Hybridity without Guarantees

Toward Critical Transculturalism

Cultural experience or indeed every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid, and if it has been the practice in the West since Immanuel Kant to isolate cultural and aesthetic realms from the worldly domain, it is now time to rejoin them.

—Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism

The claim that hybridity is symptomatic of resistance to globalization is troublesome, and the less forceful assertion that cultural mixture reflects the lightness of globalization’s hand is misguided. Hybridity as a characteristic of culture is compatible with globalization because it helps globalization rule, as Stuart Hall once put it, through a variety of local capitals. Hybridity entails that traces of other cultures exist in every culture, thus offering foreign media and marketers transcultural wedges for forging affective links between their commodities and local communities. As a discourse of intercultural relations, hybridity conjures up an active exchange that leads to the mutual transformation of both sides. Mainstream public discourse frames this exchange as benign and beneficial. The sheer repetition of the word “hybridity” in hundreds of media outlets and dozens of academic disciplines gives hybridity an aura of legitimacy and hides its inherent contradictions as it mystifies globalization’s material effects. Hybridity, then, is not just amenable to globalization. It is the cultural logic of globalization.

As the cultural logic of globalization, hybridity is not posthegemonic. By now this book has substantiated the claim that hybridity does not implicate the relenting of inequality. Whether in Lebanese television reception, in Mexican television production, or in U.S. journalistic discourse, unequal intercultural relations shape most aspects of cultural mixture. In many instances there are causal links between politico-economic power and cultural hybridity. This, however, does not mean that hybridity is tantamount to an effect of dominance. The processes and outcomes of hybridity are too convoluted to be explained by an always already
direct politico-economic causality. Consequently, in order to understand the complex and active links between hybridity and power, we need to move beyond commonplace models of domination and resistance. Critical transculturalism is designed to help us accomplish this task in international communication.

A reiteration of this book’s cardinal argument is in order before we put forward the framework of critical transculturalism. The congregation of postcultural imperialism approaches to international communication and culture, which first emerged under the banner of audience activity and can now be identified by the cultural pluralism or cultural globalization rubrics, have been either unwilling or unable to focus at once on the discursive and textual aspects of international communication while at the same time emphasizing material structure. The move from the monoculture of imperialism approaches to the multiculture of pluralism perspectives will remain incomplete until it considers structure and meaning in tandem in the current global transculture. The corporate view of this transculture elaborated in Chapter Four should be replaced with a critical and humanistic vision. It is with that objective in mind that I now propose critical transculturalism.

Critical transculturalism is a framework that focuses on power in intercultural relations by integrating both agency and structure in international communication analysis. The following is critical transculturalism in a nutshell, visually captured in Table 1. Critical transculturalism takes a synthetic view of culture, unlike cultural imperialism’s holistic premise and cultural pluralism’s view of culture as a merely pluralistic entity. Whereas in cultural imperialism agency is located in the global structure of capitalism, and in cultural pluralism agency is found in local individuals or communities studied contextually, critical transculturalism considers that social practice, acting translocally and intercontextually, is the site of agency. In terms of the relation between structure and agency, cultural imperialism sees it as a dialectical determination of the latter by the former, and cultural pluralism as a dialogical interaction between the two, whereas critical transculturalism conceives it as a lopsided articulation in which the dialogical aspects of communication must be analyzed concurrently with its dialectical dimensions. Finally, whereas cultural imperialism focuses on the production and distribution stages of the media communication process, and cultural pluralism emphasizes message/text and reception, critical transculturalism takes a more integrative approach that considers the active links between production, text, and reception in the moment of cultural
reproduction. In the following pages I emphasize the differences between cultural imperialism, cultural pluralism, and critical transculturalism.¹

In contrast to multiculturalism’s reference to the coexistence of plural cultures (or cocultures), transculturalism characterizes a mixture of several cultures. The former establishes boundaries of recognition and institutionalization between cultures; the latter underscores the fluidity of these boundaries. When the Chicago Cultural Studies Group (1992) coined the term “corporate multiculturalism,” it was referring to the “great danger [that] lies in thinking that [U.S.] multiculturalism could be exported multiculturally” (p. 550). Along the same lines, Chapter

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**Table 1  Critical Transculturalism in Comparative Perspective**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cultural Imperialism</th>
<th>Cultural Pluralism</th>
<th>Critical Transculturalism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conception of Culture</td>
<td>Holistic</td>
<td>Pluralistic</td>
<td>Synthetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conception of global culture</td>
<td>Monoculture</td>
<td>Multiculture</td>
<td>Transculture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central trope</td>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>Resistance and/or adaptation</td>
<td>Hybridity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Site of agency</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Individuals and/or community</td>
<td>Social practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scope of agency</td>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Local and contextual</td>
<td>Translocal and intercontextual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empirical focus</td>
<td>Material/Institutional</td>
<td>Discursive and/or textual</td>
<td>Material and discursive and textual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relation between structure and agency (process)</td>
<td>Dialectical</td>
<td>Dialogical</td>
<td>Dialectical and dialogical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relation between structure and agency (outcome)</td>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>Interaction and intertextuality</td>
<td>Articulation (lopsided)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media focus</td>
<td>Production and distribution</td>
<td>Reception and text/message</td>
<td>Production, text, and reception reproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation of state to external forces</td>
<td>Too weak</td>
<td>Too strong</td>
<td>Mediator/Referee</td>
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¹ For a discussion of the term “transcultural,” see Chapter 1.
Four explored the rhetorical claims of a corporate transculturalism elaborated in (mostly) U.S. public discourse, including its advocacy of free trade, individual consumerism, and reduction of culture to economic variables. No wonder, then, that the discourses of globalization and corporate transculturalism are so compatible. “[S]o convinced are people that global capitalism is relentlessly opposed to local cultures and diverse identities,” Zachary (2000) writes, “that they fail to realize that among the most vigorous proponents of mongrelization are the world’s biggest, richest, most profit-hungry corporations” (xx). Indeed! The shift in public discourse from multiculturalism to transculturalism, from the recognition of cultural difference to the celebration of cultural fusion, is at its core economic.

Critical transculturalism reclaims the notion of hybridity from doctrinaire free marketeers. It redefines cultural fusion as a social issue with human implications, from its earlier definition as an economic matter with commercial implications. People’s identities may be refracted through individual consumption, cultural and otherwise, but consumption alone is not tantamount to being. Hybridity theory, and cultural theory at large, cannot consider people merely as individuals who constantly recreate themselves by way of consumption. Rather, agency must be grasped in terms of people’s ability to accomplish things in the world they inhabit. If culture represents the meanings, ways of action, and ways to evaluate the value of actions in a society, and if cultural hybridity entails a change in those meanings and actions, then attention ought to be paid to hybridity’s ability or inability to empower social groups to have influence over the course of their lives. Ultimately, then, the value of a theory of hybridity resides in the extent to which it emphasizes human agency.

Critical transculturalism emphasizes the relation between hybridity and agency. The former is its conceptual core and the latter its central concern. This framework focuses on the links that communication processes create between power and meaning in the context of cultural transformation, and with the material and discursive consequences of these links. Whereas structure is the site of agency in the cultural imperialism thesis, and agency is located in the individual/community for the cultural pluralism perspective, in critical transculturalism agency is sited in social practices. By “practices” I mean, following Stuart Hall, “how a structure is actively reproduced” (1985, p. 103, my emphasis). Understood as practices, communication processes harnessed to express different kinds of hybridity serve to reproduce social, political, and
economic structures. When hybridity is posited as a naturally occurring and globally desirable condition in public discourse, it reproduces the prevailing global order. Even the hybridity articulated by Maronite youth who themselves see it as an empowering identity can be perceived to be hegemonic by other Lebanese confessions. This brings us to the issues of volition and intention: whether hybridity is self-asserted or ascribed will determine to a large degree its relation to agency.

In this regard, Bakhtin’s distinction between intentional and organic hybridity in language can be usefully applied to culture. Intentional hybridity, characteristic of, for example, the novel, is the result of an artistic intention and stylistic organization. It is therefore “a semantic hybrid . . . not . . . in the abstract . . . but rather a semantics that is concrete and social” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 360, emphasis in original). In contrast, organic hybridity is “unintentional, unconscious hybridization” (p. 358) that occurs and changes historically when several languages—and, for our purposes, cultures—enter into contact: “The image of a language conceived as an intentional hybrid is first of all a conscious hybrid (as distinct from a historical, organic, obscure language hybrid); an intentional hybrid is precisely the perception of one language by another language, its illumination by another linguistic consciousness. An image of language may be structured only from the point of view of another language, which is taken as the norm” (p. 359). Intentional hybridity is therefore primarily a communicative phenomenon. Its intentionality increases the possibility that it will become a process of othering, where identities are projected by powerful social agents onto others who are less powerful. The necessity of translation, of rendering meaning cross-culturally, raises the issue of who controls the means of translation. Communication is central in the formation of hybridities because it strengthens the agency of those with the means to translate and name the world, while weakening the agency of other participants. In other words, whether hybridity is self-described or ascribed by others is primarily a communicative process. The means and ability to communicate are therefore an important determinant of agency in intercultural relations that form the crucible of hybridity.

Based on the central relation between hybridity and agency, critical transculturalism has three foundational pillars: a conception of culture as synthetic, an emphasis on the translocal and intercontextual links between hybridity and agency, and a commitment to an epistemology with multiple methodologies—discursive, textual, and empirical.
Critical transculturalism advocates doing away with the view that cultures are stable and autonomous units, because the holistic view of culture is an obstacle to a critical approach to international communication. Though notable scholars have advanced a nonholistic view of culture (Appadurai, 1996; Bakhtin, 1981; Benhabib, 2002; Hannerz, 1992; Marcus, 1998), social analysis and conventional wisdom still reinscribe what Benhabib called the “reductionist sociology of culture” (2002, p. 4). This approach presupposes that (1) cultures are homogenous units, (2) culture is congruent with nationality or an ethnic group within a nationality, and (3) cultures are for the most part separate from each other and interactions between them are epiphenomenal. While studies conducted from the cultural imperialism perspective adhered to these premises to varying degrees and focused on intercultural power differences, research done under the cultural pluralism/globalization umbrella rejected the holistic view of culture but for the most part neglected power. Indeed, cultural holism explains what I believe to be the fatal flaw of “cultural imperialism,” namely the equivalence between politico-economic dominance and cultural homogeneity (Kraidy, 2004). This assumption has been challenged, if only indirectly, for example, in postcolonial criticism and even—as discussed in Chapter Two—within the critical political economy tradition itself. However, the tendency to equate homogeneity with dominance, rooted as it is in the conflation of culture with its political economy, has empowered opponents of critical approaches to international communication to associate hybridity with pluralism and resistance. To reclaim power as a major and legitimate focus of research, it is important to view cultures as synthetic entities whose hybrid components are shaped by structural and discursive forces. Critical transculturalism differs from both cultural imperialism and cultural pluralism in that it rejects what anthropologist George Marcus called the “fiction of the whole” (1998, p. 33) but at the same time emphasizes that intercultural relations are unequal. In order to understand the intricate entanglement of structural and discursive elements in relations between cultures, we shall revisit our conception of the local.

SHIFTING GEERTZ: THE LOCAL IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE

When Clifford Geertz (1983) wrote that “the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and their encasements” (p. 4), he was explicitly stating an implicit tradition in anthropology to treat the local as an autonomous site, sometimes recognizing
but rarely dissecting the local’s enmeshment in supralocal networks. In the two decades since Geertz’s pronouncement, social scientists have focused on “the local” as a conceptual issue (see, for example, D. Miller, 1995; Mirsepassi, Basu, and Weaver, 2003; Rosenau, 2003), especially as the opposite of “the global” in globalization theory. In international communication, where the local/global dichotomy has become pervasive, the local is treated as the site of meaning construction, power struggles, and social action, ranging from an individualistic emphasis on “resistance” to a focus on social aspects of communication, for example, in research on alternative media.²

Rather than consider the local and the global as opposites, it may be more helpful to think of them as mutually constitutive, a perspective advanced in terms of “glocalization” (Kraidy, 2003b; Robertson, 1994), “interpenetrated globalization” (Braman, 1996), or “distant proximities” (Rosenau, 2003). However, it is Appadurai’s claim that local knowledge is “not only local in itself but, even more important, for itself” (1996, p. 181) that enables a productive contrast to the Geertzian view on the local. The local knowledge envisioned by Geertz was, as his definition quoted earlier demonstrates, “local in itself.” In other words, its locality was primarily empirical. Local knowledge “for itself” à la Appadurai, however, foregrounds the political nature and uses of local knowledge. (Chapter Three offers historical examples of how local knowledge of cultural and racial mixtures was local for itself.) Locality, then, is not naturally formed, waiting for the anthropologist to interpret it. Rather, locality is shaped by myriad forces, including the people who inhabit it and the anthropologist or media scholar who studies it.

This is not a radical constructivist proposition. The local is primarily although not exclusively a physical reality in nature and matter. The insight that local knowledge is also “for itself” fills a major gap in the Geertzian “culture-as-text” legacy, namely its relative neglect of material power. In this regard, it is important to stress that the exercise of power in the realm of the local is not the exclusive prerogative of the global. The local itself is often the scene of power struggles between local actors, who are themselves embedded in larger external networks. In other words, the local is at once a site of empowerment and marginalization. This point is overshadowed by the recurrence of romantic views of the local, alternately defined as “a residual category overtaken by development . . . [or] a haven of resistance against globalization” (Haugerud, 2003, p. 61). This view elides the fact that the local itself is pervaded with power and inequality, a fact with troublesome
implications for those studies in communication and cultural studies that glorify local cultural hybridity as resistance.

Critical transculturalism, then, considers that (1) the local is intricately involved in supralocal relations and that (2) exogenous and endogenous circuits of power pervade the local. For these two reasons, I prefer to conceive of locality in terms of translocality (Kraidy and Murphy, 2003). A translocal approach focuses on connections between several local social spaces, exploring hitherto neglected local-to-local links. A translocal approach reformulates Galtung’s “wheel model” (1971) of cultural imperialism, where the hub and rim are metaphors for, respectively, the center and periphery, by shifting the focus of research on connections between several points on the rim of the wheel, without predetermining that such connections must necessarily spring from the hub and through the spokes. This suggests an alternative approach to hybridity than, for example, the one spun in the Washington Post articles analyzed in Chapter Four, where various countries’ hybridity is a function of their relation with U.S. popular culture, positing the United States at the center of cultural exchanges and all other cultures in various peripheral positions. In contrast to this hub-through-spokes-to-rim model, a translocal perspective calls for an analysis of how these different nations’ hybrid cultures are shaped by their mutual interaction, in addition to their links with the West. While there is a risk of overemphasizing these local-to-local connections, lapsing into another romanticization of the local that would obscure supralocal power plays, a translocal perspective, at least analytically, allows us to remove the West from the center of intercultural relations. International communication research would benefit greatly from more emphasis on local-to-local, “East-to-East,” or “South-to-South” interactions and exchanges. The objective of this decentering is not to deflect attention from Western power, but to pave the way for the construction of alternative perspectives on hybridity and locality that are not confined to global-to-local links that reinscribe dependency. Thinking of international communication and hybridity in terms of translocality, then, keeps issues of power high on the agenda.

The consideration of hybridity in tandem with power is perhaps best captured by the term “intercontextuality,” (Appadurai, 1996), which allows us to understand text and context to be mutually constitutive. As used here, “context” does not refer merely to a natural environment or a social setting where practices are put in motion and texts find their interpretative frames. Rather, I employ “context” as a constitutive and constituting force in the sense elaborated by critical communication
scholar Jennifer Daryl Slack (1996) when she wrote that “context is not something out there, within which practices occur or which influences the development of practices. Rather, identities, practices, and effects generally, constitute the very context with which they are practices, identities or effects” (p. 125, emphasis in original). Using the notion of intercontextuality, we can maintain that hybridity is always already permeated with power, without, however, arguing in favor of a generalized hegemonic outcome. In other words, while most hybridities tend to be structured in dominance, the resulting hybrid forms and identities are not always and not necessarily reflective of total dominance. Critical transculturalism views the relationship between structure and agency in terms of a lopsided articulation. Articulation, according to Stuart Hall (1986), “is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together in a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects” (p. 53). Our attention, then, needs to be redirected from debating the political and theoretical usefulness of hybridity, to analyzing how structures and discourses operate in a variety of contexts to shape different hybridities, and how, in turn, hybrid cultural forms—as we have seen, for example, with Tele Chobis in Chapter Five—reflect at once the presence of hegemony and its limitations.

While some, perhaps the most powerful, politico-economic structures are global, it may be helpful to pay more attention to the role of the state as a regulator of communication processes that shape hybridity. Critical transculturalism, as mentioned earlier, considers social practice as the site of agency whose scope is both translocal and intercontextual. The state, even as its economic prerogatives have been frittered away under globalization, retains most of its political, legal, regulatory, and military power. In these domains, the national state mediates between not only the global and the local, but also the local and other locals. It is therefore helpful to reappraise the role of the state in international communication, and to explore the implications of this role for the issue of cultural hybridity.

**Policy Matters: Hybridity and the State**

It is widely agreed that globalization challenges the Westphalian nation-state from “above” and facilitates internal dynamics that challenge the state from “below,” leading to the conclusion that the nation-state may be a threatened form of political organization. However, many advocates
Hybridity without Guarantees 157

of globalization depict the state as a problem to be solved, an argument in different versions, from liberal economics to “cultural globalization,” in both public and scholarly settings. Criticism of the state is present both in academic discussions of cultural globalization (as discussed in Chapter Two) and in public discourse (as analyzed in Chapter Four), or both, for example, in free flow views hostile to the New World Information and Communication Order, analyzed in Chapter Two. Contra these depictions of the state as bureaucratic, protectionist, and authoritarian, which reflect the views of transnational capital, it may be productive to contemplate a positive role for the state.

Recently, perhaps as a reaction to globalization’s hostility to the state, the nation-state has emerged as an explicit theoretical and empirical concern in international communication (Braman, 2002; Curran and Park, 2000; Morris and Waisbord, 2001). States have always been preoccupied with the mass media because electronic signals ignore territorial borders and breach sovereignty. The state’s role has traditionally been that of a protector of the nation, but, as discussed in Chapter Five in regard to British television exports, states have increasingly been acting as mediators between national spheres and global processes. In the international system, however, most states speak for their nation as a unified cultural entity, even when national diversity is acknowledged, based on the faulty holistic premise discussed earlier in this chapter. My advocacy for a renewed local knowledge leads me to focus beyond the state’s mediating role between the national and the global and consider the state’s role in administering the local, in all its diversity, within the national space. The local, that always already hybrid realm, is where relations between political, social, cultural, and economic forces take concrete forms in people’s lives. And in terms of media, the links analyzed in Chapter Six between audience perceptions and media policy in Lebanon indicate that hybrid cultural identities have important implications for media policy. I will therefore conclude with some normative reflections on hybridity as a locus of interaction between the national and the local.

Situating hybridity in fields of power as I have striven to do brings to the surface the tension between cultural politics of recognition and social demands for distribution, a tension that reflects the materialist-idealist divide and that is inherent between the local and the national. In many academic and intellectual quarters, these two visions—recognition and redistribution of justice—have had a conflictual relationship, the former associated with the New Left and the latter with the Old Left, the first with “cultural studies” and the second with “political economy,”
Chapter 7

recognition with discourse or representation and redistribution with material resource allocation. To many, this competition has been asymmetrical, with the notion of recognition ascending at the expense of the redistributionist view, as captured by political theorist Nancy Fraser (1997): “Claims for the recognition of group difference have become increasingly salient in the recent period, at times eclipsing claims for social equality. . . . Empirically, of course, we have seen the rise of “identity politics,” the decentering of class, and, until very recently, the corresponding decline of social democracy. More deeply, however, we are witnessing an apparent shift in the political imaginary, especially the way in which justice is imagined. . . . The result is a decoupling of cultural politics from social politics and the relative eclipse of the latter by the former” (p. 2).

With its simultaneous emphasis on the material and discursive aspects of hybridity, critical transculturalism aims to recouple cultural and social politics. Cultural research and criticism concerned with social justice examines how socioeconomic structures enable, hinder, or even cripple individual and social agency. For example, by “creating” a multiracial option, the 2000 U.S. Census undoubtedly encouraged people who believed they fit in one of the older categories to see themselves in terms of this hybrid identity. In other words, the institutionalization of a category by the state legitimizes it in the eyes of individuals and groups, thus enhancing its appeal for people whose mixed identity predisposes them to select the multiracial identity. From a critical transculturalism perspective, however, the fact that structure and ideas are reciprocally formative entails no necessary outcome. As we saw in Chapter Six, Maronite youth gravitated toward television content that is theoretically counter to the political sentiment prevalent in their community. Whether this “subversive” consumptive behavior coalesces in real action at the social or political level; whether, to put it differently, segments of Maronite youth enact real social agency; and whether, in an extrapolation beyond the scope of this book, other Lebanese communities do the same and initiate an indirect dialogue stimulated by media content, depends to a major extent on the state.

States must devise competent media and cultural policies for hybridity to act as a progressive political reality that mitigates tension, averts conflict, and enhances representative democracy. These policies must coordinate public and private interests without systematically privileging the latter. In the United States, for example, with the exception of public broadcasting, the primacy of commercial interests in
broadcasting is clear, and this logic permeates both how the system works and how it is engaged by social movements. Negative media representations of minorities, for instance, are not monitored or sanctioned by the state; rather, activist groups address stereotypical media depictions by organizing commercial boycotts. Because media corporations recognize the rising purchasing power of certain groups, they often accommodate their demands, whether these are ethnic groups, such as African Americans and Hispanics, or more recently the gay community.

The situation is different in less commercial media environments. In Latin America, states tend to follow a preservationist approach to culture, and cultural policy thus concentrates on traditional folk art and crafts and elite plastic arts. In the past, media and popular culture were neglected by policy, and when included, they were treated according to the same “preservation of culture” logic, an approach now giving way to market considerations in the wake of economic liberalization (García-Canclini, 1995/2001). In western Europe and Canada, on the other hand, commercial considerations have overshadowed public broadcasting ideals, but well-enshrined social democratic values and the laws these values have inspired have arguably worked against too rapid a change and mitigated the impact of liberalization.

In the Arab world, the media are caught between the exacting demands of markets and the repressive tendency of states. Lebanon, its freewheeling economy and relatively free civil society notwithstanding, is no exception to this combination of laissez-faire media economics combined with authoritarian state control over content. This tension is mediated by a system of political patronage and partitioning of media and other resources perhaps best captured by the phrase “oligarchical capitalism,” in which media resources are distributed along sectarian lines and controlled by the elite of each confession. This system, as explained in Chapter Six, devolves power and control to the confessional level, so that leading politicians in each group have a monopoly over public expression. Instead of enhancing the prospects of constructive dialogue between communities, this rigid structure concentrates the ability to communicate in the hands of unaccountable political leaders. Therefore, oligarchical media capitalism hardens pluralism into enclavism where recognition and redistribution are perfectly (at least in theory) aligned under elite control, and it preempts hybrid identities from developing into progressive political energy.

An alternative policy must be imagined, at least from a normative, if not yet practicable, point of view. In the United States, where public
advocacy and electoral campaigns are largely determined by the financial means of the contestants, and where ethnic minorities are increasingly targeted as cultural-economic enclaves or electoral enclaves (when justified by population size as in the case of Latinos), public discourse could benefit from a more vigorous regulatory policy. The establishment of public financing of elections, for instance, could help ethnic minorities reclaim a sense of agency that is less dependent on financial power they do not have. It could also help bring about a true diversity of opinion by helping third parties reach critical mass. Throughout the Western world, the combination of social marginalization and diasporic media can push immigrants toward enclavism. In the case of Lebanon, whose situation is applicable to other pluralistic societies (including Iraq) in the non-West, instead of allocating media resources along sectarian lines, why not decentralize the system and allow truly independent stations to emerge? In Lebanon, these media outlets could express various ways of being a Maronite, a Shiite, or a Sunnite, exposing the internal diversity of all confessions. By highlighting intraconfessional diversity, this approach undercuts the system’s raison d’être, which has hardened into dogma, and makes possible the development of alternative social, political, and media structures. A national audiovisual space could be rehabilitated by revamping Télé-Liban, making it a public, not a state/privately owned, institution, committing public funds, and possibly levying a special fee on private broadcasters to raise necessary monies. In the words of García-Canclini (referring to Latin America but applicable elsewhere), political and economic conditions must favor the expansion of multicultural media that express multiple points of view, in a framework that promotes the “collective public interest rather than commercial profitability” (1995/2001, p. 133). A media system where a strong national public service shares the airwaves with a variety of local, regional, and national stations not exclusively based on sectarian calculations has the best chance of enhancing political life and public discourse across confessional and other potentially explosive boundaries of affiliation.

The legal and jurisdictional pluralism advocated by Seyla Benhabib (2002), as discussed in Chapter Three, provides a conceptual framework that I find applicable to media policy in complex, multicultural countries. The merit of her model is that it recognizes and encourages fluidity in cultural identity and mixture between groups, while guaranteeing equal rights to all. In Benhabib’s view, as long as the system she describes adheres to the three normative requisites of (1) egalitarian
reciprocity, (2) voluntary self-ascription, and (3) freedom of exit or as-
sociation (elaborated on in Chapter Three), it is compatible with univer-
sally acknowledged human rights and democratic standards.

The fulfillment of these conditions leads to a “complex cultural di-
ologue” (Benhabib, 2002, p. 22) that repudiates the idea that cultures
are discrete and separate entities, historically unchanging wholes into
which birth alone secures membership. In contrast, the accomplish-
ment of egalitarian reciprocity, voluntary self-ascription, and freedom of exit
and association anchors the recognition of diversity between and within
ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities and allows for transcul-
tural mixtures that are bound to take shape with sustained cultural
exchange. These positive developments, when they occur at the na-
tional level and thus allow for increased translocal exchanges, make the
local and national realms less vulnerable to capture by the seductive
discourse and reductive structures of globalization. This, in turn, en-
hances the prospects that hybridity, a condition that is constituted in
part by communication, fulfills its social and political potential, mitigat-
ing social tensions, expressing the polyvalence of human creativity, and
providing a context of empowerment in which individuals and com-
munities are agents in their own destiny. Only then can the unsavory
implications of hybridity as the cultural logic of globalization be miti-
gated. And only then can hybridity—albeit without guarantees—be a
progressive, hopeful discourse.