

OBITUARY

CAROL A. BRECKENRIDGE

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The historian and cultural critic Carol Breckenridge (b.1942) passed away on the 4th of October, 2009 in New York. She and her husband, Arjun Appadurai, founded the field-defining academic journal *Public Culture* in 1988. In her death we lost someone deeply special, for she was rare in her desire and striving to relate academic research to issues of public life, whether in the United States (her native country) or in India (her second home) or anywhere else. The very title of the journal was expressive of this concern. One may or may not find antecedent uses of the expression “public culture” before Breckenridge and Appadurai used it, but it would not be wrong to say that it was only after they gave it the novel and political sense it carries today and launched their journal by that name, that “public culture” acquired a conceptual status in the social sciences.

Breckenridge started out as a scholar of colonial South India, inspired, as she would often tell me later, by the scholarship of her intellectual mentor, the late Burton Stein, a doyen of modern south Indian studies. She pursued her doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. She and Appadurai



Carol Breckenridge
Photo: Arjun Appadurai

both completed their dissertations in 1976, working on closely related themes of worship, conflict and endowment in two important temples of South India – Breckenridge on the Sri Minakshi Sundar-eswarar temple in Madurai, and Appadurai on Sri Parthasarathi Swamy temple at Triplicane, Chennai. Stein pioneered such research in his own dissertation completed in the late 1950s. A special issue of the *Indian Economic and Social History Review* brought together the results of their and some other scholars’ research in 1977.

Beginning thus in South Asian studies, Breckenridge and Appadurai opened up their scholarly vistas in the eighties to actively embrace new intellectual winds blowing through American universities as the global process of decolonization came to a climactic end with the dramatic defeat of the United States in Vietnam in 1975. One of the most critical academic events influencing their choices would have been the publication of Edward Said’s insurgent text *Orientalism* in 1978. The History of Con-

sciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, heralding the coming of postcolonial studies in the US got going in the same year – and it does not seem accidental that the first issue of *Public Culture* should carry sentiments of solidarity for the journal *Inscriptions*, a periodical brought out by “His Con” students and academics from Santa Cruz. *Inscriptions* started what came to be known – and sometimes vilified – as “colonial discourse analysis.” The third important event would have been the publication of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* in 1982, a text that inaugurated a post-nationalist era of criticism. But the two most important categories inflecting Breckenridge and Appadurai’s projects in the 1980s were globalization and cosmopolitanism, concepts they helped to both define and popularize by what they were to do in that decade and after.

However, the idea of “public culture” as developed by Breckenridge and Appadurai maintained its own distinctive trajectory in the discourse on globalization that has developed since. The emphasis, from early on, was on global cultural flows, underwritten by an assertive feeling that the older categories like “folk,” “popular,” or “mass” did not quite capture the way cultural artifacts and icons – and their bearers, peoples – were now in circulation through the globe, pulled and pushed by the ever-changing forces of the marketplace and coming into constant proximity and contact with that which was once considered “strange” and “unfamiliar.” The resultant cultural formations, while never homogeneous, were so mediated, commodified, and global as to break down any local/global distinction. They called for some radically new paths of thinking. Breckenridge and Appadurai developed this idea first with regard to

India in a booklet published in 1987 (Bombay: A. H. Advani) entitled *Public Culture*. The idea became a radical call in the manifesto-like introduction they jointly wrote for the first issue of the journal in 1988.

It is instructive to go back and read that introduction, for it makes clear how all of Breckenridge's projects in later life would be shaped by this vision. For more than a decade she remained the guiding spirit behind the journal, seeking out new and young authors and projects in different parts of the world. At the same time, she also retained a deep professional and emotional interest in India and tried to bring Indian material into a larger, global conversation around issues that concerned her. As an educationist, she initiated the on-site India quarter of the South Asian Civilizations course for undergraduate students at the University of Chicago. As an intellectual, she engaged postcolonial theories in the book she edited with Peter van der Veer in 1993, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); returned to the question of consumption in *Consuming Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) that she edited in 1995; and continued to address cosmopolitanism in the book of that name that she co-edited with Homi Bhabha, Sheldon Pollock, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002). In all of these books and in her other writings, South Asian studies retain a strong presence while the analytical impulse is global. The volume on cosmopolitanism came as the last of the "millennium quartet" she planned as special issues (edited by Arjun Appadurai, Dilip Gaonkar, and John and Jean Comaroff) of the Journal to mark the passing on the last millennium.

I first met Carol at a conference in Brighton, Eng-

land, around 1989. But I really got to know her as a person from 1994 when I visited the University of Chicago where she was then teaching in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. I had the privilege and honor of becoming her colleague in 1995 when I became a member of the same department where Appadurai and Pollock also taught. Bhaba was our close friend and colleague in the English department. By the time I came into her life, she had already begun treatment for cancer. All I saw in Carol in these years was courage in the face of a trying illness and the indomitable and generous spirit with which she edited the journal and associated projects. I never saw her miss a class because of her illness. Never did she complain either about the pain or discomfort of her condition. Instead, she was always ready to discuss the disease in an academic and inquisitive spirit, as if her body had opened up a new text to be read and shared. Most remarkable was her capacity to weave friends into projects that also gave meanings to their collective lives. The person in her easily elicited warm affection from others – she was always ready for a joke, always ready to listen to a new idea, to argue about it, and to accept friends for what they were. Arjun and Carol moved to the east coast around 2000 and Carol soon began to teach at the New School. They founded Pukar, an organization for urban knowledge, research, and action in Mumbai in 2001 and would spend part of every year in that city. I would see her less frequently in these years. But the search for new projects that could combine the active and the contemplative went on throughout her life, down, I am sure, to the very last day.

Carol's battle with the disease intensified in the recent past but it never took away her spirit. The last

time I saw her was in November 2008 in Lisbon. We took a walk together in the gardens of the mansion that houses the Gulbenkian Foundation. Carol needed the help of a stick in walking. But she showed me around the garden and talked about life – hers, theirs, and mine. She was all about life. All about the art of living in this confused, globalized world and making sense of it all the same. For me, she was indeed the spirit of our shared and troubled times.