

Of crabs and clawback

The responses to date to Richard Fox's *Religion, Media, and Cultural Studies* have been intriguing, not least for their failure to address his argument. So it is worthwhile briefly to consider this curious omission.

Stewart Hoover's reply is particularly interesting because it expatiates on aspects of the encounter of the study of religions with media and cultural studies. On close inspection however, Hoover carefully circumambulates Fox's thesis and roundly criticizes imaginary positions. As an intellectual practice, it suggests a cardinal berating a novice for presumptuousness in questioning the sacred canon, rather than an evaluation of the issues. Fiske and Hartley described this process in television news as 'clawback', where studio news anchors claw unruly opinions and events back into the dominant value system (1987: 87). So what was Fox arguing and what generated such incomprehension and heat?

Fox states his aim clearly. It is to examine potential problems in 'the rise of "religion and media" as a new field of scholarly inquiry' (p 1). Instead of wading one by one through every school of thought in religious and media studies, Fox opts for a presuppositional analysis. That is, he seeks to identify implicit assumptions common to different approaches and to explain why they remain unrecognized. Slippage between different senses of key terms like 'media' and 'meaning' (pp 2-3, 11) hides a lack of clarity or plain muddle which is constitutive of the object of study, the impression of coherence being derived tautologously from the mutual definition of terms (Quine 1953). Fox's analysis has two immediate aims. First, it explores uses of core notions like 'text' and 'transmission' to show how they presuppose particular ideas of substance. Second, it indicates how such usage involves circularity, exemplified by such apparently unrelated instances as Max Müller's philological method and Stuart Hall's interpretation of preferred meanings.

If my reading is not too far from the mark, this helps to explain why scholars of religion in general seem to be having difficulty grasping Fox's point and Hoover's particular take on the piece. As an intellectual practice, Fox's article is somewhat Hemingwayesque. He trails a matador's cape – evidently with Hoover in mind. Hoover prefers savvily to snort, paw the ground and generally gore the air rather than face the charges head on. In so doing he inadvertently intimates that Fox's critique may be less unfounded than his dismissal implies.

Let me take just three examples. In stressing the 'multiple sources and roots' of cultural studies (p 1) and the multifarious ways that media are involved in religion ('We must recognize that "media" are all of these things—and more' p 3), Hoover suggests that Fox's concern over the heterogeneity, potential incommensurateness and substantialization of the object of study is not entirely misplaced, in which case it is incumbent on Hoover to show this is not so or why it does not matter.

Essentialism, like witchcraft, is not something of which you like to be accused. So Hoover rebuts (p 1) a charge that Fox did not make. Fox is concerned about substantialism, which is rather different. Hoover prefers categorizing to arguing. He describes a variety of scholars as 'high modernist' (p 2), as if there were some mysterious essence they all

shared. Hoover pigeonholes The Birmingham School in terms of ‘the ideological atmosphere of Thatcher’s Britain’ (p 2) rather than for example examining the differences between their version of Gramsci and the work of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Laclau, which is fairly evidently Fox’s starting point.

Like it or not, such argument merits serious engagement, not bowdlerizing and evasion. Here we come to the nub. Hoover’s intellectual project relies on a now pretty long-in-the-tooth model of individualistic subjectivism (‘individual meaning-making’ 2006: 40; cf. Volosinov 1973: 45-96), a sub-Geertzian hermeneutic approach to meaning (2006: 3, 22-25), a reified account of culture (2006: 10, 66; cf. Fabian 1991; Hobart 2000), uncritical assumptions about the everyday and much else besides (e.g. Hoover 2006: 19, 55, 88; cf. Roberts 1999). It might just be coincidental that this concoction goes down particularly well in North America where, in late Gramscian terms, it sutures deep antagonisms by reinforcing an idealized and depoliticized self-image. Fox challenges all these ‘sources and roots’, to use Hoover’s preferred metaphor. And, as turkeys do not usually vote for Christmas, it is hardly surprising that Hoover is unhappy. In the end though he does scholarship a disservice in failing to engage with the argument. Among some obvious questions are the following.

- Is Fox’s argument relevant to mainstream scholars of religions or only to those interested in media and religion? Why, if at all, might scholars of religions need to pay attention to his arguments? How does Fox’s approach enable them to understand religious thinking, commitment, institutions or practice in more interesting or revealing ways than they could otherwise?
- Following Foucault (1990), Fox stresses the circularity of interpretation and offers two examples. To the extent that his argument has validity, what are the broader implications for religious, cultural and media studies? Would Fox hold the problems to apply to all kinds of interpretation? If, following Wittgenstein, explanation, interpretation and description are not radically different kinds of practice, has he not thrown out the baby of critical interrogation with the muddy epistemological bath water?
- On substantialism, Fox offers a *prima facie* case for requiring us to pay attention to philosophical ideas of substance as being – i.e. that which grounds things, or the fundamental entities of reality. Adopting Heidegger’s scepticism about substance, what does he propose in its place? If it is practice, does this not just substitute one substance for another? And how does his critique of substantialism relate to arguments about essentialism? If he is embracing nominalism, what kind does he have in mind? And how does this relate to his version of pragmatism?
- If almost all knowledge and experience is mediated, if the mass media are now so constitutive of human practice, but if there is no coherent referent to terms like ‘the media’ or ‘mediation’, what is Fox’s object of study? For example, how does he intend to refer to practices previously designated ‘media-related’ without re-inscribing the media? If reference is so contaminated, what does Fox propose as the alternative?

Ron Inden, Fox’s colleague at Chicago, tells the story of a Bengali boy walking home with a large basket containing crabs. A passing man advises the boy that, if he does not put a lid on the basket, the crabs will escape. ‘No’ says the boy, ‘as soon as one crab tries to climb out, all the others pull him back’. That, so far, seems the thrust of the responses to Fox’s article and a sense of clawback that its originators may not have envisioned.

- Fabian, J. 1991. Culture, time and the object of anthropology. In *Time and the work of anthropology*. New York: Harwood.
- Fiske, J. & Hartley, J. 1987. *Reading Television*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. 1990. Nietzsche, Freud, Marx. In *Transforming the hermeneutic context: from Nietzsche to Nancy*. eds. G.L. Ormiston & A.D. Schrift, Albany, N.Y.: New York State Univ. Press, pp. 59-67.
- Hobart, M. 2000. *After culture. Anthropology as radical metaphysical critique*. Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana Press; also available at <http://www.criticalia.org/Books.htm>.
- Hoover, S.M. 2006. *Religion in the Media Age*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Quine, W.V.O. 1953. Two dogmas of empiricism. In *From a logical point of view: nine logico-philosophical essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Roberts, J. 1999. Philosophizing the everyday: the philosophy of praxis and the fate of cultural studies. *Radical philosophy* 98: 16-29.
- Volosinov, V.N. 1973. *Marxism and the philosophy of language*. trans. L.Matejka & I.R. Titunik, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.

Mark Hobart