

NÉSTOR GARCÍA CANCLINI

CONSUMERS
AND CITIZENS

GLOBALIZATION AND MULTICULTURAL CONFLICTS

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY GEORGE YÚDICE

consumers and citizens

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Edited by George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores

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For Sandra

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From Hybridity to Policy

For a Purposeful Cultural Studies

Néstor García Canclini, an Argentine with a doctorate from the University of Paris, has been a professor of anthropology at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana—Iztapalapa since the early 1990s, where he heads the Program for the Study of Urban Cultures. He is undoubtedly the best-known and the most innovative cultural studies scholar in Latin America. His work straddles the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, art and literary studies, and cultural policy studies. Among his many books, *Cortázar, una antropología poética* (Cortázar, a poetic anthropology, 1968), on the noted Argentine “Boom” novelist and short-story writer, and *La producción simbólica* (Symbolic production, 1979), on the relationship of politics and avant-garde art in Argentina, reveal the range and originality of García Canclini’s early work.¹ In the late 1970s, he began to conduct work on changes in the “popular” or folk cultures in Mexico, where he resettled as a consequence of the inhospitable atmosphere, particularly for progressive intellectuals like himself, created by the military dictatorship in Argentina.² This work led him to the creation of a rich and very serviceable methodology for studying the intersection of, on the one hand, mass, popular (or “folk,” in U.S. parlance), and high culture, and, on the other hand, modernization

in the spheres of communications and the economy. His *Las culturas populares en el capitalismo* (1982) (*Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico* [1993]), which won the prestigious Casa de las Américas prize for best “essay,” was an important corrective to both the clientelist subordination of indigenous cultures under the Mexican state and to romantic portrayals of these cultures as pure and innocent, although he also denounced their oppression.³ It was also a book that resonated among those Latinamericanists familiar with cultural studies as it was practiced by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, among others. *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1990) (*Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* [1995]) further elaborated the critique of museum-bound views of culture, demonstrating that the dividing line between all three varieties (popular, mass, and high) blurs quite frequently and, in most cases, one is the supplement or constitutive exclusion of the other.⁴ Rather than posit a postmodern Latin American condition, he registered, with the detail characteristic of the ethnographer and the art or literary critic, the ways in which artists, intellectuals, and popular communities engaged the pressures of modernization in a changing political context. *Consumidores y ciudadanos: conflictos multiculturales de la globalización* (1995) (*Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts* [2001]) maps the effects of urban sprawl and global media and commodity markets on citizens, critically, and yet shows that the complex results offer not only a shrinkage of certain traditional rights (particularly those of the welfare or clientelist state) but also openings for expanding citizenship.⁵ Although in García Canclini’s opinion consumers are not cultural dupes, he also does not hold to the voluntarist view that consumer choice is the same as a viable politics. This book includes a range of specific policy recommendations for a Latin American cultural space that can hold its own against the juggernaut of Hollywood and “Americanism” more generally. His recently published edited volumes, *La ciudad de los viajeros* (1997) (*The city of travelers*) and *Cultura y comunicación en la ciudad de México* (1998) (*Culture and communication in Mexico City*), focus on how the residents of Mexico City experience the built and broadcast environment;⁶ *Las industrias culturales en la integración latinoamericana* (1999) (*The culture industries in the integration of Latin America*) consists of state-of-the-art sectorial analyses of the culture industries for the purposes of making concrete policy interventions in the creation of the Latin American cultural space that he proposed in *Consumers and Citizens*.⁷ As I write this Introduction in August 1999, García Canclini

has just completed his latest book, *La globalización imaginada* (Imagined globalization), in which he addresses many of the issues dealt with in prior books—multi- or interculturalism, migration, urban expansion, and cultural studies—in the context of globalization.⁸ In this book he also gives a critical twist to relations between Latin Americans and North Americans (and especially Latinos) in the context of a U.S. projection of multiculturalism.

Conditions of Reception: The Currency of Hybridity

García Canclini is best known in the English-speaking world for *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. First published in Mexico in 1990, this book has been widely read in cultural studies circles, in part because of the currency of theories of hybridity since the 1980s. This is both serendipitous and troublesome. The nearly two decades-long discussion among U.S. cultural studies scholars concerning flexible and multiple identities has provided a receptive context for García Canclini's proposal that in late modernity all identities straddle borders, whether geopolitical, cultural, or epistemological.⁹ For the purposes of these introductory comments, I am taking a very broad view of cultural studies, a field that examines multiple, contending forces and power relations and that includes popular culture analysis, feminism, postcolonialism, deconstruction, Chicano and other minority discourses, discussions of border culture, queer studies, and so on. For conjunctural reasons that I shall elucidate subsequently, cultural studies rather than anthropology or sociology proper is the multifarious field in which García Canclini's work on hybridity resonates. Cultural studies as a political and intellectual project has been in an ongoing process of opening itself to revisions from the above-mentioned critical initiatives, as exemplified by the impetus provided by the work of the Marxist Literary Group since the late 1970s and the transformations of journals such as *Social Text* over this same period. Years before *Social Text's* groundbreaking critique of postcolonialism,¹⁰ the postcolonial framework had already been put to the test in the journal in the spate of commentaries on Fredric Jameson's proposal that all third-world texts are necessarily national allegories.¹¹ Indeed, the publication of Jameson's essay was accompanied by an account of the critical reception it encountered when delivered in Havana in 1985.¹² A subsequent issue carried Aijaz Ahmad's trenchant critique of Jameson's own national (U.S.), gendered (male), and racial (white) positioning, and suggested that the neat di-

vide between third and first worlds was not viable precisely because of the effects of the new strategies of global capitalism and the struggles against them.¹³

The theories of hybridity that received the greatest receptivity at that time in this comprehensive definition of cultural studies were those associated with postcolonialism and minority cultures. Most exemplary is Homi Bhabha's proposal that the colonial situation and its legacy in postcolonialism introduced an incommensurability in the very heart of national projects. Colonial mimicry, which Bhabha considers subversive of European models, for example, both opened up and supplemented the neat divide between colonizer and colonized. With the intensification of transnational phenomena in the postcolonial era, this undermining of stable identities was magnified, introducing more numerous temporalities into the processes of identification. Rather than national coherence, Bhabha refers to a cultural difference that ensues from the split between a national pedagogy that takes the "people" as its historical objects and the performative work by which heterogeneous practices are transformed into the signs of a national culture while carrying with them the traces of difference. As such, hybridity is characterized by Bhabha as "the perplexity of the living as it interrupts the representation of the fullness of life."¹⁴ Although expressed in a very different language, reflecting regional and disciplinary differences, García Canclini also characterized hybrid cultures as being fundamentally liminal, borders where struggles and negotiations confront "rigid wires and fallen wires."¹⁵ In such sites, power is not defined by "confrontations and vertical actions," but, following Foucault, by "interwoven relations," whose cultural and political effectiveness is not explained by the imposition of power, but by the play of differences in the fabric of social life: "What gives [hybrid cultures] their efficacy is the obliqueness that is established in the fabric. How can we discern where ethnic power ends and where family power begins, or the borders between political power and economic power?"¹⁶ As in Bhabha's reflection on colonial situations, García Canclini understands Latin American societies as constituted in the "intersection of different historical temporalities" ensuing from the multiple positions that they occupy in the symbolic as well as the political and financial world economies. As such, the multitemporal hybridity of Latin American societies is a function of a multiple relation to modernization. Some have celebrated this heterogeneity as proof that Latin America invented postmodernism before it ever gave signs of life in Europe and the United States.¹⁷ García Canclini's interest, however, is to

demonstrate the power of culture in political and economic projects and to analyze the effects of modernization in the periphery in order to help devise proposals for bettering life chances for the majority who barely survive. As we shall see, there is a significant difference in García Canclini's approach when compared with Bhabha's. Whether or not hybridity can discursively subvert Western reason is less important than its usefulness in pointing to practices that help democratize hierarchical and authoritarian societies both culturally and economically.

Toward the end of "DissemiNation," Bhabha focuses his discussion of the slippage between historical pedagogy and cultural performance on the foreignness that inheres therein. His emphasis is on the aporia that drives the narration of the nation to posit the "cultural condition for the enunciation of the mother-tongue,"¹⁸ on the one hand, and the multiplication of borders that trouble the interior of national space, on the other. "What is . . . significant . . . is the emergence of a hybrid national narrative that turns the nostalgic past into the disruptive 'anterior' and displaces the historical present—opens it up to other histories and incommensurable narrative subjects."¹⁹ We might ask what exactly is Bhabha's own investment in this incommensurable liminality? The answer, it seems, is a form of empowerment that comes from the condition of estrangement that inheres in liminality: "From this splitting of time and narrative emerges a strange, empowering knowledge for the migrant that is at once schizoid and subversive."²⁰ The agency of that empowerment is the minority subject. We might inquire into the nature of the empowerment wrought by liminality: how does it articulate with a politics? Bhabha argues that the aesthetics of interstitality serves to empower the marginalized insofar as it is nonessentialist and nonintegrationist,²¹ and to foster new modes of cultural identification across the divides that modernity has drawn throughout the world.²² It is as if Bhabha expected estrangement—or the unhomely—to be redeemed by an aesthetic practice that relies for its effectiveness on the autonomy of the institution of art rather than a politics that would struggle to open the institution into encounters and conflicts (he says little, indeed, about institutions).

In order to appear as material or empirical reality, the historical or social process must pass through an "aesthetic" alienation, or "privatization" of its public visibility. The discourse of "the social" then finds its means of representation in a kind of *unconsciousness* that obscures the immediacy of meaning, darkens the public event with an "unhomoely" glow. There

is, I want to hazard, an incommunicability that shapes the public moment; a psychic obscurity that is formative for public memory.²³

To argue that classic aesthetic distancing (whose counterparts are the Russian Formalist *Ostranienie* and the Freudian *Verfremdungseffekt*) is the means by which colonized or subaltern “otherness” makes itself present—Bhabha writes “begins its presencing,” an allusion to Heidegger’s notion of “unveiling”—is to misunderstand how two orders of sociality (aesthetics and politics) interact. Literary theory and cultural studies are rife with these assimilations of social problems to philosophical and aesthetic categories: Heidegger’s homelessness versus homeless people; Kristeva’s abjects vis-à-vis social “deviants”; Freud’s uncanny vis-à-vis parent-to-child power differentials; French feminists’ play of the signifier vis-à-vis women’s sexuality; and so on. It is only by a sleight of hand, I would argue, that the aesthetic can be made to redeem the “disadvantaged” side of this dubious equation. As we shall see, this dichotomy is evident in various statements from the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, who on the one hand is concerned about the exclusion of subalterns from national consolidations and state-oriented cultural critique, and yet abstracts away the lived presence of subalterns by construing them as a force of negation (the “unveiling” or rejection of Eurocentrism).

This is indeed a familiar move within a broadly conceived U.S. cultural studies framework: the contention that the most effective struggle vis-à-vis power is the supplementation that the “weak” introduce into the hegemonic discourses of the powerful. In a 1985 text, Bhabha had proposed the “colonial hybrid” as the paradoxical instance in which the authority invested in the colonists’ identity was subverted by the mimicry of their colonized others.²⁴ In another influential text from 1985, Donna Haraway embraced the myth of the cyborg to characterize the agency that troubled the organic wholeness of identity.²⁵ “[C]ommitted to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity” (151), the “cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work” (154). Like Bhabha, Haraway drew on the experience of minoritized people to characterize her quintessential hybrids and cyborgs. “Women of color,” and in particular Chicanas such as Chela Sandoval and Cherríe Moraga, who respectively brandished an “oppositional consciousness” (157) and a mestizo delegitimation of purity and origins (175), taught Haraway about “the power of the margins” and “liminal transformation.” As hybrids and members of a “bastard race,” in Har-

away's words, they are identified as the demolishers of Western identity and dualisms that are inherent to the "logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals—in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self" (177).

García Canclini also senses the utopian potential in the critique of a normative Western subjectivism on the part of "new (or not so new) social actors, who are no longer exclusively white, Western, and male." Focusing on Latin American artists—whether of high, popular, or mass culture—who produce "hybrid" work, García Canclini attributes to them an "interrogative relationship with societies, or fragments of them, where they think they see living sociocultural movements and practicable utopias."²⁶ But the critique of the aesthetics of hybridity expressed by artists and writers from Tijuana, that most hybrid of border towns, is instructive of the pitfalls of the knee-jerk assumption that subaltern cultural practices ensuing from a given social situation are necessarily subversive. These Tijuana artists and writers took performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña to task for celebrating the hybrid border as the expression of a more "multifocal and tolerant" culture. They reminded him and other postmodern celebrants that hybridity results from having to satisfy basic needs by participating in a system of production and consumption not of one's choosing. These Tijuana artists "reject the celebration of the migrations often caused by poverty in the place from which people migrate, and which is repeated in their new destination." They resent, moreover, those ubiquitous theorists and artists from metropolitan centers in Mexico or the United States who "want to discover us and tell us who we are."²⁷ There is a resentment in these words, for the Tijuana artists suspect that Gómez-Peña and his artistic and theoretical kin were accumulating cultural capital useful in museological or academic struggles by claiming to have an experiential knowledge of the aesthetic of the day—appropriation, pastiche, impurity, sampling, and so on—drawn from the experience of the subaltern on the other side of the border. The Tijuana artists understood this as a legitimation strategy that necessarily traded on the migrants' or *maquiladora* workers' experience of hardship.

Although García Canclini understands that hybridity undermines such dualisms as North/South, European/indigenous, folk/mass—"[c]ultures are no longer grouped in fixed and stable wholes, and therefore the possibility disappears of being cultured by knowing the repertory of 'the great works,' or of being popular because one manages the meaning of the objects and messages produced by a more or less closed com-

munity (an ethnic group, a neighborhood, a class)" —he also eschews, for the very same reason, the voluntarism that proclaims the "epistemic privilege" of the oppressed. Between representation and its undoing by hybridity, García Canclini, unlike Bhabha or Haraway, concentrates on the mediation of institutions that never permit one or the other to prevail completely. "The artistic market and the reorganization of urban visuality generated by the culture industry and the fatigue of political voluntarism are combined to make unrealistic any attempt at making of high art or folklore the proclamation of the inaugural power of the artist or of prominent social actors."²⁸ I would go a little further and elaborate this insight: neither the representations disseminated by government agencies, the media, labor and consumer markets, or academic disciplines such as anthropology nor the scrambling of these representations through the intersection of these institutions or other contingencies provide a foundation for the epistemic privilege of any one individual or collective subject.

Some U.S. cultural studies critics, including Latinamericanists, are troubled by García Canclini's reticence in "taking the side" of the subaltern. It goes without saying, of course, that he does not side with the dominant classes, capital, or the culture industries. García Canclini reminds his critics that not all subalterns are struggling for inclusion in a democratic society:

My principal aim is to understand under what conditions and in what direction the processes of deterritorialization, opening and hybridization of traditional heritages are contributing to democratization in this *fin de siècle*, while many reterritorializations—like that of Sendero Luminoso . . .—have the effect of reinforcing authoritarianism, dogmatism and fundamentalism (which in Latin America, Eastern Europe and other areas are obstacles to democratic reconstruction and the resolution of the basic problems of the inhabitants).²⁹

This reminder flies in the face of John Beverley's criticism that García Canclini is reformist rather than radical for not seeking to contribute to a historical bloc in which the subaltern will have a protagonist role in the struggle for hegemony.³⁰ From García Canclini's point of view, Beverley's aspirations appear quite voluntarist. In his more recent work, including *Consumers and Citizens*, written after this statement, García Canclini has devoted most of his energies to discover viable practices that enable scholar-activists to contribute to this endeavor. His increasing involvement in cultural policy as a complement of research is one

direction that I comment on subsequently. I argue that such involvement in cultural policy is not simply accommodationist reformism, as Beverley has alleged.

At heart, Beverley is skeptical that a traditional intellectual (i.e., not from the subaltern classes) can effectively espouse the cause of the subaltern. Consequently, he assimilates in knee-jerk fashion García Canclini's position to that of neo-Arielist arguments according to which analytic authority should remain among traditional or "critical" intellectuals.³¹ Neo-Arielism, for Beverley, "is a variant of Néstor García Canclini's claim that with modernity the category of subalternity itself is no longer relevant, since it depends for its functional efficacy on traditional, pre-modern culture that has been overtaken by modernity and urbanization."³² Beverley engages in a willful oversight here, disregarding the target of García Canclini's critique, which is the ways in which discourses of the "popular" have been manipulated and hybridized. For example, in *Transforming Modernity* he takes to task critics "influenced by a Gramscian analytical framework" because they draw a Manichaeian opposition between elites and popular masses that enables them to posit too easily "anesthetizing" or "contestatory" qualities to elite or popular cultural products and practices, without examining the complex mediations (religious beliefs, bureaucratic agencies, markets, media, tourism) that have their own impact on those products and practices.³³ García Canclini goes on, however, to provide his own neo-Gramscian framework that emphasizes the cross-class and transnational industrial articulations that complicate the Manichaeian schema.

In *Hybrid Cultures* García Canclini extends his critique of neo-Gramscians' reliance on

superparadigms and generat[ing] popular strategies to which they attempt to subordinate the totality of the facts: all that is not hegemonic is subaltern, or the inverse. The descriptions then omit ambiguous processes of interpenetration and mixing in which the symbolic movements of different classes engender other processes that cannot be ordered under the classifications of hegemonic and subaltern, modern and traditional.³⁴

This may indeed be the case among the Latin American Gramscians whom he takes to task. It should be pointed out, however, that by the time he began his research on *Transforming Modernity* in the late 1970s, the work of Hall, Williams, and especially Laclau, which made the same criticisms as García Canclini and in some cases went significantly beyond his, had already been published. In 1977, each published a major

theoretical piece. Williams elaborated a quite workable concept of mediations that accounts for ideological processes better than the base-superstructure dichotomy and raised the question of residual, dominant, and emergent formations that complicate the notion of ideology within the hegemonic process; Hall recognized Gramsci's understanding of tradition as something reworked within given conjunctures and elaborated on the dialogic and ongoing contestation within knowledge and in and across institutions; and Laclau proposed the oft-cited notion of articulation as the fusion of nonclass elements within the contradictions or power blocs, which enabled the insight that (reworked) traditions may be continuous from one power bloc to another, "in contrast to the historical discontinuities which characterize class structures."³⁵

The "Popular"

The criticism that can legitimately be leveled at García Canclini is that he throws out the baby of the subaltern with the bathwater of the popular. This is because of a kind of transcultural and translational parallax that makes it difficult to understand how a concept developed in one geocultural region is applied in another. This problem of parallax is also at work in the misreadings by several cultural studies critics of García Canclini's work, particularly their refusal to understand why he proceeds with caution whenever intellectuals invoke the popular. The popular and the subaltern are, of course, kindred concepts, both passing through a foundational theoretical turning point in the work of Antonio Gramsci, on whom García Canclini, despite his critiques of neo-Gramscians, has taken inspiration, particularly in *Transforming Modernity*. Before delving into the use of the notion of the popular in Latin America, of which García Canclini is one of the most astute critics, it will be worthwhile to give a brief history of the term in Gramsci.

The notion of the popular was used by Gramsci in his diagnosis of the rise of fascism in 1920s Italy and as part of his program for moving Italian politics in a more revolutionary direction. In his estimation, progressive Italian intellectuals were out of touch with the social forces, particularly the "popular masses," necessary for the construction of a "national-popular" consciousness or "collective will" that in turn were necessary for revolution.³⁶ In France, the Jacobins ushered in a national-popular bloc by creating an alliance with the "popular masses," in particular the peasantry, which enabled the creation of a modern state (131–32). But the legacy of quasi-feudal "economic-corporate" domination in

Italy, characterized by autonomous city-states, dependent regions, and a mechanical bloc of social groups, was not conducive to national unification until the Risorgimento in the mid-nineteenth century, and then only "inorganically" under the leadership of Cavour and the Moderate Party, without significant involvement of popular classes. Indeed, the absence of popular elements enabled the Moderate Party to absorb the more liberal-democratic intellectuals of the Action Party of Mazzini and Garibaldi, thus serving the interests of northern (Piedmontese) capitalists (204). Gramsci calls this northern dominance a "dictatorship without hegemony," in which Piedmont stood in for but did not properly function as a "leading" social group (106). The northern bourgeoisie did not show the "inflexible will to become the 'leading' party," as did the Jacobins (80). Instead, the Piedmontese state "'led' the group which should have been 'leading.'" This state loosely held together ruling-class "nuclei" throughout Italy, but these nuclei "did not seek to 'lead' anybody, i.e., they did not wish to concord their interests and aspirations with the interests and aspirations of other groups" (104-5). The result was the failure to achieve a "national-popular collective will," particularly without a "*simultaneous* burst into political life" of the "great mass of peasant farmers" (132).

The construction of a national-popular will in Latin American societies faced similar challenges to those outlined by Gramsci. Juan Carlos Portantiero, for example, considered Gramsci's analysis of "Caesarism" and "Bonapartism" applicable to Latin American nationalist populisms, particularly Varguismo in Brazil, Cardenismo in Mexico, Peronismo in Argentina, and Aprismo in Peru.³⁷ This situation results when a potentially catastrophic contention between social forces is intervened in by a third actor, for example, the military, which brings into play an array of "auxiliary [often popular] forces directed by, or subjected to, their hegemonic influence," and "succeeds in permeating the State with its interests, up to a certain point, and in replacing a part of the leading personnel."³⁸ In this case, the popular forces do not, obviously, take power, but some of their agendas, particularly those that have been articulated into the third actor's ideological offensive against dominant forces, are incorporated into state policies. The history of the relationship between the left and popular masses has not been a felicitous one in Latin America, for leftist intellectuals and indeed revolutionaries (e.g., Che in Bolivia or the Sandinistas regarding the Misquitos) have not understood the specificity of popular subjects' historical, geocultural, and ideological formations. Because these formations are rooted in social,