

# Essentialism, Hybridism and Cultural Critique<sup>1</sup>

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Transgression concepts – such as ‘hybridity’, ‘diaspora’, ‘creolization’, ‘transculturalization’ and ‘syncretism’ – have to an increasing extent become key concepts in various attempts at escaping the problems of suppression and exclusion involved in notions of purity – be it the purity of race, culture or whatever. The purpose of focusing on concepts of transgression is usually to try to develop conceptual spaces within which it is possible to grasp and to study cultural identity without resorting to cultural essentialism. These attempts open up new possibilities but also new problems – e.g. they are being criticised for being elitist and for reproducing the very idea of cultural purity that they are meant to transcend.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, I focus on the analytical perspectives of this agenda, suggesting that we sharpen our attention towards the complexities of the work of power in transgressions as well as in constructions of essentialist identities. We need to move beyond the limitations of *both* identity politics *and* the critique of essentialism without losing sight of the commitment to social and cultural critique. Focusing on the concept of hybridity, I argue that we should not only be concerned with asking questions such as ‘What ‘is’ hybridity and how can the many forms of hybrid experience be given space in a world in which purity is guarded jealously?’ We should also ask questions such as ‘how are notions of and distinctions between transgression and purity applied, by whom, to what ends, and articulated with which other elements?’ Turning notions of transgression into analytical, rather than descriptive, concepts will open up new fields of study and new possibilities for critique.

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<sup>1</sup> A more thorough version of this argument has been published (in Danish) in Frello (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Some key references to various dimension of and positions in this discussion are Ang (2001), Anthias (2001), Bhabha (1994), Brah and Coombes (eds. 2000), Clifford (1997), Friedman (1997 and 1999), Gilroy (1993), Hall (1996), Hannerz (1992), Nederveen Pieterse (1995 and 2001), Shohat (1992), Werbner and Modood (eds. 1997) and Young (1995).

The application of transgression concepts has to some extent taken the form of a celebration of the phenomena that these concepts are referring to, and of the possibilities that they are supposed to open up. The thing which is celebrated is on the one hand various mixtures of cultural elements with different origins, and on the other hand 'transgression' as such: the hybrid, the mongrel, ambivalence, etc.

Hence, in relation to recent social and cultural theory, the use of transgression concepts has a clear critical dimension. One dimension of this has been an effort to turn the privilege of purity upside-down and focus on the experience of the migrant and the exile as a particularly privileged experience by virtue of their hybrid position 'on the margin' or 'in-between' cultures. In the words of Stuart Hall:

'You have to be familiar enough with it [the centre] to know how to move in it. But you have to be sufficiently outside it so you can examine it and critically interrogate it. And it is this double move or, what I think one writer after another have called, the double consciousness of the exile, of the migrant, of the stranger who moves to another place, who has this double way of seeing it, from the inside and the outside'.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the celebration of the privileged experience of the hybrid has been the object of fierce critique. For now I will briefly mention just two typical points of critique, which have been put forward by – among others – Jonathan Friedman who for the last decade has been one of the most outspoken critics of hybridity theory – and of hybridity theorists.<sup>4</sup> One point of critique consists in calling attention to the fact that speaking of 'mixture' presupposes the existence of something that can be mixed. Cultures were never pure, the argument goes, and the concept of hybridity tells us nothing, since all of us are and always were cultural hybrids. Hence, transgression concepts presuppose the very idea of purity with which they aim to reckon. Therefore Friedman criticizes the following 'listing' of 'hybrid' phenomena:

'How do we come to terms with phenomena such as Thai boxing by Moroccan girls in Amsterdam, Asian rap in London, Irish bagels, Chinese tacos and Mardi Gras Indians in

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<sup>3</sup> Hall in Hall and Sakai (1998, pp.363-4). See also Bhabha (1994) and Said (2001).

<sup>4</sup> See Friedman (1997; 1999).

the United States, or 'Mexican schoolgirls dressed in Greek togas dancing in the style of Isadora Duncan'" (Nederveen Pieterse 1995, p.53).

Friedman's comment to this is that it is the very idea of having to 'come to terms' with these phenomena that is the problem. He asks: 'Why is this postmodern bazaar so bizarre, so strikingly intriguing?' And he answers: 'These phenomena are only surprising and confusing if we expect to find a neatly classified world' (Friedman 1999, p.241).

Hence, according to this line of critique, the essentialist notion of culture is the very precondition for the astonishment at the experience of cultural hybridity in terms of the mixture of elements from different territorially based cultures.

Another point of critique is that the celebration of hybridity as a critical position in fact amounts to nothing more than a privileged elite's self-celebration, because only privileged groups can take advantage of the potentials that the transgression of the boundedness of culture implies. Non-privileged groups, such as work migrants and refugees have not chosen the life 'in-between' cultures – and it does not necessarily grant them a privileged position neither as regards insight nor possibilities.

A counter-argument against these kinds of critique could be that hybridity is not about mixture per se, since purity never existed anyway. Rather, hybridity is about displacement. This is the way in which hybridity is predominantly conceptualized within cultural studies today. This is also what is at issue in the above mentioned quote from Stuart Hall: what is at issue is not some 'happy mixture' of cultures but the 'double consciousness' of the exile. That is, focusing on hybridity involves focusing on 'positioning', rather than on 'mixing' of cultural forms. It involves focusing on the relation between the 'centre' and the 'margin' in one way or the other – be it the relation between the West and the rest or between majority and minority. And it involves focusing on how the penetration of the centre by the marginalized undermines the naturalized dominant position of the centre. Hybridity is about the introduction of 'otherness' – in terms of an 'impurity' that contaminates, disturbs and displaces the idea of purity. And the migrant's insistence on belonging in the centre is a very concrete example of this.

However, the importance of drawing attention to the suppressing dimension of the naturalization of the discourse of the centre (that is, *any* centre), and hence also to the critical potential of transgression, does not make every critique of the use of transgression concepts superfluous. I will argue, that there are still plenty of good reasons for a critical scrutiny, since the celebration of hybridity sometimes works in favour of hiding unequal power relations, rather than undermining or criticizing them. Transgression concepts do not have some inherently critical function. They can be applied in favour of various interests just as it is the case of the idea of purity.

This is very well exemplified by Len Ang (2001) in her discussion of the 'liberal hybridism' of the official Australian discourse on national identity where the ideal of multiculturalism has replaced the ideal of whiteness. In this context, the idea that every Australian citizen somehow has a stake in a shared culturally and racially mixed past can be seen as just another attempt to deny and gloss over the history of racism against the aboriginal population. Celebrating hybridity can be potentially oppressing, as can celebrating purity:

'The problem is [...] that the very equation of hybridity with harmonious fusion or synthesis – which we may characterize as 'liberal hybridism', simplifies matters significantly and produces power effects of its own, which reveal some of the problems with an uncritical use of the idea of hybridity' (Ang 2001, p.195).

Hence, we should always be attentive to the question of whose interests are served by articulating identity in terms of 'hybridity', rather than 'purity' in specific instances. I will argue that the point in focusing on hybridity is not just that it directs attention towards the naturalizations of relations of power that discourses of *purity* imply. We also need to focus on the very complex struggles over power, identity and legitimate enunciative positions that are involved in discourses of *transgression* – or 'impurity'. We should study the power of definition in relation to the distribution of the pure and the impure, and how value is ascribed to each of them.

Therefore, we should perhaps focus less on the political value of the pure and the impure, and more on the production of knowledge in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault 1972) and ask how 'hybridity' and 'purity' are made objects of knowledge, by whom and with which kinds of consequences. Cultural classifications take place in fields that are always marked by unequal relations of power and they have power effects. Thus part of the struggle over hybridity and purity concerns the question of who can occupy the legitimate enunciative position when it comes to defining and distributing purity and impurity. Therefore, we should ask questions, such as: Where and how is the line between the hybrid and the pure drawn in specific contexts? Which conventional understandings of cultural difference organize the distribution of purity and impurity? Who has the power to define oneself or others as hybrid or 'impure', in which contexts and articulated with which other elements? And how is such power constituted and challenged?

Hybridity can be articulated in many different ways, depending on the context and on who defines the situation: It can be seen as a threatening contamination of a much valued purity; it can be seen as a creative mixture of disparate cultural elements; it can be seen as a subversive insistence on equality through difference – displacing the 'givenness' of the centred perspective; and it can be seen as yet another strategy for upholding existing power relations. Therefore, the act of replacing 'purity talk' with 'hybridity talk' also has very different power effects, depending on the context and who defines the situation. There is no guarantee that the introduction of the hybrid and the impure works in favour of the powerless and the excluded.

This is why I argue that we need an *analytics* of hybridity in order to draw attention to the huge variety of ways in which distinctions between the pure and the impure intersect with dominant and subversive local and historical discourses and relations of power. In order to illustrate the diversity of ways in which distinctions between the pure and the impure works, I will just briefly mention an example from my own work, consisting in an analysis of a Danish TV-documentary series called *Slaves in the Family* (Frello 2006). The documentary focuses on Scandinavian descendants of slaves from the former Danish colony of the West Indies – now the US Virgin Islands. In the series, we follow how people

of mixed Scandinavian and African-Caribbean descent explore their genealogy and look up unknown blood relatives – in Scandinavia as well as in the West Indies.

The series aims at presenting a critical perspective on Danish public narratives about the colonial history by demonstrating that this is a dark history of trading and enslaving human beings, rather than a benign history of the *abolition* of slavery – as it is often portrayed in Danish public discourse. Furthermore, by stating that the overall message of the series is that ‘We are all immigrants’ (‘Vi er alle indvandrere’ 2005), the producer, Alex Frank Larsen, emphasizes that the series addresses not only narratives about Danish colonial history but also the current debates about ‘Danishness’ in relation to the ethnic minorities in Denmark.

Hence, the aim of the series is to displace the centred discourses about Danishness by hybridizing them. However, the idea of purity, which is criticized and displaced by re-articulating the story of Danish colonial history and of Danish national identity is re-installed by the way in which ‘kinship’ is articulated as the basis of true relations. On the one hand, the narrative of the series is predicated on miscegenation as a positive, hybridizing force that can throw a critical light on today’s immigration debate in Denmark. On the other hand, kinship is articulated in terms of essence, that is, in terms of finding one’s ‘true identity’, as when encounters among strangers in the series are articulated in terms of ‘re-unions’ among family members.

By assuming the lens of kinship, *family* becomes the organizing unit of the tale, and family relations come to determine who the victims are and who the perpetrators are. This results in the series’ coming close to negating specific Caribbean ‘black’ experiences, connected to the legacy of slavery, because the story of the descendants of the slaves is articulated primarily as a story of re-uniting family bonds that have unrightfully been broken down by slavery and colonial power. According to this narrative, the victims are whoever can somehow claim to be related to the slaves – black or white, Scandinavian or Caribbean, rich or poor. The series renders individual experience and life circumstances irrelevant by depicting the ‘family’ as the collective unit that lives through history and that – collectively – can be the victim of this history. Therefore, the particular ways in which hybridity and purity

are articulated in the series lead to the consequence that the power differences between whites and blacks and between masters and slaves, that the series sets out to criticize, are annulled rather than transgressed. The overall effect is that the potentially subversive story of hybridity that the series sets out to tell, is displaced by a sentimental quest of a 'true' personal identity. All in all, the analysis of the distribution of hybridity and purity in the series demonstrates that despite the critical purpose of the series, this critical edge is premised partly on the essentialism of the idea of 'true' identity and partly on a liberal hybridism that hides power differences as much as it reveals them.

Therefore, while criticizing essentialism is often vital for fighting group-based exclusionism, the celebration of hybridity does not automatically work to the advance of the excluded. Neither essentialism, nor hybridity have self-evident affiliations with specific political projects. Rather than expecting to find definite emancipating or suppressing capacities connected to constructions of the 'hybrid' and the 'pure', we should focus on how these two poles are invested with meaning and related to power. Hence, while insisting on Cultural Studies' commitment to social and cultural critique, I will argue that this critique would benefit from an analytical sensitivity towards the uses and abuses of the discursive power to designate meaningful and legitimate subject positions, rather than assuming that certain social forms carry a critical, emancipating or suppressing potential per se.

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