H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eva P. Bueno, Terry Caesar, eds. *Imagination Beyond Nation: Latin American Popular Culture.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998. 314 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5686-0.

Reviewed by Stephen R. Niblo (Department of History, La Trobe University, Melbourne)

Published on H-LatAm (October, 1999)

Popular Culture: The Triumphs of Mediation Analysis

Popular culture has come into its own in recent years as a result of a number of important factors. There have been the rapid theoretical advances by such authors as Jesus Martin-Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones: comunicacion, cultura y hegemonia* (Mexico City: G. Gili, 1971) and William Rowe & Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America*, (London: Verso, 1991). Major theoretical insights were quickly followed by fascinating historical contributions in such work as: William Beezley et al., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebration and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994) and more recently Gilbert M. Joseph et al., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

Of the many ways of looking at popular culture, one of the more interesting developments of fundamental issues emerges from an older dichotomy between things commercial and authentic. A generation ago, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart virtually launched the field of Latin American cultural studies with their brilliantly titled *Para leer el Pato Donald* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 1972) in which they subjected the values of the Disney pantheon to scrutiny from a perspective of Chile's Popular Unity era.

A strong current of reflection in the intervening years has eroded this absolute divide between authentic indigenous culture and the mass commodification of metropolitan capitalist culture. While never loosing all validity, some important works by analysts Martin-Barbero in Colombia, as well as Carlos Monsivais and Nestor Garcia Canclini in Mexico, began to focus upon the way individuals interact with even the most commercially driven media. The exciting aspect of this approach is that it does make room for the human agency that many social historians are deeply committed to recovering, even in the most extreme moments of repression and/or savage neoliberalism. A focus upon the mediation between the commodities of mainstream commercial culture and the way individuals receive, manipulate, and, at times, subvert even the most insipid commercial product does make room for individuals. In a sense, it is an answer to that haunting line in an old Bob Dylan song: "We are making a world with nowhere left in it for people".

As an historian with an instinctive bent for the structural aspects of political economy, it has been fascinating to watch the field of popular culture prosper and grow well beyond some fairly weak early efforts. Clearly popular culture analysis has added important new dimensions to more traditional approaches. Eva P. Bueno's and Terry Caesar's collection of essays, *Imagination Beyond Nation: Latin American Popular Culture* offers, among other things, some excellent case studies of this process of mediation. It is especially fascinating to watch authors who are well informed about the culture they study reflect upon this phenomenon.

Traditional myths can become the focus of research on historical aspects of popular culture. Jeanne L. Gillespie looked at the case in Mexico of the *china poblana*. In "Gender, Ethnicity and Piety: The Case of the *China Poblana*," she examined the origin of a national myth of female virtue; she denied that it was linked to the historical person of Catarina de San Juan, a seventeenth century Asian woman who ministered to the poor. A battle for the ownership of the *china poblana* evolved over time: from her image as a defender of the poor, first threatened and then later sanitized by the Church, to the status of a proto-saint, and eventually converted into a devout model of virtue for Mexican women within the dominant myth of the new Mexican nation. In popular representation –frequently used to sell products from beer to food and clothing – her Asian origins and even her features became Europeanized.

To a significant degree, Gillespie's is a parallel study to Anna Lanyon's, *Malinche's Conquest* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999) in which the historical figure of the woman who was given to Cortez in 1519 became, not a symbol of the intimate personal burden of conquest that women had to bear, but in the hands of the nineteenth century nation builders, the traitor who had sold out the Mexican/Aztec nation to the foreigner/anti-Aztec Indian.

The long conquest of the Indian also drew the attention of two of the best of the commentators in *Imagination Beyond Nation.* These authors actually find cases of relatively unmediated popular culture in the least likely contexts. Milagros Zapata Swerdlow and Davil Swerdlow placed the plight of the *cholo* people of Piura in Northern Peru at the core of their analysis: "Framing the Peruvian *Cholo*: Popular Art by Unpopular People".

The very word *cholo* in Peru is a term of contempt hurled at an Indian who is trying to get ahead or pass as mestizo. With connotations of aggressive behaviour, the racial contempt for those not willing to stay in their place is close to the surface. In the country where Indians suffered perhaps the most profoundly destructive conquest of all, a repression that came close to even convincing the victims of their own inferiority, the Swerdlows introduce us to a highly emancipatory art. Some twenty ceramic artists – perhaps the best known is Juana Sosa –from Chulucanas produce splendid works based upon the ceramics of the ancient Vicus and Tallan people. Not unlike the tango, that only became respectable in Argentina after its acceptance in Paris, the overseas success of these Chulucanas potters has given the *cholo* a new image. Joined by regional artists such as Mauricio, they have endowed the *cholos*, especially the robust women of the district, with a dignity that defies centuries of oppression. Like the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, or the photographer Tina Modotti, the visual representation of the Indians gives the lie to centuries of prejudice. Even David Rockefeller commented how well their art went with contemporary architecture!

Less comfortable – indeed these were attempts to shock the more prosperous mainstream members of their society – were "Masculinities at the Margin: Representations of the *Malandro* and the *Pachuco*" by Simon Webb. Similar to contemporary rap music of the ghetto, the idea of the *pachuco* in the Mexican-American world, and the *malandro* in Brazil, was to shock those who normally avert their gaze. To dress in a provocative way, mocking the dress code of the middle class, while at the same time staking out space for a minority long held in contempt, was a form of everyday rebellion. Clumsy government efforts to battle the zoot-suit by requiring a 26%reduction of fabric used in suit manufacture – as a wartime rationing measure – were risible. Indeed the inability of repressive forces to contain popular culture generates optimism in even the worst moments of repression.

An extreme test emerged from the culture of opposition that survived in that most barren soil of Chile after 1973. Oscar Lepeley links traditional *arpilleras*, hand sewn textiles with the theatre of resistance in "The *Cueca of the Last Judgement: The Politics of Chilean Resistance in* Tres Marias y una Rosa*". In a stunning play by the experimental Taller de Investigacion Teatral, poor women practice their traditional craft to earn anything in a world where the men have been crushed by the neoliberalism of Pinochet's junta. Eventually gaining a commission from the Church to produce an enormous* arpillera_ (tapestry), the play became a fascinating combination of unspoken condemnation of the junta (against which even the censors failed to build a legal case) and an exploration of the popular

culture of the last judgement (clearly a theme calculated to make the authorities squirm) involving even a "Carabinero God" and Charlton Heston as Michaelangelo.

Mediation in our day forces attention increasingly on the media of mass communications. But take heart; there are a few surprises. For those who find bad films and telenovelas tedious, new levels of understanding emerge from the discussions by Eva Bueno in "The Politics of Nation in [Amacio] Mazzaropi's Films" in Brazil. Not unlike Anne Rubenstein's analysis of comics in Mexico, she focus on the cultural aspects of the enormous shift of millions to the hyperthropic cities of Latin America in this century. Easing the transition from rural areas to urban, and from patriarchial families to a frequently more atomized urban life, called for more than nostalgia. Ethnic fragmentation, religious syncretism, and scandal all merge in the battle for symbols in Mazzaropi's Brazil. And, when these popular artists made it fun, mere academics can only look on at their reception with envy.

Or even more surprising is the case of the subversive Venezuelan *telenovela*. Nelson Hippolyte Ortega examined *Por estas calles* by Ibsen Martinez. Set in an era of extreme political decay between 1992-94, the series actually evolved from the endless evocation of unrequited love and personal conflict to engage in a critical way with the disintegrating political culture of the day. Set in the heart of Caracas, the political and economic crisis provided a link between the traditional intra-personal conflicts and the national upheavals of the day by focusing upon juvenile delinquency, the drug trade and its associated money laundering and political corruption. As the paradigm was shifting from reform politics to crime, *Por estas calles* became an on-going critique of political, economic, and cultural problems that were reaching crisis proportions.

Overall this is an excellent collection of essays on popular culture. A bit of theory and a lot of history of popular culture have truly opened new vistas for the student of Latin America. Linked to older approaches, these triumphs of mediation analysis can deepen our levels of understanding. The contributors and editors should be congratulated, in the main, for resisting the excruciating jargon that, at its worst moments, can subject cultural studies to ridicule.

Citation: Stephen R. Niblo. Review of Bueno, Eva P.; Caesar, Terry, eds., *Imagination Beyond Nation: Latin American Popular Culture*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3539