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Boundaries and Bridges in Trans-European Cultural Research

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Taking its point of departure in a comparative, international study on the so-called cartoon controversy and the discrepancies found between the domestic, Danish and international discourses, the article argues that comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives offer new venues for innovative cultural research. This argument is contextualised by a mapping of some of the tensions facing European cultural research in terms of substance, organisation and funding.

Boundaries and Bridges in Trans-European Cultural Research

A few years ago, the American cultural historian John Gillis published a book called *Islands of the Mind* (Gillis 2004). Here, he analyses the permutations of ways in which people in the western hemisphere have imagined islands since the Greeks and how islands have served as metaphors of thinking, of categorising and analysing things. For example, Gillis notes, the islanders of Polynesia traditionally thought of themselves as belonging to a "sea of islands" rather than to a particular territory. The Europeans and Americans, on the other hand, defined islands as discrete entities. And so when they entered the Pacific, they introduced the concept of insularity, isolating one island from another and "turning the sea into empty space" (Gillis 2004: 2).

In a similar fashion, culture may be defined and understood in different ways. For while culture has always been generated withing processes of exchange, Gillis' anecdote serves to remind us of an important basis of cultural research: when we study culture we may focus on entities, the islands themselves, or we may focus on the connections between entities, the waterways. But, as the anecdote also demonstrates, whatever our particular focus of interest, to perform cultural research is to make comparisons – indeed, this may be true of most research in that we understand what something *is* by what it is not.

I want to draw attention to this simple fact of comparison in cultural research for two reasons: one is to counter a prevalent notion that today cultures have become so globalised that we need to analyse and understand them on a larger comparative canvas. I would argue that cultural research has always been nursed on comparative perspectives. Second, I want to highlight that the research landscape, within which most of us conduct our current research, has certainly become more internationalised, even globalised, not least in Europe. This process is to do with the ways in which we define the substance of research, with the organisation of research and with its funding.

The Cartoon Controversy: Comparative Cultural Research

In the following, I want to briefly map out some of the tensions in conducting comparative, cultural research within this wider, trans-European research landscape. I want to do so by drawing on preliminary findings from an international research project on the so called cartoon controversy. As most of you will know, the immediate background to the controversy was the publication in September 2005 by a Danish newspaper of 12 cartoons defaming the prophet Muhammed.

The project is directed by Risto Kunelius from Tampere University in Finland and involves 14 countries. The project focuses on how the issue of "freedom of speech" was articulated by newspapers in different parts of the world (with different legal, political, cultural contexts) when reporting about the cartoon controversy (Kunelius et al. 2007). The analyses demonstrate that e.g. Russia and the United States frame the crisis as a remote European incident low on their respective news agendas; Pakistani newspapers focus on what they see as a double standard between the freedom of speech discourse concerning the cartoons vs the sentencing in Austria at nearly the same time of David Irving who denied the holocaust: why should he go to jail for his public views when *Jyllands Posten* was not tried for blasphemy? Conversely, most European newspapers use the cartoon crisis as a backdrop for debating freedom of speech and its possible limits.

Why are these differences interesting when discussing ways in which we may conduct trans-national cultural research today? Naturally, the differences in themselves are not interesting. When comparing public discourses in different regions or nations, differences are bound to come up. Rather, I want to pose some rather more intriguing questions: Which contextual factors do we need in order to study socio-cultural discourses such as the ones

displayed in the cartoon crisis? What does it take to map out, not only differences, but also similarities across widely different socio-cultural spaces? What are the options and obstacles in funding trans-European cultural research such as that involved in the cartoon crisis? These questions broach key issues of the substance of trans-European research, its organisation and funding. I will deal with these three issues below. But first a note on why the cartoon crisis seems an obvious case in pointing to these more general issues.

In concrete terms, the project's framing of the cartoon controversy as a freedom of speech issue is in itself a contested matter. While it is true that most European newspapers focused on that aspect, the domestic situation looks rather different. In Denmark, the publication of the 12 cartoons immediately prompted 12 ambassadors accredited to Denmark to write the prime minister a letter listing a number of similar instances in the recent past of what they termed "an ongoing smearing campaign in Danish public and media" and asking for a meeting with the prime minister to discuss ways in which this tone might be changed (Ambassadors 2005). The prime minister refused to meet; some of the ambassadors then took action by taking the matter to political parties and groups in the Middle East, and the whole situation escalated from there.

Seen from a Danish perspective, the controversy was part of a longer process. Moreover, it sparked, not one discourse concerned with freedom of speech, but rather a number of conflicting discourses – on multiculturalism, on racism, on Euro-Islam, and so on. Indeed, the Danish author of the comparative project argues that the take on the crisis as a freedom of speech issue is the result of the Danish government's successful spin of the whole situation (Hervik in Kunelius 2007). But these conflicting discourses do not become part of the comparative project.

The cartoon controversy, then, is a prime example of more general tensions involved when carrying out cultural research across socio-cultural boundaries within today's European research area. I will try to flag up some of these more general tensions to do with substance, organisation and funding.

Tensions of Substance

In terms of substance, the primary tension today is found between research defined in terms of discipline and research defined in terms of problematics. The Austrian sociologist Helga Nowotny, vice-president of the newly established European Research Council, terms this type of problem-oriented research "frontier research", probably in order to avoid unhappy distinctions between basic and applied research. For problem-oriented, or frontier, research can be both.

Cultural studies is by definition problem-oriented research – it is borne out of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, disciplines which were once also problem-oriented, by the way; and it has crossed many of these boundaries, thereby also helping to redefine mother disciplines. Cultural studies is therefore a strong candidate in terms of substance when conducting trans-European cultural research today.

I see two challenges here: one has to do with the still overwhelming emphasis within cultural studies on issues of representation, and issues of power. I see this very clearly for example in the articles submitted to some of the refereed journals where I serve on the editorial board. In order to be able to tackle trans-European cultural issues, both present and past, we need to develop other aspects of the cultural research agenda to do with e.g. law and political economy. To do so, we need to forge stronger ties with a broader range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences.

But we also need to forge stronger ties to disciplines beyond the humanities and social sciences. Life sciences and natural sciences are obvious cases in point, not only because this is where the big money is – this is certainly the case – but because cultural perspectives add to

the overall quality of the research questions asked within these other disciplines. In my own experience with research funding, cultural researchers could benefit from being more active in building networks outside their chosen path and break the often self-imposed understanding that "this is not for us."

Tensions of Organisation

Naturally, cultural research develops within particular institutional and organisational frameworks. Here, the main tension is between competition and cooperation; and this goes for the local level, as well as the national and international level. For example, within a single university departments vie with one another for funding, for the best students and the best researchers. This competition often acts as a barrier against cooperation across boundaries of discipline, as I think most of us who do cultural studies research have experienced. What is, of course, more serious is the fact that existing organisational priorities operate against the long-term interests of the research communities at large in that we become worse equipped to tackle the socio-cultural complexities we wish to study.

The tensions between competition and cooperation is mirrored on a European level. For example, large countries such as Germany and France are less engaged participants in the European Science Foundation in terms of funding joint research projects than are smaller countries which do not possess a critical mass of research and researchers to guarantee quality and diversity. Thus, a Norwegian researching the history of reading needs to venture further afield to find kindred scholars than does a German scholar within the same field.

Cultural studies researchers, who do not always enjoy the institutional backing of their more discipline-oriented departments, seem to me to be among the scholars benefiting the most from trans-European research organisations; and we need to be extra adamant in sustaining professional communities that make cultural studies applications strong candidates when it comes to European research funding. I very much welcome the initiative and the thinking behind the Inter conference as a very important way in which these interdisciplinary, professional communities may be nurtured.

Moreover, the engagements of interdisciplinary research communities must be matched by similar developments by the funding organisations. Here we face a major challenge in that transnational research organisations in Europe have by tradition been geared towards disciplines, not themes or problematics. This means that so far interdisciplinary applications have been evaluated within funding agencies that are mostly geared to disciplinary funding. It is therefore very promising that the newly established European Research Council has organised itself within 20 thematic strands spanning traditional boundaries of disciplines. Also, the so-called COST funding agency within the EU has recently been refashioned into thematic strands (COST n.d).

Tensions of Funding

In terms of funding, there is an increasing political realisation that Europe needs to unite forces in terms of research. But, as we noted with the substance and the organisation of research, ideals of cooperation often conflict with the realities of competition.

Today, there are two main tensions in terms of trans-European research funding: one is between national vs trans-national funding, the other is between strategic vs researcher-driven research. Traditionally, trans-national research funding in Europe has followed two routes which are still operating: one is the EU's so-called framework programmes and the other is the European Science Foundation. The framework programmes have a common pot of money for research; they are policy-oriented and strategic and not defined by researchers themselves. The ESF is open to researcher-driven research within all areas of research, but funding is

dependent upon each member state, and so highly ranked trans-national projects may never get off the ground if one member refuses funding.

Two new initiatives are highly promising in terms of funding because they break new ground in terms of overcoming some of the traditional limitations of funding. One, and the most important, is the European Research Council. It is funded through a common pot of money and grants are made solely on the basis of scientific excellence. So far, only individual grants are given – the first round had its deadline in May 2007 and resulted in over 9.000 applications.

The second initiative is research funding within so-called ERA-nets (European Research Area nets), that is networks of collaboration between particular research councils in Europe, funded partly by the EU and partly by the research councils involved. The social science ERA-net is called NorFace and offers grants for e.g. transnational research in "Religion as a Social Force in Europe" (Norface n.d.). The humanities ERA-net is called HERA, and two transnational grant schemes will be announced in the autumn of this year: one dealing with cultural heritage and one dealing with cultural industries and innovation (see HERA n.d.). In all of these areas, cultural researchers are obvious as candidates for application.

Conclusion: Conducting Comparisons

Whether we focus on issues of substance, organisation or funding, trans-European cultural research involves comparisons performed across a number of dimensions. While cultural globalisation is no recent phenomenon, it is fair to say that cultural researchers today are more attuned to the transmutations and interactions across neatly defined cultural boundaries than was the case just two decades ago. Global forms of communication and transport have been instrumental in accentuating our awareness of cultural exchange and opposition; and cultural complexity must be matched by scientific complexity. Hence, comparative research has assumed a new impetus on the international research agenda; and rightly so.

I have attempted to sketch out some of the tensions involved in conducting such forms of research in terms of substance, organisation and funding. All of these tensions are to do with boundaries, as I am sure you have noticed – defining them, repositioning them, pushing them. To conclude, we are back with the islands and the waterways: do we focus on the entities and on preserving existing views; or, do we focus on the bridges, on the processes whereby entities are connected, refashioned and reformulated? Whatever our particular research perspective, I am confident that cultural studies will provide important sailboats connecting the cultural islands of the future.

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