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BEING ELSEWHERE: THE POLITICS AND METHODS OF RESEARCHING SYMBOLIC EXCLUSION

‘When power is unequally distributed, the economic and social world presents itself not as a universe of possibles equally accessible to every possible subject – posts to be occupied, courses to be taken, markets to be won, goods to be consumed, properties to be exchanged – but rather as a signposted universe, full of injunctions and prohibitions, signs of appropriation and exclusion, obligatory routes or impassable barriers, and in a word, profoundly differentiated, especially according to the degree to which it offers stables chances, capable of favouring and fulfilling stable expectations.’

(Bourdieu, 1998: 225)

Introduction

‘Symbolic power’ – that is, ‘the power of constructing reality’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 163-170), one’s own reality and that of others – is primarily concentrated in one sector of society, not evenly distributed. This has been an everyday fact of life in most societies, but it takes a particular form in contemporary mediated societies, where symbolic power is concentrated particularly, although not of course exclusively, in media institutions, so that the uneven distribution of symbolic resources results in the overwhelming reality of media power. As the political theorist Alberto Melucci has put it (Melucci, 1996: 179), ‘the real domination is today the exclusion from the power of naming’, that is, naming social reality. The symbolic exclusion that results for most people is, or at least should be, a primary focus of social and cultural research.

Yet the effectiveness of media power depends partly on its being forgotten, on us taking it for granted. It is to media institutions, not elsewhere, that we look for our social facts and most of our credible fictions.¹ Media power is a central part of

contemporary societies' 'habitus' (to use another useful term of Bourdieu: 1977: 78), their 'history turned into nature'; it is therefore particularly difficult to research. The same point can be expressed by a visual and spatial metaphor. As social space is saturated by the blinding light of media narratives, and the deep shadows of invisibility those narratives cast, it becomes both more vital and more difficult to research what it means to live in those shadows, and, if possible, to contest them.

More concretely, symbolic exclusion goes unnoticed by researchers, in part, because symbolic resources are unevenly distributed in space. Where exactly academic research chooses to engage with everyday life is crucial. Unless we address the methodological politics of researching symbolic exclusion (as researchers who, by definition, have our own symbolic privileges, tied to particular sites and centres of authority), our picture of today's symbolic landscape will remain incomplete and misleading. This is not to romanticise the marginal or excluded, but simply to take seriously our responsibilities to that landscape as a whole.

Yet those who refuse to take media power for granted have often been overlooked; thus the field of alternative media has for a long time been marginal in media studies, although it is now undergoing a revival (Downing, 2000; Rodriguez, 2001; Atton, forthcoming). It is easy also to overlook the symbolic practices (with or without media resources) of those outside centres of power, particularly those who work in small groups or even alone; James Scott (1985) pointed out long ago the danger of ignoring the 'weapons of the weak', precisely because they are relatively invisible from the vantage point of the strong.

Neither omission is excusable, especially now when there is a crisis of democratic citizenship (Wolin, 1992) at the heart of the very mediated societies - the USA and Britain - whose political leaders claim loudly their right to act as global democracy's armed representatives. Are centralised media - and their concomitant, symbolic exclusion for the majority - good for democracy and citizenship? Not necessarily, or at least not simply, but, if so, it is important that our research map does not ignore this complexity. This may mean absenting ourselves from the automatic 'centres' (those places where 'being there' as researchers seems to justify itself) and putting our research focus elsewhere.

In this paper I want to examine through some examples what this might mean in practice.

The Complexity of Cultural Space

An important first step is to develop a way of thinking about symbolic landscapes and cultural space, which is adequate to their complexity, in particular the complexity that flows from the massive circulation of media materials. Contemporary anthropology has been very helpful here in articulating new possibilities.

Let me draw first on Ulf Hannerz's work on cultural space in his important book *Cultural Complexity* (1992). 'Complex societies' according to Hannerz are distinctive in a number of ways. Most relevant here is the fact that their meanings have to be distributed to that society's members, who are dispersed across space. There is no reason to assume that distribution is even. On the contrary, 'in a society where the

cultural flow is varied and uneven, it is an open question which meanings have reached where and when' (Hannerz, 1992: 81). But people are not monads taking inputs from the wider culture in isolation from everyone else; they are also engaged in making sense of other people's meanings and interpretations (1992: 14). This adds a second layer of complexity to the distribution of meanings, which cannot be simply extrapolated from the first: a dimension of reflexivity which itself is a material process that takes place here, and not there.

The idea of cultural 'holism' – that cultures comprise principally the meanings that people share – is thus untenable. As Hannerz puts it:

we must recognize the real intricacy of the flow of meaning in social life. As each individual engages in his [sic] own continuous interpreting of the forms surrounding him, how can we take for granted that he comes to the same result as the next fellow [sic]? There is nothing automatic about cultural sharing. Its accomplishment must rather be seen as problematic. (1992: 44)

Put another way, our idea of cultures as large-scale structures has to take account of the 'local' complexity of agents' reflexivity about culture, not just academics' reflexivity of course, but the reflexivity of every agent they study (cf Cohen, 1994). Everywhere processes of agency and reflexivity intersect.

This has specific implications for the methodology of cultural research, including ethnography. Ethnography's situated knowledge can no longer be based in a belief, or ideal, of the ethnographer's movement (or lack of it) perfectly tracking culture's

movement (or lack of it). The intersection between 'ethnography' and 'culture' is necessarily more partial than that. Lives are stretched across many sites and many roles, without necessarily cohering into a unity; communities are not tied to a single nation-state, but are informed by the experience of moving between many. What of identities that resist classification? We don't know, and certainly can't assume, that people accept the market-led identities that are prepared for them, and so must take seriously their journeys across cultural space, whether they are voluntary or involuntary. Culture, in short, emerges 'on a differently configured spatial canvas' (Marcus, 1998) where the connections between sites matter as much, and sometimes more, than the sites of imagined closure (the village, the city, the nation-state, or even the globe).

The nature of this methodological shift has been brought out well by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in her (1993) book on her time spent with the Meratus Dayak people from the mountainous forest regions of south-east Kalimantan in Indonesia. They are in various ways managed and marginalised by the central Indonesian Government, but at the same time engage in a complex set of negotiations of their identity with many 'centres', not just Jakarta, but more locally, and globally. Tsing found there were no 'villages' to study, but rather a shifting network of cultural dialogues across scattered populations. Her own practice – as reflexive ethnographic agent – involved ceaseless movement as well. In a powerful passage, Tsing describes how her own movements across cultural space made irrelevant the attempt to reduce that space to a closed cultural order:

As I involved myself with a network that stretched across the mountains, I moved increasingly further from structural models of local stability and came to recognize the open-ended dialogues that formed and reformed Meratus culture and history. My own shifting positioning made me especially alert to continual negotiations of local ‘community’, to the importance of far-flung as well as local ties . . . a culture that cannot be tied to a place cannot be analytically stopped in time.

(Tsing, 1993: 66)

George Marcus’s recent essay ‘The Use of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scene of Anthropological Fieldwork’ (1999) takes these issues a stage further, in a way that connects usefully with the specific problems of researching a mediated social landscape. Marcus offers a thoroughgoing rethinking of what ‘thick description’ (in Clifford Geertz’s famous phrase) can mean in today’s complex cultural spaces. He abandons the idea that what is feasible or desirable in fieldwork is ‘rapport’: a close fit between the ethnographer’s and her/his interlocutor’s understandings of the world, achieved within the confines of the ethnographic situation. Instead of ‘rapport’ as the ‘foundational commonplace of fieldwork’ (1999: 87), Marcus develops the notion of ‘complicity’, which emphasises not the knowledge, so much as the questioning and curiosity, that ethnographer and interlocutor share.²

Marcus’ first characterisation of this ‘complicity’ is as ‘an awareness of existential doubleness on the part of *both* anthropologist and subject; this derives from having a sense of being *here* where major transformations are under way that are tied to things happening simultaneously *elsewhere*, but not having a certainty or authoritative representation of what those connections are’ (Marcus, 1999: 97, original emphasis).

The result of this uncertainty may be anxiety (1999: 98), as well as a shared sense of questioning that extends far beyond the dilemmas of the (post-)colonial encounter. Indeed, the uncertainty which the interlocutor feels is not the product of being approached by the ethnographer at all; it is a pre-existing condition of any self-reflexive life in a world of complex cultural flows and influences. It is this self-reflexiveness and uncertainty within everyday life that the ethnographer has to reflect in her accounts.

The result, Marcus argues, is to change the focus of fieldwork itself:

Only when an outsider begins to relate to a subject also concerned with outsideness in everyday life can these expressions [of anxiety] be given focal importance in a localized fieldwork that, in turn, inevitably pushes the entire research programme of the single ethnographic project into the challenges and promises of a multisited space and trajectory – a trajectory that encourages the ethnographer literally to move to other sites that are powerfully registered in the local knowledge of an originating locus of fieldwork.

(Marcus, 1999: 99)

What the two figures in the ethnographic ‘situation’ share, then, is ‘an affinity’, based on their ‘mutual curiosity and anxiety about their relationship to a “third”’ – that is, to the sites elsewhere that affect, or even determine, their experiences and knowledges here (1999: 101). When the anthropologist travels, she is not therefore doing something exclusive to the (still generally privileged) position of the anthropologist, but instead she is materializing a concern with external determinations that is shared

with her interlocutor. This, at least, is the intriguing alternative metaphor for fieldwork that Marcus offers.

This new conception of ethnographic method, while it has roots going back to Hannerz's early work on urban biographies (1980) and even perhaps Simmel's urban sociology, is peculiarly apposite to today's concern with the media's role in our lives. The media operate as a 'third' space within our lives, both close and distant, and whether we are ethnographers or not. This paradox Raymond Williams expressed better than anyone, when he described modern communications as:

a form of unevenly shared consciousness of persistently external events. It is what appears to happen, in these powerfully transmitted and mediated ways, in a world within which we have no other perceptible connections but we feel is at once central and marginal to our lives.

(Williams, 1973: 295-96, added emphasis)

Media provide common contexts, language and reference-points for use in local situations, even though media production takes place outside most localities and its narratives cut across them from the outside. The frameworks within which we reflect on ourselves and others are shared with others, because they have a common source in media flows, and yet those frameworks are never entirely 'ours'; we can grasp them alternately as 'inside' or 'outside'. Indeed 'complicity' (in Marcus' sense – of a shared awareness of the importance to us as agents of the external forces that act upon and across us) may be a useful metaphor precisely for the ways in which city life itself has been changed by mediation. As Nestor Garcia Canclini has put it:

Since . . . even the accidents that happened the previous day in our own city reach us through the media, these [the media] become the dominant constituents of the ‘public’ meaning of the city . . . More than an absolute substitution of urban life by the audiovisual media, I perceive a *game of echoes*. The commercial advertising and political slogans that we see on television are those that we reencounter in the streets, and vice versa: the ones are echoed in the others. To this circularity of the communicational and the urban are subordinated the testimonies of history and the public meaning constructed in longtime [sic] experiences.

(Garcia Canclini, 1995: 210, 212, original emphasis)

The media, by providing so many shared resources through which we can (and in a sense must) frame the social world, change the terms on which individual testimony also can be researched. Instead perhaps of seeking new (more complex) forms of local authenticity in our research, the priority may be to develop passing ethnographies, that yield, knowledge under particular conditions (cf Couldry, forthcoming).

What are the implications of this for research practice?

Researching the Weapons of the Weak

The implication of the previous section was that the complexity of cultural space, particularly mediated cultural space, is such as to undermine any assumption that being ‘there’ – in any particular place, including a central place - authorises you to describe fully that place. Research’s entanglements with place are much more complex than that.

Foregrounding this complexity changes in particular the context for researching symbolic exclusion. Once we accept that there is no simple, level cultural space to be researched, some reasons why 'marginal' practices are usually excluded from research (because their relationship to the important centres of social and cultural production is too remote and too untidy) fall away. On the contrary, primary interest shifts to the overall landscape, including all its unevennesses, as reflected in the local struggles of particular agents.

Let me try to make these rather obscure comments more specific in two stages, drawing on the trajectory of my own research. In this section, I will discuss briefly some specific practices of the symbolically excluded which I have researched. In the next section, I will discuss how, retrospectively and in the light particularly of George Marcus' recent work, I came to see the methodological position that my wider research practice implied.

I became interested in forms of social activism that, because of their marginality and particularity, were very difficult to justify as the objects of straightforward research into 'new social movements' or 'alternative media practice' (in a sense, they were marginal even within the accepted margins of academic work). These cases were extreme in the sense that, while they definitely involved resistance to media power, they did not involve media production in the usual sense, because they were practices developed without media production resources. I am not claiming they are typical cases; rather they illustrate the outer limits of analysis, which it is important not to forget.

This issue first emerged, for me, in work on the women's peace camp at Greenham Common outside the US Air Force base there (1981-2000). I researched not the women originally at the camp, but those who stayed on at the camp into the 1990s, long after media attention had moved elsewhere, leaving only in 2000.

In 1996 I interviewed those women who still remained (at what they called 'Yellow Gate', even though by then the US base and the women's camp had otherwise disappeared) about why they were there and the communication strategy which underlay their continued resistance (for more details, see Couldry, 1999; 2000: chapter 9). The most striking thing to emerge was that, although they now received almost no media coverage, their actions still involved a strategy which contested media power.

Through a number of actions – entering the nearby Aldermaston nuclear weapons establishment, speeches defending themselves in court actions for such illegal entrances, writing messages on the weapons' hangars, while the weapons still remained – they communicated their abhorrence of nuclear weapons and the more general militarism, in the full knowledge of the media's silence about them. As Katrina Howse, one member of the camp put it:

There's always been a core of women who feel it as a moral imperative to take action, to take non-violent direct action, because the situation is intolerable, on a mental level the situation of having nuclear weaponry . . . and they [the state] have never broken that core . . . of belief that, for a small minority of women, taking

non-violent direction action in a consistent solid way is always better than acceptance . . . [Resisting action is] actually a daily commitment and it reflects our way of seeing the world which is not negotiable . . . it's not negotiable with the state or the state's media, nor with any one else . . . It's a resisting women's way of seeing the world. (interview September 1996)

Another member of Yellow Gate, Aniko Jones, put the relationship specifically to media power more directly: 'we have to get to people on our own terms and we have to give out information and we have to be the sources of that information, not the media' (interview September, 1996).

Here, in the absence of significant media coverage and knowing that they were invisible to most people – in the centre of a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neuman, 1974) – they expressed in its direct form the principle of resisting media power: the idea that they, not media institutions, should be the source of information. This is, in a sense, the outer limit of alternative media practice, whose importance lies not in its success as alternative media – which is highly debatable – but simply in its showing that it was possible, imaginable. Such cases are, in one way, problematic of course. Practice from extremely marginal positions rarely has wider impacts, and is therefore easily dismissed. But on the principle of 'complicity', however, to dismiss them is illegitimate: complex but still highly concentrated power distributions of power inevitably produce margins, but the reflexivity of the marginal is as important to study as the reflexivity of those at the 'centre': both can be understood as part of a wider space of 'complicity' which extends to researchers' puzzles about the impacts of such marginal practice as well.'

A second example of such outer limits of the symbolic landscape comes from a UK social activist I interviewed in 1996 and 1997. He calls himself The Umbrella Man, because of the umbrella hat covered with campaign stickers, which he often wears (see further Couldry, 2000: 164-168 and 2001). He is a pensioner who retired early though ill health, having worked as a carpenter for a London council. He was an active trade unionist, and is now involved in supporting campaigns, such as those of the UK public service worker union Unison. He is involved in important local campaigning, using the local press, particularly on disability, mobility and pensioner issues. But he has also been actively involved, as a supporter rather than organiser, of most of the significant social campaigns of recent years in Britain: the anti-road protests, the protests against live animal exports, the Disability Action Network's campaigns for disability rights, and so on.

My interest in him stemmed not so much from his 'politics', but from my interest in the strategy he adopted in relation to media power. He left school early and would not claim himself to be an articulate spokesperson (although he has often been invited onto television daytime talk shows, and the like). He would not describe himself as 'political' as such, and he is not affiliated to any political organisation. Nor is he a media activist in the normal sense: he has no media resources, no camera, no significant media connections, although over time he has built up good connections with his local newspapers. His main tactic, in relation to national issues, is to stand outside London's Houses of Parliament or government buildings on days when cameras are likely to be present (for example, Budget Days, when the government announces its plans for next year's public finances) with a placard, and dressed to

attract camera attention: to ‘lurk’ (as it is put in the celebrity world) in the image frame in order to insinuate his own message into mainstream media narratives that are already going to be broadcast.

Yet his alternative media practice – if I can call it that – is clearly articulated as a challenge to the operations of media power. Here he is describing to me an incident one Budget Day when he tried to intervene in the standard interviews with members of parliament reacting to the Budget:

I decided to do something different on my own, all the cameras came out, they all went to [College Green, outside Houses of Parliament, Westminster] and I thought right, let’s go for it. And I’ve got this little push trolley . . . that the old people carry and I’ve got all my [Unison] balloons and boards . . . so I crept across and all these cameras shot up as soon as they saw this Father Christmas coming along the footpath, right? And the trouble was they were picking me up and forgetting [the MPs] who were in front of their camera, so the MPs didn’t like it . . . the camera going onto me and not them, that’s what it’s all about. (interview, February 1997, quoted in Couldry, 2000: 167, added emphasis)

The point of this brief example – and of course it needs more detailed context than I have space for here – is not to claim the effectiveness of the Umbrella Man’s practice, as alternative media, let alone as formal politics; it is neither, strictly speaking. And yet it is an attempt to challenge the monopoly of the camera, and the privilege of those who are the usual objects of its gaze. Here, very clearly, on the outer margins of politics and media practice, we are dealing with the ‘weapons of the weak’. Their

significance lies precisely in registering (in reverse, as it were) the vast differentiated structure of power by which they are disadvantaged. There is a shadow zone, outside the formal space even of alternative media production, as generally understood, where media power is contested in various ways, maybe unsuccessfully – and we need to study this, whatever the methodological difficulties.

Mapping the Landscape of Symbolic Exclusion

I want now to reflect in more detail on the wider method implicit in my attempt to research aspects of mediated power in *The Place of Media Power* (Couldry, 2000), from which I so far have only extracted piecemeal. Although my starting-point was an interest in audience research, that is, a commitment to the empirical study of how actual people put media texts to use in their lives, this quickly shifted into an interest in how unevenly across space the process of mediation falls. I became more interested in the social and spatial process of mediation in its own right, than in the finished product of texts, or people's interpretations of texts. The process of mediation, particularly in its interrelations with spatial order, seemed almost entirely unresearched (although for one pioneering study, see Cresswell, 1996).

I had the hunch that, while mediation has very broad impacts on a territory such as Britain, those impacts are never simple or even, and it was worth studying the moments – or rather sites – where the process of mediation is opened up to view: fissures, if you like, where, as in Victor Turner's (1974) model of liminal behaviour, wider structural patterns are revealed. I decided therefore to research not conventional

sites of media reception or production, important though these are, but instead more exceptional sites where non-media people came up face-to-face with the media process. Hence my choice of two very different situations for field research in 1996: first, leisure sites where people get close up to the process of media production, such as Granada Studios Tour in Manchester, which contains the set of Britain's longest-running prime-time soap opera, *Coronation Street*; and, second, protest sites where people without media experience became involved in a mediated event and therefore saw the media process close up. For the latter case, which is more relevant to the themes of this essay, I focussed on people's reflections about a protest the year before my fieldwork against the export of live animals through the small East coast English port of Brightlingsea. (Since the detailed political context of that protests was not my main concern, but rather their status as an access-point to the media process, I will not detail it further here: but see Couldry, 2000: 123-124.)

This research approach was, on the face of it, unusual because instead of researching differences and similarities between two or more broadly similar types of situation, I was researching two situations (media tourist sites, visited for leisure and entertainment, and mediated protest sites, where the encounter with media was a byproduct of protesting and not, as such, chosen) that from many perspectives had little in common. What they shared was a structural relation to a wider model that I was still trying to articulate: a model of the uneven ways in which the process of mediation maps onto spatial processes.

When I started my research, my main instinct was for the complexity of the way media map onto space, rather than issues of power or exclusion or such. I was

concerned to avoid the very crude assumptions in, for example, postmodern theories of the media's annihilation of space and place (for discussion, see Couldry, 2000, chapter 2). But, as I conducted the fieldwork, the question of power became increasingly prominent. My sense developed that, in spite of the radical differences between the two types of site – differences so great that any traditional ethnographer, for example, would have insisted they belonged to two quite different studies – common patterns of language, which suggested a common basis in a wider pattern of power, particularly media power.

There was a striking pattern, even or, especially, at the level of the banal language people used about both the leisure sites and the protest sites and their significance (see Couldry, 2000: 104-5, 143-4, 197 for further explanation; and cf Billig, 1995). I decided that it was this patterning, and its pervasiveness, that provided the most useful perspective for interpreting the interviews and observations I had conducted. This wider pattern did not contradict or undermine the self-reflexivity of those I interviewed, but often could be seen working itself out through their reflections on situations and actions. Indeed such patterns of thinking – their characteristic categories, such as the underlying hierarchy between 'media world' and 'ordinary world' (Couldry, 2000: chapter 3) – emerged most strongly in the passages where they were put under pressure by the interviewees, through being argued with or renegotiated. Rarely, however, were those patterns entirely deconstructed, or absent; and this, I realised, was the wider point towards which my scattered 'quasi-ethnography' was leading. These patterns of thought, language and action – and particularly the banal hierarchy of 'media' over 'ordinary' 'worlds' implied in them – were one means through which the massive concentration of symbolic power in media

institutions (in the 'media world') was naturalised and thereby came to seem legitimate.

Even so, such patterns are never entirely fixed: indeed their continuation across space is only the result of continuous reproduction, which can always be uneven. Hence my interest also in moments when such patterns are disturbed, and people's framework for thinking about their relationship to the media world is potentially de-naturalised (Couldry, 2000: ch 7). So the actual landscape to be researched is always in fact uneven, even if the general tendency to reproduce banal patterns of thought may disguise this. This is precisely the power of 'habitus': that, even its temporary breaches may be forgotten, because there is no framework within which they can be collected together so as to make any wider sense. Hence, as already suggested, the importance of research being sensitive to these unevennesses. This requires a complex form of complicity by researchers, that is sensitive both to general patterns of reproduction and local unevennesses, which sometimes have wider de-stabilising effects.

To study that patterning, which I supposed was distributed widely across UK media culture (but of course to establish that fully would require many studies), meant emphatically not staying in one place to study it exhaustively. Elsewhere I have developed the connections of this approach with George Marcus' writings on multi-sited ethnography (Couldry, forthcoming). Certainly, the dispersed nature of this research, in one respect, fits very well into the new paradigm of multisited ethnography that Marcus has been developing in recent writings (1998, 1999). Here,

however, I want to emphasise an other side of my research method: its insistence on a particular relation of local observation to theory.

In effect, I had conducted a contextualised, multisited study of people's talk about visits to two main sites (not themselves connected), that revealed patterns of thinking that were more than just multisited: they were the type of pervasive and banal categories (Billig, 1995) through which wider ideological structures get (more or less) produced, in this case the ideology of media power. To grasp such patterns, and their influence, I needed paradoxically, to study them in action, as they were put to work in particular cases: multiple cases grasped as rhetorical contexts – contexts of argument and negotiation – which did not require to be understood in their total life-context. Only through work across a number of lived contexts (without necessarily immersing myself in any of them) can we grasp the patterning of language, thought, and action, through which media power is reproduced and legitimated. The 'place of media power' is latent everywhere, even if our naturalised beliefs about the media emerge most clearly at those places (for example, sites where non-media people come face to face with media production) where they are, or are seen to be, called into question.

Involved here certainly was a shift away from traditional ethnographic assumptions, about the authenticity of place – the ethnographer's ability to say 'you are there, because I was there' (Clifford, 1988). Such an authenticating device could not be unproblematically available in dispersed research of this sort (which is not to say that the details of local contexts for my interviews were ignored). But the issue for me was not only that media and cultural processes are dispersed across space, creating a vast web of interconnections – true though that is and a stimulus to much recent

ethnographic experiment – but the quite separate issue of how symbolic exclusion maps onto space. Multi-sited ethnography is important when processes of mediation (media flows) overlay space in every direction, although not necessarily evenly. But there is a separate spatial problematic that arises from the uneven distribution across space of people’s abilities to contribute to those media flows, and the differences therefore in how they are affected by the opportunity, if it arises, to be mediated.

This latter unevenness is real and based in material inequalities in the spatial distribution of media resources (see Couldry, 2000: 52-55 on ‘spacing’), but it does not simply translate into the spatial distribution of media images. Symbolic exclusion is a question not so much of what meanings have reached where (to return to Hannerz’s formulation of uneven cultural flow discussed earlier), but of what it means to be located here, and not there: close to an input node for the network of media distribution, or far from one; living in the media’s light or languishing in its shadows.

If ‘experience’ is a problematic category (as Joan Scott (1992) famously argued), then the differences in people’s experience and sense of themselves that result from their differential access to the means of representing themselves are even more problematic to analyse, that is, to represent. For this is a form of powerlessness that is certainly profound. As Nina Eliasoph has eloquently put it, ‘not only are dominated people powerless, they lack the power to name their own powerlessness; the lack is itself a kind of powerlessness’ (Eliasoph, 1998: 235). Yet it is a social fact that is liable to disappear, like a shadow, precisely when the light is turned onto it. What matters for research, then, are the traces of that powerlessness left in speech and action.

To grasp these, we need to bring quite a complex theory (of how media power is legitimated, embodied and naturalised in people's beliefs) to bear on talk and action across space, and particularly the relationship between broad patterns of reproduction and local unevennesses. This is not to privilege 'micro' or macro' dimensions of analysis, but rather (cf Knorr-Cetina, 1981) to study the working out of large social forms in the details of local practice. This means (following most recent social research) rejecting any simple naturalism that assumes the local is automatically authentic and meaningful, but more than that insisting there is wider structural meaning in people's actions and failures to act, in their speech and the gaps within their speech. Axel Honneth (1995) has written of 'the fragmented world of the social', meaning a fragmentation at the level of the distribution not only of material resources, but also symbolic resources. Those journeys have a particular complexity, passing as they do in and out of the light and shadow, or as I put it elsewhere 'crossing a landscape of speech and silence' (Couldry, 2001). There is no route to understanding those journeys across a fragmented world, except via a theory of how the uneven distribution of symbolic power distorts social space. Instinct and empathy will not help us, unless they are already informed by such a theory of the large-scale material forces that make symbolic marginalisation an everyday fact of life.

Conclusion

To challenge media power and symbolic exclusion is not irrelevant dreaming; it is part of reflecting on who we are and who we can be. Paulo Freire wrote (1972: 61) that 'to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming.

Human beings are not built in silence, but in work, and work, in action-reflection'. Where society's resources to reflect upon and name its realities are unequally distributed, that inequality is an ethical and political issue to be contested, and those contests must be researched. I agree with the late Pierre Bourdieu's insistence that as researchers we should 'work towards universalising the conditions of access to the universal' (Bourdieu, 1998). The study of symbolic exclusion should no longer remain in the shadows.

However, as I have tried to explore here, symbolic exclusion, because of the very unevenness of the social surfaces it produces, is difficult to research. It is everywhere and, because it is so consistently naturalised, nowhere. The complexity of cultural space has important implications for the relationship between research and theorisation.

Even so, it might seem that this new dispersed method of research sidesteps some important questions of politics. Perhaps, to return to the words on multi-sited ethnography of George Marcus, that most subtle of methodological thinkers, 'the circumstantial commitments that arise in the mobility of multi-sited fieldwork provide a kind of psychological substitute for the reassuring sense of "being there" of participation in traditional single-site fieldwork' (Marcus, 1998: 99). But too mobile an analysis of mediated space risks running free of the ethical questions which the ethnographic encounter, for example, so powerfully brought into focus. It is important to emphasise therefore that what I am not arguing for is a footloose analysis that follows media images wherever it chooses. Our sense of complexity, and why studying complexity matters, must be more grounded than that.

It should be grounded in an awareness that it matters to study power, and its disguises. Media have the vast power that they do, because we all, systematically even if usually unobtrusively, work to produce their authority as natural. Being present as analysts at one place (whether it is the home or the studio) will not be sufficient to unlock the workings of media power. To believe otherwise would ironically be to reproduce the mystification upon which media power itself relies:³ that there is one place, the place ‘in’ the media, where society’s important things happen, the myth that it matters to ‘be there’. To understand fully the dispersed symbolic order that underlies the media’s myths, we must avoid the old ethnographic myth that we can only do so by ‘being there’ ourselves.

Hence, the importance for which I have argued in this paper, of being ‘elsewhere’ as researchers, in a double sense: first, by linking observation and theory to undermine any simple sense of local authenticity from our presence at any particular site of research; second, by acknowledging that the voices of both researchers and the researched are displaced to some degree, distorted in their resonances by the uneven space of symbolic power. As we struggle to make our voices heard, as researchers, we are ‘complicit’ (in the sense Marcus has foregrounded, of sharing a concern and an uncertainty) with those we speak about. For the uneven distribution of symbolic power – and its close relation, the fact of media power – is not just one object of study, but part and parcel of the very process of research, as Pierre Bourdieu’s methodological reflections (1996) have emphasised. The site of research practice is always, in that sense, be problematic.

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¹ For a more detailed excavation of why media power gets taken-for-granted, see Couldry (2000: chapters 1-3).

² Cf also Paul Rabinow (1996: 17) on the ‘tacit sharing of curiosity’ between researcher and researched.

³ Like Marcus, I am interested in a ‘grounded study of the mystifications’ of culture. In my case it is ‘media culture’ and in Marcus’s case, it is ‘capitalist culture’: see Marcus (1998: 159 n2).