

## ***Culture Unbound Vol. 1 Editorial***

By Johan Fornäs, Martin Fredriksson & Jenny Johannisson

Why *Culture Unbound*? Why culture, why cultural research, why a new academic journal, electronically published with open access? There are many viable answers, but the term “unbound” serves as a key to opening up the response to all these questions. Let us, in this very first editorial, say something about the unboundedness we are assuming or striving for in relation to culture, cultural research and *Culture Unbound* itself.

Cultural research and cultural studies are fields of knowledge crisscrossed with lines of division and even hostilities. Just like in other social arenas (including politics or religion), there are plenty of clashes between civilisations, gaps and divides that separate camps from each other and give rise to voids and taboos of various kinds. *Culture Unbound* wants to contribute a nodal point of connection, partly inspired by a Swedish tradition of negotiation and mediation which will be commented on further below. We do not seek unity but lively argument, believing in the value of decent interfaces where positions can interact in constructive ways.

In the field of cultural theory, some individual thinkers similarly seek interaction with highly diverse directions of thought, and cherish differences as a unique source of development and insight, preferring cosmopolitan or hybridising theoretical “bricolage” to ascetic purism. Others tend to develop a strongly particular coherent universe of ideas, in contrast and often quite starkly opposed to the rest. The former strive to think *with* others, the latter to think *against* others. Scholars of the latter type are more than welcome to publish with us, but the journal stands closer to the former in its own practices. Both ways of thinking are needed to renew and sharpen cultural research. There is an obvious value in strong, critical positions that clear the air and test where radical counter-positions might lead. But there is also a need for arenas where communicative, as well as polarising, thoughts can interact in unpredictable ways. *Culture Unbound* strives to serve as such a forum, and will thus not take a stand for or against any particular branch of cultural research, but always value heterology and polyphony.

Tony Bennett (1998: 535) has described cultural studies as a transdisciplinary crossroads with simultaneously critical, reflexive and bridging functions, “acting as an interdisciplinary clearing-house within the humanities, providing a useful interface at which the concerns of different disciplines, and of other interdisciplinary knowledges, can enter into fruitful forms of dialogue”. These “other interdisciplinary knowledges” include feminist and postcolonial studies, science and technology studies, as well as critical theory and cultural sociology. They are in-

creasingly put to work not only in the humanities, but also in the social sciences, thus contributing to bridging the gap between human and societal perspectives on cultural practices. While cultural studies, according to a dominant genealogy, once was born in Birmingham as a particular British school of thought, it has since then developed into a transnational and transdisciplinary interface. Still, it retains certain limitations and is surrounded by strong hostilities in many regions, which is one reason why *Culture Unbound* has opted to be a “journal of current cultural research” rather than just “cultural studies”. This choice of name indicates an explicit ambition to connect to a research field that is broader than cultural studies alone, including all branches of interdisciplinary cultural analysis, critical theory, psychoanalysis, science and technology studies (STS), cultural sociology, ethnography, etc.

Étienne Balibar (2004: 235) has argued for “the idea of the ‘vanishing mediator’” with “Europe as the *interpreter of the world*, translating languages and cultures in all directions”, in “an attempt to restore the political function of intellectuals” where they “would be border lines themselves”. *Culture Unbound* will make use of this conjuncture of relaxed boundaries and, from a position of mediation, exploit the productive potential of the dialogical combination of a series of challenging crosscurrents in cultural research. This is a Swedish (or Nordic), but also a European and global interest. While it corresponds well to the Nordic countries’ long-standing tradition of mediating and negotiating between different political and cultural fractions on a global arena, *Culture Unbound* can also, in a sense, sympathise with the EU’s motto “united in diversity” – although certainly without subscribing to all the other parts of the current European project. Ultimately, however, *Culture Unbound* is a transnational and inclusive forum that seeks to bring together different strands of cultural research from different parts of the world. This new journal creates a new communicative platform for glocal cultural research, open to scholars everywhere but with a special mission to also open channels for voices from the Swedish and Nordic regions. This should meet broad interest, since these local voices contribute unique perspectives to the major issues in the field today.

The launching of *Culture Unbound* is possible thanks to the joint efforts of three units at Linköping University in Sweden. This university is famous for organising interdisciplinary thematic programmes for research and PhD education. One such ‘theme’ unit is the Department of Culture Studies (Tema Q), covering a wide area of studies on cultural issues. A second partner is the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS), a national hub for international and transdisciplinary exchange in this field. The third partner is the Swedish Cultural Policy Research Observatory (SweCult), which links cultural researchers to practitioners and politicians in the cultural sector. Two of the initial journal editors, Editor-in-Chief Johan Fornäs and Executive Editor Martin Fredriksson, are employed

at the two former units, while the third editor, Associate Editor Jenny Johannisson, is Vice Chair of the Board of SweCult and works at the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at University College of Borås, which publishes *The Nordic Journal of Cultural Policy (Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidskrift)*. The intention is to let new editors take over at intervals, to give scope for other voices. The current trio has agreed to serve as editors initially for three years. Future editors may either be located at the same Swedish academic units, or in some other appropriate environment, in Sweden or elsewhere. Linköping University Electronic Press offers professional support and a channel for publishing the journal with open access.

If *Culture Unbound* is a forum where different disciplines and forms of cultural research can intersect, it also aims to view this area of research in a broader academic context. While the journal focuses on internal boundaries within the vast field of cultural research, it also takes an interest in the perimeters of the field as a whole. Neither culture nor cultural research have ever been a static sphere with clear-cut boundaries to the world of politics, economics or everyday life. Today, this is even more evident, as an ongoing process of culturalisation continuously expands the concept of culture and integrates it with more or less every other social sphere. In the wake of the cultural turn, the cultural perspective has been gaining new ground within the social and political sciences, and during the 1990s this also spilled over into the economic sphere. Since then, culture has been acknowledged, and exploited, both as a commercial resource in the new economy and as an analytical tool at business schools all over the world. Yes, it has even interfered with the natural sciences and technological knowledge-production.

In roughly the last half century, the object of cultural research has expanded rapidly, and some may regard this as an attempt from the humanities to colonise the rest of academia. Even though a quick look at the distribution of funding between the humanities and the natural sciences should put such suspicions to rest, it could still be relevant to question how this process of culturalisation affects other academic disciplines.<sup>1</sup> And how does it affect the humanities? In a time when the field of cultural research is expanding and its boundaries are constantly negotiated, the great challenge may be not to transgress these borders, but to identify them. If culture is everywhere, what are the limits of cultural research? Can cultural research become as unlimited as its object of research, and would that be a sign of freedom or a symptom of lost identity?

These questions are fundamental to the future of the humanities and social sciences, and neither a single editorial nor a legion of academic articles will settle them for good. Still, we will make *Culture Unbound* a forum for discussions that transgress what we consider to be counterproductive boundaries. Hence, *Culture Unbound* will strive to move beyond both a narrow understanding of culture, and the norms guiding individual academic disciplines. Culture can never be completely unbound, but current cultural research may identify and explore the new

boundaries and frontiers of cultural practices and cultural research that the process of culturalisation has brought with it.

As an initial attempt in this direction, the first thematic section of the first volume of *Culture Unbound* is devoted to the usefulness of cultural research against the backdrop of culturalisation. However, similar reflections on the role and shape of current cultural research will now and then reappear in various forms, both in future theme sections and in individual articles. We plan to issue a series of thematic sections to be published over the next years, so that each annual volume will present three of four such themes, together with reviews of publications relating to similar topics. In due time, the succession of themes will, in practice, indicate the potential and scope of the journal, and demonstrate more clearly than any introductory editorial what this journal is about.

In 2009, the first theme on the usefulness of cultural research will be followed by a further two thematic sections: a section on urbanity and representation, entitled *Signs of the City, City of Signs* and edited by Geoff Stahl, is up for publication in early fall, and a section on *Surveillance and Governmentality*, edited by Toby Miller, will be published by the end of the year. Over the next couple of years, we aim to deal with questions such as academic and artistic knowledge production; culture~nature; intellectual property; rural media spaces; fields of cultural production, and uses of the past. But there will always be room for individual articles in any conceivable direction, so that *Culture Unbound* is able to both make focused interventions in cultural studies and represent the border-crossing multiplicity of approaches in the wider field of cultural research.

In short, we have provided the following arguments for launching this journal:

Firstly, *culture* is, in some ways, less limited by strict boundaries. In several of the multiplying definitions of the term, culture and cultural aspects or phenomena move across the boundaries of inherited divisions, necessitating increased and focused attention that does not limit itself to any given disciplinary or geographic domain. *Culture Unbound* will trace these changes as they affect new developments of cultural research.

Secondly, *cultural research* is currently in an interesting flux, with growing interest in, and need, for boundary-crossing innovations, where the field of cultural studies is becoming transnationally glocalised and is mutually interacting with other, sometimes regional, branches of interdisciplinary cultural research. *Culture Unbound* will act as an interface and arena for such interchanges.

Thirdly, the journal *Culture Unbound* will formally strive to provide an unbound, free and open space for intellectual exchange. Not bound to any printed format and not limited by subscription fees, it is an open-access resource available to anyone with a networked computer and a wish to take part in recent developments in the understanding of the many facets of culture and culturalisation.

**Johan Fornäs** is Editor-in-Chief of *Culture Unbound*, Professor at the Department of Culture Studies (Tema Q) and Director of the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (AC SIS), Linköping University. With a background in musicology and media studies, he was 2004-08 Vice Chair of the international Association for Cultural Studies (ACS).

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## Notes

- 1 This journal's title, "Culture Unbound", derives from Fornäs et al. (2007), discussing the processes and discourses of culturalisation. It was in turn inspired by O'Dell (1997).

## References

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