How Ideas Spread

Alan Durant

Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*. Blackwell, Oxford 1996. pp175; £35.00 cloth, £13.99 paperback.

Dan Sperber's perhaps most influential work is *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, co-written with the linguist Deirdre Wilson and first published by Blackwell in 1986 (recently re-published in a revised edition). That work offers a critique of 'code' models of communication (prevalent in linguistics and semiotics), and suggests a compelling alternative framework based on a combination of coded and inferential interpretation; in doing so, the book simultaneously offered persuasive answers to a number of problems in semantics and pragmatics, and also addressed the question how human communication fits with cognition more generally and with evolution-based accounts of the human species. Alongside that work, however, Sperber has also published a series of anthropological studies, from an early account of structuralism in anthropology onwards, through *Rethinking Symbolism* (1975) and *On Anthropological Knowledge* (1985), up to the present book: a collection of essays written over the last ten years outlining what Sperber calls an 'epidemiology of representations'.

Compared with other French thinkers such as Foucault, Bourdieu, or Baudrillard, Sperber remains relatively unknown in cultural studies in Britain. Given broad trends in the field, that is unsurprising. This collection should serve, however, if not to make Sperber's work more widely understood, then at least to present a serious challenge to those who ignore it without having answers to most or all of the important theoretical questions he asks: questions about the variable diffusion of representations in society; questions about ontology and causation in cultural theory; and questions about variation and species-invariants in human cultures.

Despite some repetition of central concepts and themes, the collection presents formidable arguments for considering population-scale macro-phenomena, such as myths, fashions, rituals, or traditions, as the cumulative effect of micro-processes involving individually analysable causal events. Such events consist principally of the production of physical, 'public' representations which are derived from cognitive representations (what we describe informally as 'expression' or 'cultural production'), and the derivation of mental representations (attributions of meaning) from such public representations. Sperber contrasts investigation of causal *chains* of micro-processes of this kind (which he describes as 'naturalistic', in virtue of its compatibility with disciplines in the natural sciences) with most existing work in social science. More commonly in the social sciences, he points out,

holistic approaches are adopted which explain one macro-phenomenon in terms of another (Sperber's preferred illustration is explaining religion in terms of economic structure). But approaches which attribute causal properties to ideal or abstract objects (of the kind macro-phenomena inevitably are), Sperber argues, fail in a number of respects: they do not sufficiently distinguish types from tokens; they submerge issues of ontology with falsely attractive notions of 'cultural autonomy'; they allow formal properties to assume inexplicable causal interaction with the world; and in many cases they proclaim a materialism which is at best illusory.

By contrast, Sperber characterises his own general approach as an 'epidemiology of representations', readily acknowledging that the term involves an element of metaphor or analogy. But what, more precisely, does this expression convey? An epidemiological approach should describe and explain, according to Sperber, the distribution of representations. Representations, he argues, take two forms: either mental states in human minds, or physical products (such as books, utterances, or institutions) which are the traces of human production and exist in the environment of human minds. What we loosely call culture consists of patterns in the circulation of these two kinds of representation, where 'circulation' means a vast number of local events of interpreting, remembering, re-telling, and reworking of representations.

'Cultural phenomena are ecological patterns of psychological phenomena.' So proclaims one highly condensed statement in perhaps the collection's key chapter: a reprinted, already-influential Malinowski memorial lecture from 1984 entitled 'Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations'. One interesting implication of this statement is that cultural phenomena are not a distinct set of entities, such as might be prescribed in a standard curriculum topic list, but unevenly distributed and varying patterns of representations which are then carved up into distinct objects of study (such as myth, ideology, pop music, or literature) more for interpretive convenience than on theoretical, explanatory grounds. There is on Sperber's account no clear-cut distinction between what we usually think of as private mental representations (one-off desires, personal memories or meditations) and deep or enduring cultural traditions. The two simply involve different degrees of 'cultural-ness'. How far any representation acquires 'cultural-ness' depends on its suitability to do so, within a given ecology or environment. It is also that suitability, coupled with environmental factors, which locates any given representation along a continuum that ranges from little or no distribution outside an originating human mind, through what might be thought of as representational 'epidemics' (such as fashions or discussion of current affairs), to cultural 'endemics' (long-lasting and pervasive cultural traditions, such as canonical literary works, proverbs, and religious rituals).

The medical analogy introduced by the term 'epidemiology' signifies, among other things, two distinct but related approaches. For cultures to

exist at a larger macro-level of description and interpretation, both intrasubjective (psychological) and intersubjective (public) processes are required. The 'epidemiology' analogy accordingly draws a two-level parallel: between viral or bacterial infection and individual pathology, in the case of disease, and cognitive processes such as memory, attention, and attainment of relevance, in the case of representations; and between identifiable social conduits for transmission of infection, in the case of disease, and ecological or environmental processes, such as whether writing is available, in the case of representations.

For Sperber, however, there is a key *difference* between an epidemiology of diseases and one of representations. Viruses and bacteria mutate only relatively seldom, while at almost every step in the millions of interpretive events involved in the social distribution of representations some degree of non-random transformation is introduced, even in cases where the physical means of circulation themselves - by recording, e-mail forwarding, or another technological means of reproduction - ensure exact replication. Crucially, such transformation is the result of the specific cognitive endowment of humans, which Sperber examines in terms of dispositions (or positively adapted evolutionary capabilities) and susceptibilities (or indirect consequences of dispositions which may or may not have any adaptive role). Endowment imposes specific *constraints* on cognitive abilities, such that we have for instance limits on memory, a need to prioritise information to prevent cognitive overload, and a psychological readiness to search for maximal relevance at cost of minimal effort (as Sperber illustrates convincingly with his examples of Gödel's theory, a 20-digit number, and the story of Little Red Riding Hood). At this point, the connection between Sperber's epidemiological arguments and Relevance Theory more formally is especially evident: the extent and direction of the transformation of representations which takes place in the chain of interactions between representational tokens (which in turn collectively constitute large-scale cultural phenomena) are shaped by what best fits with human psychological capacities.

Concern to examine cultural phenomena within historical and evolutionary time-spans obliges Sperber to address questions surrounding the acquisition of cultural concepts (as well as, in the previously unpublished Chapter 5, to investigate statistical and other claims surrounding notions of selection and attraction in evolutionary theory). After reviewing arguments about acquisition of basic concepts (including claims about innate abilities in the case of elementary colour discrimination, and the development of an encyclopaedic database of concepts, such as natural kind terms, as a sort of default from ostension), Sperber develops a more specific hypothesis: that humans have, perhaps as part of a controversially extended modularity of mind (cf. Fodor), what he calls meta-representational abilities. Such abilities allow incomplete concepts to be embedded in fully-formed reporting or meta-representational attitudes of disbelieving, wondering, doubting, etc. Sperber suggests that such incomplete concepts (one of his illustrations is a

child's belief that someone has died being held simultaneously with recognition that she doesn't understand what dying means) are retained on the basis of the authority to which they are attributed, and relevance subsequently sought for them. Some of these half-understood concepts are later understood more fully (for instance as the child gradually enriches her notion of dying), while other such concepts remain perplexing and unresolved mysteries.

Among such mysteries, Sperber interestingly claims (as he has done since *Rethinking Symbolism* in the 1970s, where he called such incomplete representations 'semi-propositional knowledge'), exists a sub-class of mysteries which are particularly evocative. Such mysteries are both especially well-suited to cognitive abilities such as remembering and also generate a large number of relevant thoughts; they become established, Sperber suggests, as a culture's recognised myths, religious conventions, and cultural beliefs. This is in itself a highly suggestive and thought-provoking contention, best developed in Chapter 4, 'The Epidemiology of Beliefs'. But what makes the claim interesting theoretically is a related hypothesis: that humans have an evolutionary *disposition* to expand learning with meta-representational concepts, and as a result also an inherent *susceptibility* to retain for later understanding mysteries produced as a by-product of learning, which, as it turns out, provide the stuff of religious beliefs, superstition, ideology, and aesthetic pleasure.

As Sperber emphasises repeatedly in *Explaining Culture*, especially in the brief Introduction and Conclusion (where general issues in social science research are addressed), an account of culture along these lines does not preclude or devalue descriptive and interpretive work; rather, it redraws the terrain for theoretical explanation and encourages research pluralism. Sperber's emphasis on frameworks which are explanatory is not in a general sense polemical (though his irony on specific points is biting, as is well illustrated by his pastiche analysis of Little Red Riding Hood and *Hamlet* as in a relationship of 'structural inversion', or his critiques of functionalism, organicism and proclaimed materialism in the social sciences). Throughout, Sperber insists that no unified, grand theory of culture is likely to be possible; research and theory need to remain heterogenous and modest, not only because of the scale and difficulty of the questions to be asked, but also because so little is genuinely understood at present.

Many people in cultural studies are unlikely, I imagine, to enjoy this book much. Some will not get past the word 'naturalistic' in its sub-title. That will be a pity. Apart from its wealth of insight, cogent arguments, apposite illustration, and lucid and entertaining prose, *Explaining Culture* also offers a glimpse of what cultural study might be: rather than foreclosing possibilities on the strength of received wisdom or a selective interdisciplinarity which rules out so much interesting thinking, it makes its own start on the formulation of fresh, apparently basic but at the same time far-reaching research questions.

Individual Regimes

Barbara Cruikshank

Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; pp222 , £35.00 cloth

With one exception, the essays by Nikolas Rose collected in *Inventing Our Selves*, are previously published; in some cases several versions of the same essay are in print and appear here in revised form. Those familiar with the earlier work of Rose will find several surprises in these collected essays, as well as some further reflections on the arguments made in *Governing the Soul* and *The Psychology Complex*. In those earlier works, Rose adapted Michel Foucault's genealogies of the modern subject to tell his own stories about how human interiority became knowable and governable. Only one of the essays in this new volume continues that line of inquiry with a fascinating survey of early 20th-century social psychology as a science of democracy. Rose deftly explains that in the USA and UK, references to democracy in social psychology were more than rhetorical flourishes. Group psychology and public opinion research, for example, offered solutions to the problems of government by and for the people as well as techniques for governing democratically. By rendering the subjective will of the demos visible and calculable, government could be conducted in alignment with the desires and choices of the governed. Rose does not overestimate the role of *psy* in making the liberal arts of government practicable. He does not argue that psychology is part of a state apparatus of social control, domination, or a discourse of legitimation. Rather, he makes a compelling case for treating the heterogeneous histories of *psy*, psychological expertise, and social scientific techniques as a 'regime of the self' that invents and re-invents, rather than discovers, the self.

In the other essays collected here, the reader will find Rose more concerned with our current regime of the self. In its own way, each essay builds upon the historical hypothesis drafted by Foucault, that disciplines with the psy prefix originated in 'a reversal of the political axis of individualization' (p105). Where once only heroic and privileged lives were individualized and put into descriptive narratives as individuals, with the advent of psy, the individuality of ordinary people was rendered visible, objectified, and differentiated by the regulatory norm of autonomy. With that historical backdrop, Rose questions the emergence of new constructions of interiority and normativity such as 'enterprising selves' and the possibilities for 'assembling ourselves.'

The first four chapters grapple with the question, how should we do the history of *psy*? These chapters will be of interest to anyone looking for ways to account for particular histories of power-knowledge and they are essential reading for historians of the social sciences. Readers interested only in psychology itself will be impatient with these essays for in addition to being repetitive, each is deeply reflective and critical of psychology. However, to those facing the history of the social sciences, it will seem that some things do bear repeating. While it is an annoying academic convention, Rose cites himself repeatedly to direct the reader to texts where the historical method under discussion is actually utilized. In that sense, one might consider them a primer for reading Rose's earlier works; but they are much more than that. These essays say as much about how to do the history of psychology as how not to do it.

Rose presents a persuasive case that it is not enough to look at the history of *psy* discourses in terms of the epistemic possibility of uttering a truth claim about mental health or an ethical claim about what is good for us. The history of *psy* cannot be told without accounting for its distinctiveness in relation to other ethical, medical, and religious discourses. Rose argues that the unique success of psy rests not in the ideological or scientific force of its discourses, but in its techniques for visualizing human subjectivity, identity and difference into science as a known and calculable object. Nor can the institutionalization and dispersion of psy be attributed to the ontology of its object, the self. A geneology of the self must be carried through without presuming the self as an object of analysis. Rather than tell us what the self is, that is, rather than practicing psychology, he tells us how the self is made. Rose draws on Bruno Latour to explain that *psy* is not merely a conceptual apparatus applied to human being, but a method or *techne* for inscribing human subjectivity. Despite its heterogeneity, Rose argues, what distinguishes psy from other disciplines are its techniques for inscribing and disciplining human difference, for making human subjectivity governable. In these and the remaining chapters, Rose characterises and enlivens three contemporary themes.

First, Rose reminds the reader that the current proliferation of challenges to the unity of the self coming from disparate movements (feminism, genetics, medicine, cybernetics, among others) make human-being appear more and more to be a product of invention. Alongside these challengers, Rose adopts a critical-historical approach throughout that disrupts the self-evidence of psychological thinking, as he terms it, by thinking against the present. Without pronouncing the dawn of a new age, Rose makes it clear at every critical juncture that the current regimes of the self are an unstable mix of practices, knowledges, and institutions. In the gravity of that mix, it is not possible to simply 'disinvent' the selves we have become; but it is possible to contest the current regime of the self and to struggle to invent ourselves otherwise. Each of the essays is charged by that possibility.

More suggestive than definitive, Rose examines the disparity between

the disappearing unity of the self in social theory and the persistence of the self in regulatory practices from self-realization to the enterprising self. Rose uses the conception of folding found in the writing of Gilles Deleuze to explain how it is possible to act as if we are coherent selves while at the same time relating to or acting upon ourselves; how is the boundary between the self and the exterior traversed without shattering the apparent unity of the self? Rose rejects the idea that subjects are constituted linguistically and narratively, without any exterior apparatus other than language. He suggests looking at the relationships of interiority to external authority, apparatuses and powers.

A second theme coheres at the point where psy meets liberal democratic government, in the history of invention in myriad locales of techniques for governing the interiority of human-being. This theme is thoroughly developed in *Governing the Soul* and here appears more as an undercurrent than as an argument in itself. As noted above, one chapter considers social psychology as a science of democracy. Also, in an essay titled, 'Governing Enterprising Individuals,' Rose illustrates a recent set of programmes for governing human autonomy and freedom in new ways termed neoliberal. Part of a much larger set of challenges to the liberal welfare state from both the left and the right, Rose argues that neoliberalism succeeded in operationalizing new techniques for governing without the paternalistic intrusions of social workers and legislative bodies into the autonomous choice and decision-making of individuals conceived as entrepreneurs. Here, Rose is at his best, identifying what is discontinuous, and thinking critically against the current movements in liberalism.

The third theme is that the regime of the self is heterogeneous. This is no history of ideas nor of the powers that be, but of how incredibly complex, local, and heterogeneous the regime of the self is which dominates our present conception of ourselves. That regime of the self does not invent or force uniformity, Rose argues, but practices a common normativity for measuring all selves against the regulatory ideals of choice, autonomy, and self-realization. From his vantage point, even materialist history looks surprisingly superficial. None of that history was necessary or inevitable; the role of psy in regulating the freedom of the modern self is a question that cannot be explained with reference to the self as a given, but only as a product of invention. The implications for future research are that a great deal of meticulous and localized study must be undertaken without the promise of discovering who we are. Without the driving force of discovery, we are faced with the daunting task of inventing our selves.

Space Exploration

Gail Low

Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1996; pp238; £15.95 paperback, £47.50 cloth

If the past decade established the academic study of travel writing as a legitimate, albeit marginal, adjunct of colonial and postcolonial cultural studies, the last few years have seen how 'travel' and 'displacement' have become major tropes in the representation of postmodernity. Contemporary theory's preoccupation with space and place within the politics and poetics of identity has meant that its discourse is permeated with metaphors of dis/placement in terms such as migration, nomadism, exile, tourism, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, position, location and the margin. Caren Kaplan's monograph attempts to provide a historical and political map of the use and abuse of such geographical representations in critical practice. The book is divided into four chapters; the first two explore the construction and rhetorical use made of a metaphor (nomadism), or opposing metaphors (exile/tourist), while the final two look at the language and politics of both 'disaporas' and 'locations'.

The opening chapter guides a reader through different aspects of a critique of the Euro-American modernist celebration of exile as cosmopolitan internationalism. Firstly, there is a 'critical promotion of exile as aesthetic gain' where 'exilic displacement' operates in inverse proportion to contemplative and aesthetic creativity. Existential alienation and melancholia is constructed as an 'enabling fiction': 'the activity of writing and the professional legitimation of authorship provide a form of recompense for the loss and uncertainty of the modern condition' (p38). Secondly, the critical institutionalisation of these writers contributes to an 'ideology of modernism' which has the effect of de-politicising and de-historicising modernist aesthetics. 'Dislocation' is translated as 'detachment' and the nationalism/internationalism debate is narrated as a freeing of artists from the 'worldly locations of nation-states' for 'loftier pursuits'. Thirdly, Kaplan considers modernism's complicity with imperialism. Here, the quest for new aesthetic forms is impelled by nostalgia and a search for authenticity located elsewhere in other worlds. The modern subject travels (physically or mentally) to other locations in time and space to appropriate and incorporate. Employing Renato Rosaldo's term, 'imperialist nostalgia', Kaplan argues that the narrativisation of Euro-American past as another country, culture or time is

central to the 'conquering spirit of modernity'. Focusing on Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* and Paul Fussell's *Abroad*, she shows how they both produce and are produced by the primary tropes of Euro-American modernisms.

Kaplan's argument takes an interesting turn in this chapter when she deliberately positions Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist* against the elitist focus on exile as a privileged signifier in the paradoxical relation between time and space in modernity. MacCannell's postmodern tourist also embodies the modern subject's ambivalent relation to the past and quest for authenticity. In an unevenly developed global economy, the tourist 'confirms and legitimates' the First and Third World categorisations: 'created out of increasing leisure time in industrialised nations and driven by a need to ascertain identity and location in a world that undermines the certainty of those categories, the tourist acts as an agent of modernity' (p58). Functioning as an emblem of modern man, the formulation of the tourist in MacCannell enables a powerful critique of modernity. However, Kaplan does not simply displace the exile for the tourist but focuses her analysis on their structural similarities and their central role in the production of Euro-centric discourses.

The postmodern turn leads Kaplan to consider the 'nomad', recently cast as the figural embodiment of a progressive poststructuralist theorisation of displacement. In this second chapter, the work of Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari are argued to be imbued with a modernist ahistorical romanticisation of exile. Kaplan's Baudrillard is revealed not as the postmodernist theorist's theorist; his travelling theory invokes modernist poetics. Reading *America* and *Cool Memories* as instances of travelling theory, Kaplan looks at how Baudrillard's texts contain structural similarities with the Euro-centric discourses of exploration, heroism and imperialist nostalgia. His 'theoretical cruising' employs the stereotypical narrativisation of woman as the obscure object of desire and the space of theoretical formulations. In this light, 'the theorist as nomadic subject in the poetics of space is situated through and against Others' (p74). Deleuze and Guattari's theory of 'deterritorisation' promises a politicised theory of postmodern subjectivities; they hold out the possibility of alternative political practices to the nationalist, humanist and liberal agenda. Their version of the nomadic subject and their employment of the rhizomic metaphor constitutes 'an anarchic relation to space and subjectivity, resistant to and undermining the nation-state apparatus' (p87). But as Kaplan also points out, their generalised poetics of displacement is at its best utopian. At its worst, they reproduce a kind of 'theoretical tourism' which enacts 'a kind of colonial discourse in the name of progressive politics.' Becoming minor is a strategy that only makes sense if you are not already dispossessed. Celebrating hybridity and alterity without addressing the transnational and global nexus of power and capital simply constitutes the margin as a 'linguistic or critical vacation' while producing a 'new poetics of the exotic'. In contrast, Gayatri Spivak, Lawrence Grossberg

and Janice Radway's calls for the analysis of the subject positioning (or positions) of theorists and intellectuals points the way forward for a less blind and more productive critical practice.

Kaplan argues that Euro-American modernist deployments of displacement often work to mystify and to homogenise historically specific encounters, travels and circuits of exchange. They also mask economic and social differences in a generalised celebration of cosmopolitanism. Travelling theories and theorists are part of the legacy of imperial history and Kaplan traces - to use a mixed metaphor - the impassioned polarisation of exile/expatriate and immigrant/cosmopolitan in cultural theory. The shift from modernist exile to postmodern cosmopolitan diasporas also enables her to concentrate on the work of Edward Said and James Clifford - two theorists who are very much concerned with thinking through multiple positions, locations, border crossings and the politics of transnational cultural production. In Said's work, Kaplan sees a productive tension between politics and aesthetics, location and exile, the local and the cosmopolitan, neutrality and affiliation, and 'cataclysmic loss and critical possibility'. Exile functions in Said's texts as 'a reading strategy, a definition of a historical condition, a precept, a political or cultural program, and a specific zone for the exploration of the relationship between nation, identity, and location' (p117). In relation to Clifford's work, Kaplan focuses on three separate areas: his engagement with the poetics of displacement and the writing of culture, his call for 'the politics of theory as a historical relationship between cultural production and reception' and his turn to 'diaspora' as a term that confounds 'essentialist nationalisms in favour of transnational [and postmodern] subjectivities and communities'. Yet as with the celebration of nomadism, Kaplan warns against erasure of difference and suppression of material histories; these absences of the histories of collective displacements, and absenting of refugees and immigrants in favour of the 'diasporic' and the 'hybrid' tell us more about 'the social construction of Euro-American theory than about the historical and cultural conditions of migration' in modernity. Transnationalism has both positive and negative effects; it may refer to new diasporic identities, the construction of 'dynamic border zones' as well as 'hegemonic aspects of globalisation and transnational corporate exploitation' (p135).

As part of the exploration of metaphors of displacement, Kaplan's arguments conclude with a consideration of location and placement in the production of feminist discourses of identity and subjectivity. That geography and typography have impacted on contemporary cultural theory can be seen in relation to the proliferation of spatialised metaphors of location, locale, place and position used in the theory and praxis of 'emergent identity formations and social practices'. Yet the recourse to geography must not be at the expense of history; coming to terms with the complex circuits of postmodernity involves both a temporal and spatial dimension. The question of 'how to negotiate or mediate space with time or vice versa' forms the

central preoccupation of theories of spatial politics or the politics of location.

Political and cultural resistance in postmodern theory can take the form of a valorization of the local and regional; Kaplan argues that, especially for feminist and postcolonial theory, 'the privileging of the local' is 'produced in a context of increased concern about hegemonic cultural and economic practices ... fomented and disseminated by transnational capital and its diversely pervasive effects' (p146). Challenging the homogenisation, abstraction and aestheticisation of the worst totalising excess of theory, feminist discourses have sought to offer complex and differentiated subjects and 'material analyses of lived experience and gendered divisions of labor'. Kaplan offers a brief history of Euro-American feminism's interrogation of global feminism and the naturalisation of 'woman'. Adrienne Rich's first use of the term 'the politics of location' was to deconstruct hegemonic uses of the word 'woman' and to foreground the position of the theorist. From Nancy Hartsock's somewhat conservative coining of 'standpoint epistemology', and gender as a 'singular standpoint' for feminist practice, to Chandra Mohanty, Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani's theorisation of location as 'discontinuous', multiple and 'traversed' by diverse historical and material formations, Kaplan traces a complex and paradoxical field where postmodernism and postcolonial discourses of feminism intersect. Location, she concludes, should be thought less as a place than an 'axis'. Such a change in metaphor admits to an 'uneven, discontinuous, yet open process [and] allows for the alignment of identity at the intersection of axes not as the monumental erection of a stable site but as a temporally spatialized location - a paradoxical space of historicized effects' (p184).

Kaplan's book presents an excellent exploration of how metaphors and specific terms bring with them particular ideological formations. Her account of differences and similarities across the field of cultural theory in the Euro-American academy offers the reader a useful mapping of discursive relations. Her final two chapters, which focus less on particular texts or theorists and more on situating significant theorists and theories within the field of postcolonial and feminist cultural production, provide especially admirable and nuanced conceptual histories. My only reservation is that *Questions of Travel* calls for a history of the production and reception of theory and critical practice, but this call should not be restricted to a literary or representational history. Kaplan's brief references to the historical contexts of theoretical discourses and practices (for example, the 'geopolitics and cultural conventions of the cold war era', the 'rock 'n'roll and pop culture of 1950s and 1960s America that ties Baudrillard's *America* to the French reception of American popular culture in the aftermath of World War Two) made me wish for different kind of book to be written. A book that moves from the close circuit of theory towards a more 'empirical' account of how theory shapes and is shaped by history and culture.

Imported Goods

Keith C Hampson

David Howes (ed), *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*. Routledge, London, 1996; pp224; £13.99 paperback

David Howes has assembled a collection of essays which, though written largely from an anthropological tradition, should be of value to all disciplines concerned with the cultural, economic and political implications of the global movement in cultural commodities.

While each of the nine essays (plus an introduction and epilogue) address a particular case of cross-cultural consumption, what gives this publication its considerable coherence is the shared desire among the theorists to reconsider two assumptions common within cultural anthropology: (a) that subordinate, marginal cultures are by and large defenceless against the imposition of dominant cultural production ('cultural imperialism') and dominant consumption practices ('cultural appropriation'); (b) that, 'for the sake of analysis', intrusions by such outside forces can and should be distinguished from the 'original' or 'genuine' culture. Whether examining the usurpation of the symbols of a subjugated culture or the rapid deployment of Western production and marketing into a previously 'untouched' cultural environment, scholarly work within anthropology has tended to both minimize the resistive capacity of subordinate cultures and to downplay the evolving, incorporative quality of cultural formation. According to this view, then, commercial practices such as the international expansion of brand names Coke, McDonalds, and Disney, or the cultural 'poaching' in developing nations by Western tourists has led to the erosion of local differences and to the subsequent rise of global consumer capitalism as a way of life.

While the essays in this book recognize the potentially devastating effects of global capitalism on the economic, environmental, health-related and cultural conditions of marginal cultures, they emphasize the importance of the practical and discursive conditions in which these interventions operate, and how these conditions may serve to creatively defend and reconstitute the subordinate culture in light of such developments. Drawing on recent work in anthropology, cultural studies and post-colonial theory, the studies recognize, to varying degrees, the negotiatory role of culture and the capacity of individuals and communities to rework commodities in accordance with their unique objectives, interests and values. The reception and ultimate impact of global capitalism is shaped, thus, by local, historically-specific

forces which can only be understood by way of consideration of the particularities of the context of consumption. Howes suggests that:

> ... the assumption that such goods, on entering a culture, will inevitably retain and communicate the values they are accorded by their culture of origin must be questioned. When one takes a closer look at the meanings and uses given to specific imported goods within specific 'local contexts' or 'realities', one often finds that the goods have been transformed, at least in part, in accordance with the values of the receiving culture. (p5)

This notion of the 'active consumer' is a very familiar one within cultural studies. Several theorists have advocated a recognition of the creative, resistive nature of everyday culture. Indeed, the debate surrounding this issue became something of an obsession for cultural studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite the familiarity of the book's fundamental theoretical perspective, though, *Cross-Cultural Consumption* provides a number of excellent analyses which pose new and relevant questions of global consumer capitalism which could, in turn, stimulate the revaluation of cultural studies.

For example, the considerable attention paid within cultural studies to consumer capitalism has not often been extended to non-contemporary, Western urban settings. While it may be the case that cultural studies should be cautious about over-extending its geographical reach - to not be all things to all people - it may also be the case that as consumer capitalism continues to evolve into a borderless activity, maintaining such restrictions may become increasingly difficult. Secondly, the concrete empirical character of many of these studies contrasts with the relatively loose application of the ethnographic method often found within cultural studies. As many of the essays in this book illustrate, the study of individuals, groups and contexts in substantive detail can provide an insightful account of the complexity and uneven nature of the economic and material conditions through which real people live.

Finally a number of these studies pose refreshingly new questions of the weary concept of 'resistance'. David Howes, for example, asks if cultural resistance can be productively recast in legal terms. He suggests that, despite the Anglo-American bias of the legal system, the Native American Hopi may be able to employ legal measures as a means of defending against the appropriation of the traditional Hopi cultural practices and symbols by dominant, non-native cultures. Similarly, Marian Bredin considers how alternative applications of communication technologies among Canada's northern First Nation communities may be shaped (and potentially inspired) by exposure to southern, urban and non-native media. The unique employment of media technologies can be understood, then, as responses to the subordinate culture's experiences as consumers.

If there is a shortcoming to this publication it is the omission of a discussion of the ways in which global capitalism increasingly launches

production and marketing efforts which cater to the peculiarities of local tastes, traditions and values. In those instances in which this tactic is central to production and consumption processes, the very relevance of the 'cross-cultural consumption' issue is upset. The degree to which multinational consumer capitalism can assume a 'local' or 'authentic' status within specific contexts, regardless of the actual origins of the products and services, is fundamental to questions of its reception and ultimate significance. The growing corporate emphasis on sophisticated, detailed market research enhances the capacity of companies to locate, understand and secure the customer, 'to get us where we really live'. Within North America the accuracy with which this tactic is carried out is increasing dramatically. It is safe to presume that these efforts will be extended to other, non-Western markets as well. The development of this issue requires attention if only to be discounted.