

Book Review

**“Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory”, Charles Stewart (ed.),
Walnut Creek , CA: Left Coast , 2007, 268 pp., ISBN 978-1-59874-278-7**

There are some words in the social science discourse which, through different trajectories, have left their original contexts of use and their peculiar stories to become paradigmatic of more general phenomena or to be put at the centre of more comprehensive theories. Creolization is surely one of these. Its genealogy is complex and its semantic field varies greatly according to different historical, geographical, and cultural contexts. Its transit from a disciplinary field, i.e. that of linguistics, to social and cultural theory of the contemporary world – since the end of the nineteen-seventies and mostly due to the well-known work of the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz – has paralleled the trajectories of other terms, as hybridization, as metaphors good to think with about the complex cultural global dynamics. The concept of creolization, as an analytical tool, conveys indeed a particular theoretical fascination, able as it seems both to grasp those subtle processes of production of a third space in the field of cultural encounter, and to explain for the creation of new cultural constellations. But beside its apparently heuristic power, which are its origins and its ideological underpinnings, its historical routes – linked to particular geographical regions – and its actual political uses?

The book edited by Charles Stewart, which is the outcome of a workshop organised at UCL in 2002, is a truly useful journey through these issues. The twelve chapters offer a variety of perspectives on the concept of creolization, approaching it through different disciplinary and theoretical points of view. Even if reading the chapters in succession gives sometimes the impression of a lack of dialogue among the different contributions, the attention is kept high by the interest of the various analysis and by the recurrence of some references and deepest connections, providing the reader with a general framework within which to better understand the contemporary debate on the theme and the theoretical pitfalls it entails.

For instances if, with Stephan Palmié words, the aim of the volume is “to probe the analytical (rather than merely descriptive) usefulness of concepts built from terms such as *criollo* or *‘creole’*” (Chapter 4, p.67), the distinction made by Aisha Khan (Chapter 12), and borrowed by Clifford Geertz, between descriptive “models of” and interpretative “models for”, recurs implicitly or explicitly in many contributions and becomes salient as a sort of background above which to read the various positions of the authors in this theoretical attempt.

Thus, while Joshua Hotaka Roth (Chapter 10) seems to apply in a rather unproblematic way creolization as a conceptual tool to read the social and cultural dynamics concerning the return to their original country of Japanese Brazilians, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (Chapter 2) and Joyce E. Chaplin (Chapter 3) investigate in the two much different contexts of Spanish America and British North America the processes of formation of the collective identities under which colonial elites built independence struggles. The first analyses how Spanish creoles, caught between loyalty to Spanish Crown and the construction of an autonomous positioning within New World polities,

drew on race categories and what the author defines a patriotic epistemology in order to differentiate themselves from foreigners and from Amerindians and mestizo commoners, at the same time mobilising religious inclusive discourses in order to develop the new local allegiances which finally brought to the construction of independent and creolized Spanish American Kingdoms. Chaplin takes her moves from the apparent paradox of the rejection of a creole identity on the side of those people who Benedict Anderson defined as the first “creole nationalists”, that is British colonists in North America, and their embracing instead an American identity. The author interestingly investigates this denial by analysing it within the conceptions of person which constituted the discourse on ‘creoleness’, finally claiming the analytical usefulness of the framework of creolization to grasp these historical processes.

Miguel Vale de Almeida (Chapter 6), in a similar perspective, analyses creolization discourses within the context of 20th Century Portugal. He shows how elite anthropological, colonial and emancipatory discourses were intertwined in producing knowledge around concepts as miscegenation or Luso-Tropicalism – the latter developed by Brazilian Gilberto Freyre and then appropriated by Portuguese colonial ideologies – in order to explain how in Cape Verde “creoleness has come to be the definer of national cultural specificity, not part of a positively valued project of hybridisation” (p. 129).

Philip Baker and Peter Mühlhäsler (Chapter 5) presents a useful survey of the history of the study of creole languages. Centred on the figure of the German linguist Hugo Schuchardt, their contribution helps clarifying the etymology of the word ‘creole’ and its trajectories through linguistic and anthropological theory, pointing at the often misleading use of creolization, by the latter, for indicating what linguists would call ‘borrowing’.

Stephan Palmié (Chapters 4 and 9), Thomas Hylland Eriksen (Chapter 8), and Aisha Khan (Chapter 12) engage directly with the problems related to using creolization as an analytical concept outside its historical and geographical contexts of origin and salience. While the first criticises the extrapolation of the term from its specific time and place boundaries, and its often unproblematic use in anthropological theory, warning about the complexity and contradictions of the concept, the others two authors suggest that more restricted uses might be both necessary and analytically useful.

Eriksen points out the need of distinguishing between different forms of cultural mixing in order to disentangle the concept of creolization from the skein of other akin terms. In order to do so, he investigate both the emic uses of creolization found in Mauritius, and the linguistic original field from which the analogy of creolization has been adapted by anthropology, proposing a definition of the concept which, rather than aiming at being exhaustive, should direct the attention toward processes of particular analytic interest.

Khan, on the other hand, elaborates on the double distinction between creolization as a process or as a concept, and creolization as a “model of” or as a “model for”. Warning against the risks in conflating the two terms of each opposition, whose kind of relation should instead be that of an ongoing dialogue, Khan insists on the limits of using the concept outside of its own “narrative box”, underlining the importance of addressing the problem of power whereas it is adopted in more general theory.