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# Latin America and Critical Cultural Studies

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## Summary

The field of cultural studies in Latin America has had a long history and a series of both productive and convoluted developments. Today, its widespread academic commodification and institutionalization in graduate programs deter incisive, critical, and politically daring works that question the limits of the field. Even when there has never been just one way of understanding and practicing cultural studies—its internal differences are mainly due to its local geo-cultural and sociohistoric contextualization—cultural studies in Latin America cannot be understood without the transnational circulation of knowledge, hegemonized by Anglo-Saxon—British as well as American— influences and overdeterminations. Four specific and abridged transformations help sieve through this complex history intricately enmeshed in specific sociopolitical, economic, and cultural processes vis-à-vis epistemic and hermeneutic theoretical projects. These moments are unraveled from the specific articulations built from local traditions of critical thinking mixed with exogenous theories and discourses from the time when self-reflexive postmodern irony and globalization began materializing in a qualitative higher degree around the globe to its critically silent acquiescence.

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**Keywords:** cultural studies, Latin America, Latin American critical thinking, modernity, coloniality, decoloniality, Latin American cultural studies

## Definitions Amiss

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Cultural studies is an academic interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or, even, a counter-disciplinary or an antidisciplinary field of inquiry and critique, which crisscrosses diverse and heterogenous intellectual resources—concepts, theories, methodologies, data—from various disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences in order to critically analyze social, economic, political and “cultural forms and processes in contemporary and near-contemporary societies” (Payne & Barbera, 2010, p. 163). With the advent of globalization, the field of cultural studies underwent “an unprecedented international boom” (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992, p. 1) across several continents. Once cultural studies crossed the oceans, its practice undertook/experienced many mutations, adaptations, and/or transculturations. In one of the first and widely circulated readers within the U.S. academy, *Cultural Studies*, Grossberg et al. (1992) offered the following definition as a point of departure:

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Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes, counter-disciplinary field that operates in tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture. Unlike traditional anthropology, however, it has grown out of the analysis of modern industrial societies. It is typically interpretive and evaluative in its methodologies, but unlike traditional humanism it rejects the exclusive equation of culture with high culture and argues that all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures. Cultural studies is thus committed to the study of the entire range of society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices. (p. 4)

Nevertheless, this is not a definition written in stone. On the contrary, if contingency and contextualization were two of the most important characteristics of this field, then the previous definition would need to be temporally and geo-culturally reworked according to the pressing issues of the contemporariness of each location. In the *Dictionary of Latin American Cultural Studies*, edited by Robert McKee Irwin and Monica Szurmuk (2012), there is no entry on cultural studies per se, and the definition provided in the introduction reads, "cultural studies [refers] to a broad range of interdisciplinary research methodologies" (p. 1). As the authors situated its practice within regional parameters, Latin American cultural studies was then defined as

a diverse, interdisciplinary and political field of academic inquiry and critique. . . . The genealogy of Latin American cultural studies is multiple. One might think of its formation as a process of constant retroalignment among different groups from civil society, modes of popular culture, cultural institutions, nation-states, and currents of continental and international thought. (pp. 3-4)

Even though these definitions could broadly clarify what the practices of cultural studies imply within academic and scholarly settings, they did not provide specific issues and problems, modes and challenges that interrupted or disrupted what was "at stake."

Several years earlier, Alicia Ríos, Abril Trigo, and the author of this article published *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* (2004), in whose "General Introduction" Trigo included an encompassing but precise specificity related to the epistemological construction of its "privileged field of inquiry:" *the cultural* (which for Stuart Hall was "never cultural in any sense"). According to Trigo (2004), it "can be conceptualized as a historically overdetermined field of struggle for the symbolic and performative production, reproduction, and contestation of social reality and political hegemony, through which collective identities evolve" (p. 4). Hence, the practice of cultural studies should not be based on the invention of an analytical model with a specific object and set of methodologies and procedures ready to be applied. Instead, its practice should promote the eclectic intermingling of diverse undisciplined traditions of Latin American critical thinking, which were always antagonistic or oppositional in relation to what was considered to be a globally disputed field, with exogenous influences appropriated and adapted to the current task. Moreover, Latin American cultural studies' practitioners should try to unravel the articulation of naturalized social, political, economic, and cultural processes in order to understand and explain—but mainly to question and criticize—the specific grid, or grammar, of relations of power and their corresponding discursive justifications for those present conditions of existence and the sensemaking of

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shared collective experiences. Thus, constructed historical sedimentations and residues (continuities) might run deep, but also ruptures and transformations are always irrupting through the social performance of situated subjects amid the materiality of the social formations involved. This muddled definition is very much influenced by some characteristics of the British cultural studies project as exemplified, on the one hand, by what Raymond Williams emphasized: “The relation between a project [the New Left movement and its ideological underpinnings] and its formation [the emergence of post--World War II mass society and the Western expansion of American pop culture vis-à-vis Great Britain’s loss of its world hegemony] is always decisive, and . . . the emphasis of Cultural Studies is precisely that it engages with both [project and social formation]. . . . This was the crucial theoretical invention that was made: the refusal to give priority to either the project or the formation –or in older terms, the art or the society” (Williams, 1989, pp. 151-152). And on the other hand, by what Stuart Hall argued in “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities”: “cultural studies came into existence in order to understand cultural and social change in British society since the war. Its . . . vocation . . . has been to enable people to understand what [was] going on, and specially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance to all those who are now-in economic, political and cultural terms—excluded from anything that could be called access to the national culture of the national community” (Hall, 1990a, p. 22).

In Latin America, cultural studies has always been an oppositional intellectual practice, that is probably why any definition is unsuitable. Paradoxically, when in the rest of the world cultural studies started “shrinking [its] institutional footprint” (Striphas, 2019, p. 3)—such as the closure of some of its main strongholds, for example, the Center of Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, which closed in 2002, as well as other programs in the U.S. academia, in Latin America universities, cultural studies programs experienced an unparalleled institutionalizing boom in many countries, such as Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica, and Puerto Rico, just to name a few. The goal in this article is not to elaborate on the emergence of cultural studies in Great Britain as a specific origin nor to trace its dissemination across the globe in order to be reproduced as it was practiced then. As Hall maintained, “Cultural studies was then and has been ever since, an adaptation to its terrain; it has been a conjunctural practice” (1990a, p. 11). Thus, the overall purpose here is to examine how cultural studies has been and continues to be practiced in Latin America since the early 1980s to the present—and the concomitant and persistent waves of institutionalization, despite the intrinsic perils of stalemate it represents—and how those practices have been historically reformulated at different moments. Having this aim in mind, allow me to quote from and refer to my Introduction of *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* and other published articles in which the readers can find many interesting details about specific moments in the development of cultural studies in Latin America. In the following section, “Eclectic Genealogies,” the intertwined crossing of relevant exogenous sources, currents of thought, and underlying influences, adjusted and articulated to the conditions of local contexts that produce different versions of cultural studies in Latin America, is examined.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the last section, “Abridge Moments of an Intense History,” highlights four manifestations of cultural studies projects or programs in Latin America from the 1980s to the present day.

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## Eclectic Genealogies

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Cultural globalization processes are responsible for the emergence, dissemination, and transformation of cultural studies in Latin America, as well as their multiple expressions, all of them byproducts of the transnational cultural logic of global capitalism. And precisely because of those transformations, the practice of cultural studies should always exceed, problematize, and question that same logic, bringing to the scene the complex cultural and social conflict arising in peripheral countries where coloniality of power still prevails. This last characteristic, however, does not hinder that this field of inquiry reconfigure itself in different contexts according to their local conditions of emergence—that is, the local intellectual, institutional, and administrative practices and policies—on the contrary, it makes it more malleable and flexible. Therefore, it is crucial to specify that cultural studies in Latin America does not originate as a replica, translation, or adaptation of British or U.S. cultural studies but from its emergent intellectual practices during the turbulent 1980s, that deepen its roots to diverse Latin American critical traditions, transformed at the time by the horizon of the “post” (Del Sarto, 2004, p. 162, 2008a, p. 48).

Thwarting and resisting the incontrovertible U.S. hegemony, the Latin American intellectual productions of the 1960s, obviously permeated by the apogee of French structuralism (F. de Saussure, C. Levi-Strauss, L. Althusser, N. Poulantzas, and R. Barthes), would eclectically integrate the renewed influence of the Frankfurt School (M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, W. Benjamin, and H. Marcuse), the emerging semiotic field (Tartu School, Italian semiotics, and French semiology), and the first poststructuralist questionings (M. Foucault, J. Kristeva, J. Derrida, G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, and J. Baudrillard) with the transgressive power of the rock revolution and the Beatlemania that conquered the world (Del Sarto, 2004, p. 161). Within Latin America,

the influence of continental European thought—Spanish, French, British, or German, depending on the geopolitical and intellectual flows—went uncontested for many centuries and constituted the paradigms along which their intellectual imaginaries were molded. As a consequence, the Latin American cultural imaginary was multifariously embedded as a vicarious appendix mediated by “universal” (Eurocentric) culture, or better yet, as a colonized space which made possible the entire project of Western modern civilization (Del Sarto, 2004, p. 160)

Moreover,

. . . One of the strategies unconsciously implemented to contain “total colonialism” was to disjoint the economic from the cultural predominance, acknowledging the influence of competing imperialist powers in each of them. While England during the 19th century and afterward the United States ruled over the economic sphere, different aesthetic and philosophical French schools of thought—from rationalism and symbolism to existentialism and structuralism—predominated all along with an uncontested aura.

(Del Sarto, 2004, p. 161)

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Nevertheless, significant events—World War II, the United Kingdom’s loss of Occidental hegemony, and the rise of the United States as a superpower—would completely modify the configuration of this modern-colonial-world system (Wallerstein, 1991), as well as the tides of hegemonic ideas circulating around the world (Del Sarto, 2004, p. 161). Indeed, the power struggles were and still are quite complex and intricate in these crisscrossing influences, positions, disputes, and polemics. Latin America has a long history that predates its name as a region. It is a greatly unequal, uneven, heterogenous region, and within each country we find highly contrasted differences, with different forms and levels of internal colonialism. Hence, to examine the region as a whole is daunting, but not impossible. In some cases, nation-states are central, but in some others the formation of the nation, and even the constitution of the state, never fully ensued. Thus, coloniality of power as the underside of modernity also has different materializations.

For some scholars, for instance Walter Mignolo and even Aníbal Quijano, Latin America is just an idea (an idea originally proposed by Edmundo O’Gorman).<sup>2</sup> It refers to the idea of (European) *latinidad* that created a modern present in the 19th century and institutionalized the liberal republican state. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, Latin Americanism in Latin America was much more than an empty name tag. Important sociopolitical movements and ideological currents—mostly from the Marxist left, struggled for national liberation, promoting a politics of recognition and regional identity alongside a vast and rich intellectual and cultural production: dependency theory; liberation theology; pedagogy of the oppressed; experimental street theatre; imperfect cinema, third cinema and aesthetic of hunger; protest song, and so on. Marxism, in its many shapes and shades, strongly influenced this vast movement. Of course, these liberation movements needed to be eradicated when shaping the new global international world system, now under U.S. hegemony, and consequently dictatorships and repressive governments arose to align the region to its submission.

Paradoxically, intellectuals and scholars alike played their own political game. In fact, this was and still is a very contentious issue, which informs many debates and polemics since the end of the 20th century and, luckily, is still culturally open and politically unresolved: Does the addition or the subtraction of the geo-cultural epithet make so much difference? In terms of our main topic: Are they Latin American cultural studies, cultural studies in Latin America, or cultural studies *tout court*? It is interesting to remember that when many of its most prominent practitioners—such as Néstor García-Canclini, Beatriz Sarlo, and Jesús Martín-Barbero—began working within cultural studies, the name of their practice or of the field in itself was not problematic at all. Martín-Barbero, among others, recognized in an interview that “we had been doing cultural studies before that label appeared. . . . We had cultural studies a long time ago. . . . I did not start talking about culture because of influences from abroad. . . . Latin America did not incorporate to cultural studies when they became fashionable as a label, but they have a very different history in the region” (1996, pp. 4-5). Even later, when cultural studies crossed the Atlantic and became fashionable in the Americas, Latin Americans were ready to point out the differences between their own critical practice and what was practiced in the United States: A matter of resisting hegemony discursively, but allowing the materiality of the social to penetrate various arteries and channels, though believed to be contained through the mere use of language. Consequently, as soon as there were specific projects—with clear intellectual and political interests at stake—many of these same Latin American intellectuals started not only policing their supposedly

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disciplinary boundaries and belongingness but also encouraging different research strategies as those best to be practiced, as if they were universally and theoretically legitimate *urbi et orbi*.

In sum, “Latin American cultural studies have their own endogenous genealogy and eclectic and diffuse exogenous influences, with exceptional direct influence from the British project, but with correlative coincidences with respect to the peculiar situation from which similar searches and responses were arising” (Del Sarto, 2004, pp. 165–166). It is true that cultural studies in Latin America has deeply established roots in several lines within the undisciplined traditions of Latin American critical thinking, but its contemporary practices would not exist without the exogenous input and constant dialogue with the Anglo-Saxon cultural studies, but also with European reformulations of Marxism, such as the reviewing of Antonio Gramsci’s, Louis Althusser’s, and the Frankfurt School’s divergent tendencies (especially Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse), and French sociology of culture, semiotics, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction.

## Abridged Moments of an Intense History

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Since its first institutionalization as a research program on the study of culture and politics in the Center of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University in 1964 to its international boom during the 1990s, and to the present, cultural studies has had many distinct projects with their specific advocates and detractors around the globe. The name for this practice first appeared in Great Britain during the early 1960s and even when it went global and remained only loosely related to that British context, the English language still hegemonizes the field. These specificities have not only alienated many Latin American intellectuals and scholars but have almost always also engendered, if not resistance, at least serious suspicion. Only some of those who had ties to the British and/or the U.S. academic worlds or had the privilege of having had a graduate education abroad, even in continental Europe, were prone to incorporate some of its fertile inquiries. Therefore, in Latin America the politics about the name for cultural studies was always contentious (Mato, 2002; Trigo, 2004, 2012; Walsh, 2010). Martín-Barbero or García-Canclini, both early pioneers of cultural studies in Latin America, declared that they were practicing cultural studies without knowing what that name meant or what kind of practices it represented. At the same time and as an aside of what was commonly promoted as cultural studies in Latin America, two academic programs under this rubric were institutionalized during the 1980s: The Departamento de Estudios Culturales (Department of Cultural Studies <https://www.colef.mx/departamentosacademicos/estudios-culturales/>) of El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), in Tijuana, Mexico, opened in 1982 under the direction of José Manuel Valenzuela Arce. The second program was the Coordenação Interdisciplinar de Estudos Culturais (CIEC) (Interdisciplinary Coordination of Cultural Studies), implemented in 1986 by Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda through the Programa Avançado de Cultura Contemporânea at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (PACC/UFRJ), Brazil <https://www.pacc.ufrj.br/>. Both cultural studies programs are still healthy, productive, and influential in the region.<sup>3</sup>

In the following subsections, a brief but condensed history of the heterogenous variety of cultural studies experiences in Latin America will be examined through four moments conceived, not in relation to its politics of criticism vis-à-vis Latin American sociopolitical transformations or social materiality, but from the specific sedimentation cultural studies as

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political and cultural projects or programs were adopted and institutionalized within Latin America. Some of the issues debated during each period will be highlighted, but evidently this Sisyphean task is impossible even for a team of researchers.

## Parallel Emergences, 1980s–1990s

In Latin America, during those early years, cultural studies was resisted as a label, albeit practiced under other names, outside of the university system, while at the same time its practice became popular in the U.S. academia. According to George Yúdice, who compared these contextualized practices, both “shared the change in the definition of culture . . . leaving behind the elitist version and [embracing] a more anthropological, everyday life, comprehension of it” (2002, p. 1). However, quoting Daniel Mato’s “Studies on Culture and Power, in Latin America,” Yúdice argued that the initial practice of cultural studies was “disseminated in very different spaces: universities, newspapers and periodicals, scholarly journals, magazines, radio stations, civil organizations, feminist groups, museums, municipalities and even independent intellectuals” (2002, p. 1). One of the best early experiences that led to the practice of cultural studies in Latin America were the *Revistas culturales*, Southern Cone cultural journals, weekly periodicals, and magazines that began discussing aesthetic, political, and ideological issues of cultural history during the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in Argentina and Uruguay, many interdisciplinary and popular publications were launched either as special editions, such as *Libros de Bolsillo* from CEAL (Latin American Editor Center Pocket Books), or weekly publications, such as *Capítulo*, *Historia de la Literatura Argentina*, in which recent political and cultural history was massively disseminated through these kiosk publications.<sup>5</sup> Beatriz Sarlo, for instance, worked on both collections before editing *Punto de Vista* in 1978. Not by chance, Sarlo’s interview “Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart: On Culture and Society” (“Raymond Williams y Richard Hoggart: Sobre cultural y Sociedad”) was published in the second issue of this journal (Sarlo, 1979).

In Latin America, culture has always been political, and under authoritarian governments and dictatorships, cultural intervention was the only way to politicize social reality. This political specificity of culture was not necessarily linked to the research practice itself or to its specific elements or characteristics being heralded and promoted through political projects. The role of intellectuals in Latin America, due to sociohistorical specificities, has been cultural as well as political. Historically, intellectuals were also politicians, academics, journalists, and scholars. They had a public voice expressed through the very texture of the sociopolitical and symbolic struggles (the cultural). It is true, though, that they were almost exclusively male, white or mestizo (who considered themselves white), and privileged. This situation requires duly problematization and questioning not only about the past but also about the present. Most Latin American anthropologists and social scientists practicing cultural studies in Latin America today, who resort to Stuart Hall’s voice, positions, articulations, and perspective, are still white and privileged.

Critical cultural studies might have sounded like an oxymoron among some of those early practitioners of cultural studies in Latin America, such as Beatriz Sarlo, Nelly Richard, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Carlos Monsiváis, Renato Ortiz, José Joaquín Brunner, and Néstor García-Canclini. Their practice was always critical, although that designation has never reached the

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region, thus it could have never been adopted as a name. However, if there was a singular shared specificity during the 1980s and 1990s to which any version of the project of cultural studies could have communed across the region, it was its articulation to different trends of Latin American critical thinking (not only within the humanities, but also among several native offspring theories from the social sciences, such as transculturation, internal colonialism, dependency theory, liberation theology, or pedagogy of the oppressed). Although cultural studies was locally determined and decidedly heterogeneous, that is, experienced and practiced in different ways according to specific contexts, the critical edge was what better described that disputed field.

Two different U.S.-based-networks of intellectual collaboration were founded during the early 1990s, mainly triggered by events within Latin America, but made possible by the economic resources, the logistic advantages, and the international prestige of U.S. academia. Moreover, even when many of their members were originally born in Latin American, at that moment they were working in U.S. academia. In 1992, the Latin American subaltern studies group was created by John Beverley and Ileana Rodríguez. “Despaired over world politics, as well as the politics of public and academic institutions at a moment of changing paradigms,” these intellectuals were determined to “link literature to politics” from the concept of the excluded subaltern subjects (Rodríguez, 2001, pp. 1-2). In 1993, the InterAmerican Network on Cultural Studies, constituted in Mexico City during its first meeting, was dedicated to examining what cultural projects could achieve for civil society. It “reunited 60 representatives of twelve countries and its aim was to promote comparative and collaborative research to contribute to the emergent transdiscipline of Cultural Studies with alternative perspectives.” Among their projects were “a semi-annual bulletin and a series of books—in Spanish, Portuguese and English—to be disseminated across the hemisphere; a system of listservices” (especially for bibliographical sources) and electronic conferences with the purpose of keeping its members in contact to carry out their collaborations, to facilitate the materials, and to promote annual conferences” (Yúdice, 1996, p. 97).<sup>6</sup>

Both groups departed from different poststructuralist readings of Antonio Gramsci, who at that time had great influence on the practice of cultural studies and reworked his conception of the popular. Gramsci’s reinterpretations were articulated geo-culturally in different ways: The Latin American subaltern group followed a “strategy of the poor” (Gayatri Spivak’s call) to “find ways of producing scholarship to demonstrate that in the failure to recognize the poor as active social, political, and heuristic agents reside the limits and thresholds of our present hermeneutical and political condition” (Rodríguez, 2001, p. 3). The InterAmerican Network was also privileging literature to deconstruct national identity through the articulation of the popular, but the diagnosis was different: Its participants were analyzing different manifestations of the popular within national cultures. In Yúdice’s words: “If in Britain Arnold, Leavis, and Eliot differentially privileged the power of high culture to form citizens, and in the US the emphasis came to fall on mass culture, in Latin America the nation was a hegemonic culture with a base in the popular” (2001, p. 221).

Meanwhile, in Latin America the social sciences were reflecting on the cultural transformations molding politics on societies to build the region’s future, whereas the humanities were directly implicated in the liberal production of national cultures, and therefore much more conservative in its ideologic and political positions. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, better known there as CEPAL (Comisión Económica para América Latina), the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin America



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Social Sciences University, FLACSO), and then, its Council (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, CLACSO), were very active during the 1980s and 1990s debating ideological, political, and cultural issues (Stavenhagen, 2014). For instance, to give a rough example, through a very early articulation of national development and social communications research, many transnational forums were dedicated to elaborate strategies for democratization, such as IPAL (Instituto para América Latina / Institute for Latin America) and CINEP (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular / Center for Grassroots Education and Research, a Jesuit forum), through which the Latin American seminar “Transnational Culture, Popular Cultures and Cultural Politics” was held in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1985. One of the most interesting theoretical debates in that forum, but with deep implications for the social sciences and the practice of cultural studies, was articulated through a polemic between José Joaquín Brunner and Néstor García-Canclini on the importance and influence of A. Gramsci and P. Bourdieu. Today the traces of this serious and dense texture of debates are completely evaded, erased, or dismissed under the auspices of new formulaic, supposedly more progressive but evidently less critical, and ready-made knowledge.

## **Constructive Exchanges, Mid- to Late 1990s–2001**

Cultural studies cannot be understood without the unfolding of late capitalism and neoliberal globalization; the expansion of mass society and consumer culture; the development of communications through media and new technologies; the global expansion of the imaginary of (American) pop culture; and the postmodern epistemic inflection. Its practice around the globe, its “unprecedented international boom,” as quoted earlier, was disseminating a specific light, prêt-à-porter Anglo-Saxon model. It was highly attractive, flexible, and combinable, which ended up depoliticizing countless poignant edges. From Latin America, this specific fold was many times blatantly resisted and other times simply reconfigured through local articulations.

During the 1990s, Martín-Barbero argued that

there [was] a clear difference between North-American cultural studies, those that come from Literature in Latin America, and those that come from the Social Sciences. However, at [that] moment there [was] a nice interrelationship between the Anglo-Saxon academic world and Latin America, which we do not have with the French or Italian. This is very strange: we were educated by the French and Italian but they do not translate us, nor they have any kind of scholarly relations with us, while in Great Britain and in the US there is a lot of interest in what we do in Latin America.

(Martín-Barbero, 1996, p. 5)

At the same time, cultural critics Beatriz Sarlo, Nelly Richard, and Hugo Achugar were always distancing themselves from cultural studies because they considered it to be a new technology of knowledge imposed by the U.S. academia. Although all were interpellated and engaged in intellectual collaborations, they always established their different loci of enunciation, underlining that if cultural critique speaks from Latin America, cultural studies do so about Latin America (Del Sarto, 2000, p. 236).

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At international forums, scholars began working collectively to enhance opportunities for cultural and theoretical and political exchanges, collaborations, criticisms, and polemical debates. If there is a specific moment in which Latin American cultural studies coalesced and acquired regional visibility, it was during the Latin American Studies Association international conference (LASA) held in Guadalajara in 1997. That time truly represented one of the most politically appealing and theoretical engaging interactions. Through later international conferences and symposia, many research agendas, intellectual and academic projects, which embodied complicit searches to build consensus here and there, within and outside of the university systems, were elaborated and discussed. The rapid circulation, dissemination, and transmission of discourses and practices produced many intellectual and theoretical conversations. These debates and polemics reached a point at which everybody knew there was something at stake.

Some examples, among many others, would be enough to show this vitality: The international symposium *New Perspectives from/on Latin America: The Cultural Studies Challenge*, organized by Mabel Moraña in 1998 at the University of Pittsburgh, which demonstrated “the variety of transdisciplinary methodologies and topics which characterized the field during this period” (Moraña, 2000, p. 9). Two years later the VII Congress of the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature (ABRALIC), “Terras & Gentes” (Territories/Lands and Peoples) was held in 2000 in Salvador, Brazil, where Stuart Hall’s keynote lecture was “Diasporas, or the Logics of Cultural Translations.” At the same time, two different interfaces amplified this movement: On the one hand, Latin American students went to U.S. universities to pursue PhD degrees and postdoctorate temporary positions to advance in their careers. On the other hand, there was the promotion of U.S. study abroad in conjunction with scholars’ exchange programs in Latin American countries. “Duke in the Andes” was an excellent and fertile example of this double cultural interaction: While graduate and undergraduate students studied abroad in the Andes, faculty and scholars founded the Latin American modernity/coloniality research group (M/C)—whose initial members were Walter Mignolo (Duke University, U.S.), Aníbal Quijano (Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Peru), Edgardo Lander (Universidad Central de Venezuela), Fernando Coronil (Venezuela and University of Michigan, U.S.), Javier Sanjinés (Bolivia and University of Michigan, U.S.), Zulma Palermo (Universidad Nacional de Salta, Argentina), Santiago Castro Gómez (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia), Catherine Walsh (Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador), and Arturo Escobar (University of North Carolina, U.S.). Many international conferences, sponsored by these universities led to the international protocol signed in 1999 by the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Duke University, University of North Carolina, and Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the decade, these heated debates on cultural studies within U.S. academia, propelled not only but mainly by Latin Americanists working in Spanish departments and/or reconverted area studies programs, such as Latin American studies, took place mainly in relation to and among the social sciences (sociology, communications, and anthropology) in different Latin American countries. In 2001, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito, Ecuador, institutionalized the first PhD in Latin American cultural studies in the region, directed by Catherine Walsh. In 2002, the Social Science Department of Pontificia Universidad Javeriana also opened the first master’s program in cultural studies. These two institutional events were also preceded by the above mentioned international forums in which the debates on cultural studies were at center stage. The tide was high, and many interesting and very

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creative projects were riding the wave until LASA2001, in Washington DC, where several participants declared the supposed “end of the alliance” (represented mainly by the end of the dialogue between García-Canclini and Beverley) or, when the implosion of the field, as Trigo analyzed it (2004, 2012), began to untangle. Out of this hypothetical dissolution, the collective work of the M/C group galvanized around Mignolo’s role as leader of a new epistemological twist within the postcolonial turn, which made it look potentially more transgressive and representative of all the erased voices within Latin America.

## Oppositional Hindrances and Late Renewal, 2001–2010

This section starts with a long quote from Arturo Escobar’s “World and Knowledges Otherwise,” where he emphasizes not only the genealogical lines of the M/C group, but also the tasks they set for themselves:

The modernity/coloniality group certainly finds inspiration in a number of sources from European and North American critical theories of modernity and postmodernity to South Asian subaltern studies, Chicana feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and African philosophy; many of its members operate within a modified world system perspective. Its main driving force, however, is a continued reflection on Latin American cultural and political reality, including the subaltern knowledge of exploited and oppressed social groups. If dependency theory, liberation theology, and participatory action research can be said to have been the most original contributions of Latin American critical thought in the twentieth century (with all the caveats that may apply to such originality), the MC research program emerges as heir to this tradition. As Walter Mignolo puts it, MC should be seen as *un paradigma otro*. Rather than a new paradigm “from Latin America” (as it could have been the case with dependency), the MC project does not fit into a linear history of paradigms or epistemes; to do so would mean to integrate it into the history of modern thought. On the contrary, the MC program should be seen as an other way of thinking that runs counter to the great modernist narratives (Christianity, liberalism, and Marxism); it locates its own inquiry in the very borders of systems of thought and reaches towards the possibility of non-eurocentric modes of thinking.

(Mignolo & Escobar, 2010, p. 34)

This other way of thinking, *an-other paradigm*, has been vastly scrutinized since the beginning of the new millennium. In 2003, Walsh wrote “What to Know, What to Do, and How to See? The Disciplinary, Political and Ethical Challenges and Predicaments of (Inter)cultural Studies *From Andean America*,” an introduction to several texts collected after an international symposium held in the framework of the M/C research group, entitled Latin American Cultural Studies. Challenges from and about the Andean Region (Estudios culturales latinoamericanos. Retos desde y sobre la region andina). In this introduction, she argues that despite the “cultural studies expansion and institutionalization in the US in the 1980s, . . . cultural studies in Latin America are being reevaluated and in transition, especially from the Southern Hemisphere, where a field or, maybe, *a project of alternative cultural studies* is emerging, linked more to critical thinking than to the previous interests in cultural industries and consumption” (2003, p. 23; her emphasis, my translation). Walsh examines this “field as an epistemological possibility of transformation . . . [where] intellectuals from many formations begun to coalesce, even those who come from the social movements and those who reflect on

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the differences produced by coloniality (gender, ethnicity, race, nation, etc.) and the struggles of knowledge related to it” (2003, p. 24). These intellectuals are not contextualizing “Occidental critical thinking to the Latin American or Andean reality”; instead, they are “thinking from the local, national and regional specificity, heterogeneity and coloniality but always within a global dialogue” (2003, p. 24).

Although Mignolo’s leadership could have been perceived as uncontested, from many fronts in Latin America some of his ideas were and still are genuinely resisted. Even when the M/C group’s research agenda is built around the praxis, politics, and ideologies of many subaltern groups—indigenous social movements and Afro-descendent communities in Latin America—there were many researchers, native and mestizos alike or subalterns in Latin America, who questioned his mediation in English in the global academy. This non-European an-other paradigm is epistemologically and paradoxically constructed from the center of the Anglo-Saxon academia and enunciated by a white man educated in France. Mignolo made the strategic move to translate into English a concoction of concepts and ideas, almost used as axioms, carefully selected from well-known Latin American intellectuals—José Mariátegui, Frantz Fanon, Aníbal Quijano, and Enrique Dussel, among others—in order to be repackaged into several chains of equivalences. The intended purpose was to rewrite the local histories erased by imperial and global designs, while enunciating an-other discourse that enters in dialogue with all those others historically erased. The aporia emerges when, at the same time, this discourse pretends to be listened by the Other, the one who authorizes its postmodern and postcolonial epistemological rooting. Moreover, if this discourse is written in English, it is not necessarily willing to talk with the others it epitomizes, but to the Other by which it wants to be recognized for introducing all those who are excluded.

Obviously, there are other efforts from Latin America, such as the case of Catherine Walsh, an American living in Ecuador and writing in Spanish, who has dedicated her academic life to strengthening the relations between the cultural studies program at Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (UASB) and the indigenous and Afro-descendent communities in Ecuador. Walsh is one of the most active members of the M/C group. In 2004, she constructively criticized Mignolo’s position on postcolonial thinking, proposing the need to decolonize the modern/colonial episteme. At that moment, the name of the research group changed to Latin American Coloniality/Modernity/Decolonality Research Group (M/C/D). Three years later, in “Shifting the Geopolitics of Critical Knowledge: Decolonial Thought and Cultural Studies ‘Others’ in the Andes,” she postulated that “coloniality as both a concept and lived reality provides a foundational context for understanding this ‘other’ intellectual production in Latin America in general and in the Andes in particular” (2007, pp. 228–229). However, she adds: “The construction, logic, and use of critical thought have long existed among indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples, although Latin American philosophers, social scientists, and leftist intellectuals have seldom recognized or valued its existence” (2007, p. 229). She continues: “The recognition, crystallization, and use of a *‘pensamiento propio’* [our own critical thinking] has in very recent years become a visible component in the struggles of both indigenous and Afro groups in the region, struggles that as [she has] argued elsewhere are not just social and political but also epistemic in nature” (2007, p. 230).

The main concern with epistemic decolonization lies precisely in the abstract disconnect that some academic members of the M/C/D group are proposing in relation to what the concrete people from these marginalized and excluded groups practice and believe in their everyday

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life. If decoloniality becomes possible, it will be enunciated from and with the voice of the people who are inhabiting the borders. My questioning is not new. Arturo Escobar has already pointed out three pressing contemporary issues—gender, nature and the environment, and economic imaginaries (Escobar, 2007, p. 192)—that could take the M/C/D group’s efforts outside of the “academic-intellectual” and “disembodied abstract discourse.” Up to now, the only consistent efforts are made through the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (UASB) program of Latin American cultural studies, led by Walsh.

Even though these oppositional hindrances arose in relation to the M/C/D group, there are two other instances of regional and international cultural studies scholars and intellectuals’ interactions to mention before concluding this section. These two examples are interestingly subregional, one is the Congreso Centroamericano de Estudios Culturales (Central American Conference on Cultural Studies) and the other is the Red de Estudios y Políticas Culturales (Cultural Studies and Policies Network), mainly from South America. Both of them are very different among themselves: While the first one is a research-based biannual conference open to everyone willing to participate; the second one only met once, and it was supposed to coordinate collective and institutional exchanges among academics and students of cultural studies programs within South America.

The first Centro-American Conference on Cultural Studies [\\_<https://hispanismo.cervantes.es/congresos-y-cursos/i-congreso-centroamericano-estudios-culturales-literarios>](https://hispanismo.cervantes.es/congresos-y-cursos/i-congreso-centroamericano-estudios-culturales-literarios) meeting was held in San Salvador, at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas in 2007. Since then, six other conferences met in different Central America countries (mainly Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and El Salvador) with the explicit aim of consolidating critical thinking about Central America as a human and cultural space. From memory and interculturality to identity politics, body and social performance, these productive exchanges would not have been possible without the constant and active work of Patricia Fumero-Vargas, Beatriz Cortes, Ricardo Roque Baldovinos, Héctor Leyva, and Werner Mackenbach, in conjunction with the collaboration of U.S. Latin American scholars, such as Ileana Rodríguez, Arturo Arias, and Mark Zimmerman.<sup>8</sup>

The second collective network of intellectual and academic exchanges, Red de Estudios y Políticas Culturales (Cultural Studies and Policies Network), was launched in 2009 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, through the Centro de Altos Estudios Universitarios (CAEU) (High University Studies Center), funded by the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI) and coordinated by Alejandro Grimson. A visible result from this initiative is *En torno a los estudios culturales. Localidades, trayectorias y disputas* (2010), a book edited by Nelly Richard and published by Editorial ARCIS and CLACSO. More comments about this network are presented in the next subsection; however, it is important to mention that Brazil, Mexico, and Central America were not part of this network.

## Wide and Comprehensive Institutionalizations (2010–)

What we can definitively observe is that cultural studies has become a hot commodity, and it is marketable everywhere because of its profitability. Interestingly, the oldest programs, in El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (Mexico) and in Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), are still alive and very successful. José Manuel Valenzuela Arce is an extremely productive

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scholar, whose research focuses on youth, border cultures, and migrations, while Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda keeps a very active agenda promoting and publishing different works by marginal subjectivities, communities, and cultures in Brazil. Probably it is the local articulations and the self-marginalization of both programs from the supposedly larger regional political hustle and bustle that keeps them vital and dynamic.

By 2010, almost all Latin American countries had institutionalized graduate programs in cultural studies. As mentioned more than once in this article, along this brief history there has not been just one specific way of understanding and practicing cultural studies in Latin America, although there are certain lines of work, which for different reasons have become consolidated either nationally—always institutionally and geographically located in well-known universities of the capitals or big cities in the interior—and even regionally, such as the recognized Andean program of Latin American (Inter)Cultural Studies of the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, in Quito. A new generation of practitioners, many of whom graduated from this program, keeps dynamizing the field. At the same time and challenging this line of practice, an older generation is still debating the most radical way to keep out U.S. influence—to which the Andean project is linked—while resorting to the legacy of Birmingham’s political imaginary based on Stuart Hall’s writings.<sup>9</sup>

In 2010, from the Universidade de Brasilia, a PhD program in cultural studies was relaunched through the articulation of three important axes: “the struggle to institutionalize Indigenous and Afro-descendant quotas; the need to overcome the Social Sciences/Humanities dualism through complex theories; and the promotion of the encounter of knowledges (*encuentro de saberes*)” (De Carvalho, 2010, p. 229). All these important issues are framed in the explicit recovery of the critical and political position constitutive of the 1960s cultural studies project in the United Kingdom. Nobody would dare to not recognize the importance of Stuart Hall in cultural studies, but when his ideas are assembled as a ready-made kit, based on “radical contextualization,” to be used in any geo-cultural and temporal space, his theoretical insistence on maintaining a nonreductionist position while exercising a political vocation is definitively betrayed.

If, as Eduardo Restrepo argues, Hall is “an inspiration for a generation who has the challenge to transform the theoretical and political imagination predominant in our time” (Restrepo, 2017), the unchallenged reproduction of discourses and academic practices which helps molding reality while commodifying the label cultural studies amid the general neoliberal push is paradoxical. In Hall’s words:

We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always “in context,” *positioned*. I was born into and spent my childhood and adolescence in a lower-middle-class family in Jamaica. I have lived all my adult life in England, in the shadow of the black diaspora—“in the belly of the beast.” I write against the background of a lifetime’s work in cultural studies. If the paper seems preoccupied with the diaspora experience and its narratives of displacement, it is worth remembering that all discourse is “placed,” and the heart has its reasons. (1990b, pp. 222–223)

Sharing this critical imaginary, but based on other South American countries, two similar undertakings are attempting to join heterogenous voices through a digital portal, Estudios culturales **desde** América Latina y el Caribe <<http://www.eeccs-latinoamerica.net/>>

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[conversaciones/page/2/>](#) (EECCS) (Cultural Studies **from** Latin America and the Caribbean), lodged in Bogotá (Colombia), facilitated by Restrepo with collaborations from the IDAES (Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Buenos Aires) in Argentina (Rodríguez, 2018). However, this second project is still “a kind of debt”: Even when it houses several researchers, “the institutionalization of cultural studies [as a program] within the IDAES is a process of relative development” (Rodríguez, 2018, p. 36).

As of the early 21st century, there are no examples of new radical or alternative questionings and criticisms. Only too many suspicious attempts to occupy political spaces by positioning at the forefront of cultural studies progressive cutting-edge. Hall is heralded as “the” founding father to be emulated, easily replicated, politically imitated, and culturally mimicked. His works are certainly of utmost importance and demand serious reflection for and by any cultural studies practitioner. However, they should not be adopted as an attractive, flexible, and combinable model—based on movable keywords, such as “articulation,” “overdetermination,” and “complex totality” packaged in a radical contextualization lexicon—to be reproduced as any culinary recipe. Undoubtedly that is not and should not be his legacy.

While this wide and comprehensive institutionalization has further developed and promoted the local and regional practice of cultural studies multifariously in Latin America, today there is no clear hegemony within the field. Nonetheless, while in metropolitan centers cultural studies has lost most of its transactional value—though serious critical cultural studies practices remain—in Latin America cultural studies’ main political struggles are enthusing and rekindling new regroupings between the Andean programs linked to the M/C/D group and the loosely and fragmentary figments of all the programs reunited under the umbrella of the Cultural Studies and Policies Network, which had a unique and interesting inaugurating event but has not had any follow-up meetings. Simultaneously, there are many productive practitioners with creative agendas within the already institutionalized programs of Mexico, Brazil, and Central America, although their political will is directly linked to local conditions.

Paradoxically, and summing up the main argument, even though the 2008 financial crisis started as an internal U.S. event, it ended up spilling over the world many of the solutions implemented to contain it. One of those mechanisms was the now global university funding model, the corporatization of higher education. At that point, the global market colonized the politics of criticism through abstract forms: What could be resisted through words, was co-optable and subsumed through abstract forms. It seems that today if content would not be at stake—since apparently we are living in a postideological world—then what would be important is to gather keywords, embellish them, and highlight commodifiable features that end up being desired. The reproduction of this model for education steers to a deeper disconnection between what is going on in living societies and the needs of institutional funding to remain operational. Now the assessment process, focused on the correlation between aims, goals, and outcomes, problem-solving and tangible results are much more important than the production of knowledge and critical thinking. Unfortunately, cultural studies in Latin America is becoming another eclectic practice devoid of any political and critical edge, but institutionally those programs could be able to compete in the global market with the correct academic promotion and marketability from the always exotic localities and attractive specificities of the desiring other.

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## Notes

1. In this section, quotations from “Foundations,” an Introduction written by the author for *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* (2004, especially pp. 160–163 and 153–181) and from “Historias en curso: reconfiguraciones de los estudios culturales latinoamericanos” (2008a) are included to analyze the complex articulations of exogenous and endogenous sources and practices translated and adapted to local contexts. These ideas are much more elaborated and developed in those texts, but some paragraphs are included here to properly introduce the processes (2000; 2002; 2004; 2008a).
2. See Mignolo’s *The Idea of Latin America* (2005) and E. O’Gorman’s *La invención de América* (1953).
3. More details can be found in Del Sarto (2008a).
4. Many of them can be freely found in its digital form through AhiRa <<https://www.ahira.com.ar/sobre-el-proyecto/>> (Historic Archive of Argentinean Journals, 2018).
5. A more detailed account of the importance of cultural journals in the Southern Cone can be found in Trigo’s *Why Do I Do Cultural Studies?* (2000).
6. Again, many more details about these two U.S.-based groups can be found in Del Sarto (2008a).
7. Several publications came out as a result of these international forums during those productive years, such as Castro-Gómez and Mendieta, *Teorías sin disciplina* (1998); Castro-Gómez, Guardiola-Rivera, and Millán, *Pensar en los intersticios* (1999); Castro-Gómez, *La reestructuración de las ciencias sociales* (2001), Lander, *La colonialidad del saber* (2000); Walsh, Schiwy, and Castro-Gómez, *Indisciplinar las ciencias sociales* (2002).
8. For more information on the practice of cultural studies in Central America, see Fumero-Vargas, 2013–.2014.
9. See Mato, 2016.

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