationship to the authors has not been fully clarified, let alone forged. Chapters are written by different authors and there are disparities of style and structure. There is also an overall tendency to ask simplistic questions and to sound patronizing.

One of the deficiencies of the book is that it simply popularizes knowledge acquired by academics, rather than engaging with the producers of popular knowledge. We hear much in the early chapters of the potential of culture to resist hegemony, but we see little analysis of that resistant culture in action. The only exception is Ian Steadman's 'Popular Culture and Performance in South Africa'. The chapter analyses the political and theatrical practice of one of the radical community theatre groups in Soweto, the Soyikwa African Theatre.

After outlining the growth of black community theatre on the Witwatersrand, Steadman analyses the class and political affiliations of Matsemela Manake, the founder of the theatre group and the 'author' (Steadman prefers 'scribe') of some of their plays, such as *Egoli*, *Imbumba* and *Pula*.

Steadman shows himself particularly aware of the complex relationship between dominant and resistant modes of culture:

Popular culture feeds off the dominant culture and the institutions of the dominant culture incorporate, adapt and represent preferred elements of popular culture ... Popular culture is therefore designed in a continuing dialectical relationship with the cultural forms of the dominant group, class or classes.

Steadman is aware of the way the nature of that dialectic can urge popular artists towards exaggeration or distortion in order to correct greater distortions in the dominant culture.

At the same time Steadman shows, in a detailed description of the creation of *Pula*, how the extremism of a particular verbal or visual statement in a popular performance can often be tempered through the complexity of signification in the subtext. Steadman's own coming to terms with his reaction to *Pula* provides an example of an academic author not only popularizing his knowledge for a subaltern readership, but displaying to the reader the transformation which popular creativity has made to his own perceptions.

The kind of engagement with popular culture represented by Steadman's chapter by no means marks the possible limits of dialogue between intellectuals and subaltern communities. Now that they have turned their backs on the security of the 'ivory tower', the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit has adopted a course which offers many constructive potentialities as well as inevitable contradictions and dilemmas. Some of these channels have already been explored in publications for the Unit outside of this book. For example, in an important article in *Critical Arts* ('The White Hands: Academic Social Scientists and Forms of Popular Knowledge and Production') J. Muller and N. Cloete point out the dangers of intellectuals privileging themselves as 'handmaidens' of popular transformation and thereby exerting unnecessary control over the structures of popular discourse. They also show the dangers in adopting too readily the model of 'participation', which in some research situations encouraged by certain

aid agencies and independent African governments, allows peasants and workers to participate in merely legitimating their own exploitation, rather than confronting the structures which perpetuate that dependency.

Another obvious field of intellectual work which needs further consideration is the potential widening of techniques for resisting dominant culture. Although *Rethinking Culture* is meant to be a manual, it is restricted mostly to the theoretical issues underlying cultural studies. It is not a manual in the sense of demystifying those media techniques which could be appropriated by working class groups. To be sure, at the end of the chapter on the media there is a description of how a community newspaper could be set up, but it is very half-hearted,

and not of great practical value. It would take another whole book to make the next logical step — to provide a functional manual of alternative, popular media techniques, and no doubt the practical component of the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit is moving in that direction.

Even at the theoretical level, however, there are some important omissions, some of which are referred to in the Preface by Ntongela Masilela. Although it is full of 'war' metaphors by talking about exiled intellectuals preparing 'beachheads' for future 'battles', it is more than the *imprimatur* of a black South African exile. Masilela makes a useful critique of *Rethinking Culture*, complaining that the book is Eurocentric in its intellectual sources; he calls for a

'nativisation' by bringing in Jordan, Ngugi, Fanon, Cabral and others, to add an African dimension to the insights provided by Althusser and Gramsci. He asks a hard question which is never really addressed in the rest of the book: 'is a unified national culture possible in pre-revolutionary South Africa, or can it be truly realized in a future democratic South Africa?'

If *Rethinking Culture* has over-extended itself, that should not prevent us from admiring its positive achievements. By turning their backs on an elitist, reified view of culture as the accumulation of values and art objects, by broadening the scope of discussion to include the popular as well as elitist cultures, by emphasizing the connections between culture, ideology, history, class-formation and the

material production of knowledge, the contributors have opened up fertile new potentialities for interdisciplinary analysis. It is hardly surprising if some of these linkages occasionally appear clumsy or over-hasty.

The current ideological crisis in South Africa and the growing importance of culture as an arena for struggle, gives the book great urgency, and provokes debate about ways in which knowledge can be democratized and culture mobilized even further in the ideological battles which the intended reader will undoubtedly face in the future. □

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