



Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall 2006, 120-125

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Review/Reseña

Doris Sommer, editor. *Cultural Agency in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)

Culture on the Ground: Agency, Politics and Scholarship

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Since 1989 the self-definition of American scholars and critics with leftist or at least progressive aspirations has been in transition. Often overwrought with personal and professional dilemmas regarding their fate in a world no longer inscribed in the Cold War, and with the doors of an engaged cultural politics being shut by the exigencies of an academic culture that required the revamping of old paradigms and vocabularies proper to the times, critics embraced a variety of isms—from poststructuralism to postcolonialism. Cultural Studies emerged as the paradigm par excellence where the reconciliation of different –isms, as well as the development of an

expansive notion of culture took place. For scholars of Latin America the intellectual crisis of this particular time period seemed especially acute given the end of the revolutionary wars in Central America, the transitions in the southern cone, and the decline of Cuba as a viable model in the post-Soviet period. It is in light of this search for a Latin Americanist scholarly identity congruent with a progressive notion of agency, politics and scholarship that the book *Cultural Agency in the Americas* makes its intervention.

What is a humanist critic to do in these times? In the introduction to this volume, Doris Sommer asks scholars in the humanities to abandon critical despair if it yields no actual social change, and invites them to overcome what she sees as timidity regarding what their scholarship can do to influence and encourage the use of rights and resources. In Gramscian fashion she recognizes a “passive revolution” occurring in many places in Latin America where intellectuals, scholars and activists take advantage of the gaps that systems generate and use this “wobble room,” as she calls it, to engage in cultural projects that promote and engage democratic life. The possibility of culture generating agency is what the critic should embrace in her new role as “cultural agent,” which consists in promoting “moments and manners of acting up” (4). Mary Louise Pratt explains in one of the afterwords that the scholar in this model is “neither a producer of knowledge whose job is to assemble truthful, disinterested assertions about the world, nor is she the interpreter of texts who elucidate and explain symbolic expressions, though both of these are often part of the enterprise” and that *Cultural Agency* as an approach reinforces Sommer’s view of scholars as “self-conscious interveners whose work is described as a set of transitive verbs: anticipate, promote, energize, reinforce” (329).

To elucidate what all of this means, the book recruits concrete examples that range from the cultural working of Radio Taíno in Cuba to the cultural politics of leadership in Mapuche organizations

in Argentina. Except for Arturo Arias's piece on how the Maya won the symbolic war in Guatemala, all the pieces are written by anthropologists and communications or performance scholars. This makes sense if we understand that a socially engaged anthropology has been around for decades and that the nature of its method of participant-observation, in the best of cases, can lead to the scholar's commitment to the community in which she works. The practice of everyday life, including not only the creativity that culture allows in a particular context, but the specific social formations that historically inform it, is the realm of anthropological study. An anthropological understanding of culture also informs the work of both performance studies and communications scholars (best represented in this anthology by the work of Jesús Martín Barbero) who engage with the practices of concrete populations, be this bodily performances in a social context or the use and impact of technology in specific cultural milieus. At the heart of all these cases is an empirical context that shows us how culture works, how individual and collective agency is defined and transformed in space and through time, and how a basic interpretational framework in accordance with social science standards keeps at bay exuberant generalizations or *grand récits* regarding the social life of peoples and cultures.

What is somewhat perplexing in this context is how and why humanities scholars are or should be bidding farewell to criticism and hailing cultural agency as an approach that is really not very different from a socially engaged anthropology. While as citizens we can all throw our support behind cultural projects with agendas of social transformation, be this in Latin America or in our communities, what happens to the specific labor that we carry out as humanities scholars?

The biggest theoretical debate in the twentieth century was over the status of positivism. The impetus behind critical thinking was not to check into Hotel Abyss as it would seem to some critics,

but to articulate a conceptual apparatus that allowed for reflection beyond the traditional social sciences, even the traditionally engaged social sciences. The problem of the critic is a vexed one, as Adorno points out in *Cultural Criticism and Society*, and the objective is not to dismiss or defend the critic but to acknowledge her position as one riddled with the signs of history. The critic is inscribed in the same dialectic of the society she analyzes and, hence, the impossibility of an unmediated relationship to her craft. This problem did not escape anthropologists themselves, in what is now a classic debate on the interpretative turn. The crisis of anthropology was nourished by the humanistic and philosophical reflections of the humanities. This is not accidental. While we as citizens may support and promote different types of cultural agency and search for partnerships with specific communities as part of our political activism, as critics we cannot relinquish the responsibility to defend and advance an agenda of thought that refuses the understanding of the world at the level of the particularities of agency alone. Perhaps the need for the social reengagement of the humanities scholar is the product of precisely the cultural irrelevance that a humanist critic experiences in a society that has never been fond but of the pragmatic results of the academic enterprise. Claudio Lomnitz puts it well in one of the afterwords of the book: "On the question of the conditions for cultural agency, it is useful to distinguish between an ideological propensity to favor cultural agency and a set of material conditions that might have a similar effect" (336). In other words, there are concrete explanations that lead academics in Latin America to have an important role in the life of their societies in ways their American counterparts don't. It is not the point of this review to delve into what has been a permanent historical feature of this difference. Rather, I'd like to question, not the political and refreshing defense of cultural agency that Sommer sets out to articulate in this anthology but to put back on the table the

question of the specificity of the humanities in their critical theoretical form.

Some of the biggest political upheavals that characterize contemporary Latin American life still happen at the site of contestation for state power. In the new configurations of opposition to the neoliberal model, we have democratically elected presidents that defy the order of things, as we have witnessed in the elections of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, the still contested election in Mexico, the close defeats of anti-neoliberal left candidates in recent elections in Costa Rica and Perú, along with reformers in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. Certainly, the definition of what cultural agency means in these contexts will be different from what is presented in this book. How we effectively understand that will depend on how responsibly we defend a space in which we are capable of theorizing these conditions, and going beyond supporting different cultural agency projects. In this sense it is inevitable that we soil ourselves again with those “*passé*” discourses marked by the impetus of utopian, heroic and liberating energies, simply because this time the quickly changing realities of Latin America require it of us. How are we to understand in a global manner these transformations if we reject any intellectual intervention that aspires to more than support and promotion of the “wobble room” of culture?

Perhaps the biggest contribution of this book is what it tells us about the difference between Latin American public intellectuals and cultural agents and their relation to the social processes in which they are inserted, and that of American academics condemned to the radical divide that marks scholarly life from public life in American universities. While scholars in the American academy waver between constant discursive innovations on the problem of culture and their solidarity with the potential of cultural transformation in Latin America, Latin Americans who produce culture rewrite, redefine, and reenact their dreams for a better society. If only we as scholars could

do the same here, in our society, different would be the winds that blow through the sad state of the nation.