

Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?

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In his recent book, *Cultural Populism*, Jim McGuigan (1992, p. 244) identifies "a discernable narrowing of vision in cultural studies, exemplified by a drift into an uncritical populist mode of interpretation." He locates the source of this drift in bracketing off economic determinations, "because of some earlier traumatic encounter with the long redundant base-superstructure model of 'orthodox' Marxism, a trauma represented symptomatically by a debilitating avoidance syndrome" (p. 245).

We can find examples of what McGuigan means in two recent statements by leading cultural studies scholars. Stuart Hall put it like this:

British cultural studies . . . begins, and develops through the critique of a certain reductionism and economism, which I think is not extrinsic but intrinsic to Marxism; a contestation with the model of base and superstructure, through which sophisticated and vulgar marxism alike had tried to think the relationship between society, economy, and culture. It was located and sited in a necessary and prolonged and as yet unending contestation with the question of false consciousness (Hall, 1992, p. 279).

These sentiments are echoed by Angela McRobbie (1992, pp. 720, 719) in the same collection:

Cultural studies emerged as a form of radical inquiry which went against reductionism and economism, which went against the base and superstructure metaphor, and which re-

sisted the notion of false consciousness. . . . The return to a pre-postmodern Marxism as marked out by critics like Frederic Jameson and David Harvey is untenable because the terms of that return are predicated on prioritizing economic relations and economic determinations over cultural and political relations by positioning these latter in a mechanical and reflectionist role.

This article explores the implications of this founding antagonism between Marxist political economy and cultural studies. I will argue that the antagonism is based on a profound misunderstanding of political economy and that the project of cultural studies can only be successfully pursued if the bridge with political economy is rebuilt. I say "rebuilt" because cultural studies as an enterprise came out of a set of assumptions about political economy. It continues to carry that paradigm within itself as its grounding assumption and its source of legitimation as a "radical" enterprise, even if this paradigm is often suppressed or disguised behind a rhetorical smoke screen in order to avoid the dread accusation of economism or reductionism.

What do I mean? The founding thrust of cultural studies in the work of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart— itself drawing on the legacy of Leavis— was, first of all, the revalidation of British working class or popular culture against the elite, dominant culture. It was situated within the context of a class structure formed by industrial capitalism and an increasingly commercialized system of cultural production, distribution, and consumption. But this was not just a revalidation of popular culture for its

own sake. It was an oppositional, broadly socialist political movement which saw the cultural struggle as part of a wider political struggle to change capitalist social relations in favor of this working class. The revalidation of working class culture was a move to rescue this culture and those who practiced it from what E. P. Thompson called "the immense condescension of posterity" and to provide this class with the self-confidence and energy to assert its own values—"the moral economy of the working class"—against those of the dominant class. Thus cultural studies took for granted a particular structure of domination and subordination and saw its task as the ideological one of legitimation and mobilization. It clearly viewed itself as part of a wider political struggle, even if many of its practitioners saw education as a key site for their contribution to that struggle. It knew both the enemy and its friends.

I want to argue that cultural studies as a meaningful political enterprise is unsustainable outside this founding problematic. One can clearly see in contemporary writing from both British and US cultural studies that most of the current practitioners still assume, indeed assert, that cultural studies is a broadly oppositional political enterprise. It is to this that Stuart Hall (1992, p. 278) refers when he talks about cultural studies' worldly vocation: "I don't understand a practice which aims to make a difference in the world, which doesn't have some points of difference or distinction which it has to stake out, which really matter." It is to this idea that the cultural studies literature constantly refers in its mantric repetitions of struggle, empowerment, resistance, subordination, and domination.

TWO DEVELOPMENTS

In the history of cultural studies there have been two main developments. First, the question of ideology has been immensely complicated by developments

within the analysis of textuality. This analysis has brought into question the concepts of truth and falsity, of intentionality and interpretation. It has incessantly posed the difficult but unavoidable problem of the relationship between symbolic representations and social action. Secondly and crucially, the concepts of domination and subordination have widened from referring only to class to also include race and gender. The enemy is now not just capitalism but what Fiske (1992, p. 161) calls "white patriarchal capitalism." The question for my purposes is whether these developments invalidate the original links of cultural studies with political economy.

To answer this question, it is necessary to explain what I think political economy means. I want to rescue the concept from the false image that circulates largely unquestioned within cultural studies, to rescue it from the immense and damaging condescension of cultural studies.

The roots of political economy can be traced to the Scottish Enlightenment, to the writings of Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith. Witnessing the early impact of capitalist relations of production, they argued that societies could be distinguished on the basis of their "modes of subsistence." They insisted that without a functioning mode of subsistence a society and its members could not survive and that it was in this sense foundational, or the society's base. For them modes of subsistence had key structural characteristics—whether in terms of the dominance of pastoral, agricultural, or industrial modes of production or in terms of differing relations of production (feudal or capitalist or a combination of the two). Here the crucial difference in analytical traditions has been and remains over what each tradition holds as the source of historical change and the key defining characteristic of modes of production. On one side are those who stress technology and organizational forms of production, while on the other are those who emphasize collaborative social relations.

Three crucial aspects of political economy follow from the perspective that collaborative social forms are the key characteristic of production. First, such collaboration requires a set of institutional forms and cultural practices—legal and political forms, family structures, and so forth (what became known as the superstructure)—in order to function. Moreover, different modes of production will have different sets of superstructural forms and practices. Second, this necessary structure of social collaboration is the form through which individual social agents are shaped and relate to one another. Thus, identity formation and culture practices are not random. They are, in some sense, to be analyzed, determined. Thirdly, given the necessarily collaborative and supra-individual nature of the mode of production, the normative question of justice must be addressed. That is to say, how can inequitable distributions of the resources produced by the mode of production be either justified or changed. Thus, the question of the distribution of the surplus was central to political economy from the start. By what mechanisms was it distributed and how was it justified? This was as crucial to Adam Smith as to Marx. For Smith, rent and the unfair share of surplus being taken by landed capital was the problem. For Marx, the problem was profit and the exploitation of wage labor. Both attempted to develop a labor theory of value in order to explain the existing pattern of distribution and the ways in which it diverged from the ideal of social justice.

Classical sociology from Smith through Marx to Weber understood that the distribution of social resources was not natural but resulted from political struggle. Moreover, the positions that people took in such struggles were usually related to the sources of their income or the nature of their stake in the given mode of production. Thus, from the beginning, class was not simply an abstract analytical category. It was a model of the link via

ideology between relations of production and political action. The link between base and superstructure was material interest. The question for our purposes is whether this model is any longer valid and whether it is compatible with the project of cultural studies.

It seems clear that most cultural studies practitioners do in fact accept the existence of a capitalist mode of production. Although Fiske (1992, p. 157), for instance, wishes to sever any determining link between "the cultural economy" and "the financial economy," he nonetheless constantly refers to something called capitalism as the source of domination:

The social order constrains and oppresses the people, but at the same time offers them resources to fight against those constraints. The constraints are, in the first instance, material, economic ones which determine in an oppressive, disempowering way, the limits of the social experience of the poor. Oppression is always economic.

This sounds dangerously economicistic to me. Similarly Larry Grossberg (1992, p. 100), while arguing for radically distinct "economies of value"—money, meaning, ideology, and affect—with no necessary determining relationship, at the same time argues that the fact that "people cannot live without minimal access to some material conditions ensures only that economics (in a narrow sense) must always be addressed in the first instance." He talks elsewhere in the same book, in a very deterministic manner, of the "tendential forces" of capitalism, industrialism, and technology (p. 123).

The first problem in the relation between political economy and cultural studies, then, is the refusal of cultural studies to think through the implications of its own claim that the forms of subordination and their attendant cultural practices—to which cultural studies gives analytical priority—are grounded within a capitalist mode of production. One striking result has been the overwhelming focus on cultural consumption rather than cultural production and on the cul-

tural practices of leisure rather than those of work. This in turn has played politically into the hands of a Right whose ideological assault has been structured in large part around an effort to persuade people to construct themselves as consumers in opposition to producers. Of course, they are themselves at the same time producers, who must enter into an economic relation of production in order to consume. While not wishing to be economic, would cultural studies practitioners actually deny that the major political/ideological struggles of the last decade in advanced capitalist countries have been around, for better or worse, narrowly economic issues—taxation, welfare, employment, and unemployment? Would they deny that much so-called identity politics, and the cultural politics of lifestyle associated with it, has its roots in the restructuring of the labor market—the decline of white male manual labor, increased female participation, the failure to incorporate blacks into the wage labor force, the growth of service employment, and so on?

By focusing on consumption and reception and on the moment of interpretation, cultural studies has exaggerated the freedoms of consumption and daily life. Yes, people are not in any simple way manipulated by the dominant forces in society. Yes, people can and often do reinterpret and use for their own purposes the cultural material, the texts, that the system of cultural production and distribution offers them. Yes, it is important to recognize the affective investment people make in such practices and the pleasures they derive from them. But does anyone who has produced a text or a symbolic form believe that interpretation is entirely random or that pleasure cannot be used to manipulative ends? If the process of interpretation were entirely random, and if, therefore, we had to give up entirely the notion of intentionality in communication, the human species would have dropped the activity long ago.

Political economists recognize with Marx that all commodities must have a

use-value; they must satisfy some need or provide some pleasure. There is no simple relationship between the unequal power relations embedded in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural forms as commodities—the overwhelming focus of cultural studies analysis—on the one hand, and the use-value of that commodity to the consumer on the other. But there is some relationship. A delimited social group, pursuing economic or political ends, determines which meanings circulate and which do not, which stories are told and about what, which arguments are given prominence and what cultural resources are made available and to whom. The analysis of this process is vital to an understanding of the power relationships involved in culture and their relationship to wider structures of domination. As Grossberg (1992, p. 94) rightly argues,

Daily life is not the promised land of political redemption. . . . By separating structure and power it [the focus on daily life] creates the illusion that one can escape them. But such fantasies merely occlude the more pressing task of finding ways to distinguish between, evaluate and challenge specific structures and organizations of power.

Certainly the cultural industries are such specific structures and organizations of power. Where in the contemporary cultural studies literature or research program are examinations of the cultural producers and of the organizational sites and practices they inhabit and through which they exercise their power?

There are two issues at stake here. First, what explanatory force does such economic analysis have at the cultural level? And second, in what way do people come to understand and act upon their conditions of existence through cultural practices? Both of these issues are linked to the question of false consciousness.

While in the past, some from within political economy may have argued for a narrow reflectionist or determinist relationship between the mode of production and cultural practices, such a position is not necessarily entailed by the

general approach. Political economy certainly does argue that some institutional arrangements, involving specific cultural practices, necessarily accompany a capitalist mode of production. Two examples are laws of private property and the legal practices within which such laws are enacted. These legal practices in turn require forms of legitimated coercion and definitions of criminality to support them. The cultural link between ownership and identity, so central to many consumption and lifestyle studies, will be part of such a formation. On the other hand, it is clear that while some political institutions and practices will be necessary—and the mode of production may place limits on the range of their viable forms—the capitalist mode of production does not demand, require, or determine any one form of politics. Some capitalist apologists have made that argument in relation to representative democracy, but it is obvious from the historical record that capitalism has been and is compatible with a range of political forms.

Nor is political economy a functionalism. It does not claim that certain superstructures will be created because the mode of production requires them. Again, it is clear from the historical record that the capitalist mode of production can grow within a variety of inherited superstructural forms. All that is required is that they be compatible with the mode of production. Thus, in addition to political systems, a range of kinship systems, religious beliefs and practices, and aesthetic traditions may happily coexist with the capitalist mode of production. Political economy does argue that once a mode is established, the general interest of the human agents living within it in their own material survival and reproduction will tend to coordinate human actions so as to ensure their maintenance. For this reason, critics of the dominant ideology thesis—such as Abercrombie et al. (1980)—have argued that the “dull compulsion of economic relations,” not ideological hegemony, ex-

plains the relative stability of the capitalist structure of domination, in spite of manifest inequalities. Thus, there is a strong inertia in modes of production. This in turn will entail the modification of cultural practices to maintain the dominant structure. Where these stress-points between base and superstructure will come and what forms of cultural change they will entail are matters for historical analysis. The historical analysis of the development of time discipline is a good example of this. So too are current analyses by scholars such as Giddens and Harvey of the impact of global post-Fordism on people’s sense of space and time.

Political economy does not argue that attempts by human agents to maintain the system will be successful. The mode of production may well face insurmountable or unresolved tensions or contradictions between its various practices. For this reason, the regulation school argues that every regime of accumulation—the particular set of structural arrangements that at any time constitute the mode of production, involving the various possible relationships between labor and capital, and the associated patterns of distribution—will entail a corresponding mode of regulation. For instance, varying forms of welfare capitalism and social democracy developed to support the Fordist regime of accumulation. I should note in passing that the recent work of Stuart Hall contains the strange cohabitation of a post-Fordist regulation school analysis of the so-called New Times with a denial of economic determinism. He cannot, in my view, have it both ways.

This relative autonomy of cultural practices from the mode of production entails the fact that—from the perspective dear to cultural studies of resisting, challenging, or changing the structure of domination based upon that mode of production—many cultural practices will simply be irrelevant. One of the problems with much cultural studies writing is that in fact it assumes a very strong form of the base/superstructure relation-

ship, such that all the cultural practices of subordinate groups necessarily come into conflict with the structure of domination. As Fiske (1992, pp. 161, 163) puts it, "popular differences exceed the differences *required* by elaborated white patriarchal capitalism. . . . Without social difference there can be no social change. The control of social difference is therefore *always* a strategic objective of the power bloc" (emphasis added).

FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS AND INTELLECTUALS

This brings me to the question of the need—for purposes of the political project of cultural studies—for discriminating among cultural practices on the basis of their likely effectiveness, that is, their contribution to the general project of overthrowing domination. Such a project entails an analysis of the structure of domination to identify those practices that sustain domination and those that do not. This is what I take Grossberg (1992, p. 143) to mean when he writes: "Identifying the politics of any struggle ultimately requires a map, not only of the actors and agents, but of what I shall call the agencies of this struggle." This in turn brings us to the thorny problem of false consciousness and the role of intellectuals.

Cultural studies was founded on a turn from the analysis of dominant or elite cultural practices towards the analysis of popular cultural practices. There were two reasons for this turn. The first was to aid the working class struggle by giving the working class a sense of the importance of its own experience, values, and voices as against those of the dominant class. In short, it was seen as a contribution to a classic Gramscian hegemonic struggle. But it assumed that the values embedded or enacted in these cultural practices were progressive and sprung directly from the experience of subordination. This was a classic Marxist view. A revolutionary consciousness would be produced by the direct experience of

subordination. The problem was to mobilize it. This model was later used in the context of colonialism and race by Fanon and his followers and also within the feminist movement. It still runs powerfully through cultural studies, in particular through its increasing stress on the study of daily life. The project is then to give a voice to subordinate groups, a voice which stems from experience and therefore, is, by definition both authentic and progressive.

The second reason for the turn to popular culture derived from a different analytical tradition and from a different definition of the political problem. Here, while rejecting their elitism, cultural studies shared the preoccupations of the Frankfurt School as well as those of Gramsci. The problem was the demonstrable lack of revolutionary consciousness, and the purpose of cultural studies was to analyze the mechanisms by which people are mobilized or not behind those emancipatory projects that aid progressive and combat reactionary action. There is, of course, nothing original in this position. It merely recognizes Marx's own view that in the ideological forms of the superstructure people become conscious of economic conflicts and fight them out.

It does, however, have important consequences for the argument I am conducting here. First, once political and cultural values are divorced from the necessary authenticity of experience, some grounds for identifying positions as either progressive or reactionary must be found. In short, we have to discriminate among cultural practices. This in turn requires an analysis of the structure of domination, which may be distinct from the perception of that domination by the social agents subject to it. The concept of false consciousness makes people uncomfortable because it seems to imply a rejection of the cultural practices of others as inauthentic and the granting to intellectuals—or, more pertinently in the history of cultural studies, a vanguard party—a privileged access to

truth. However, once one accepts the idea that on the one hand, our relations to social reality are mediated via systems of symbolic representation and, on the other hand, that we live within structures of domination—the mechanisms and effects of which are not immediately available to experience—then a concept like false consciousness becomes necessary. Moreover, only such a concept gives intellectuals a valid role. First, organic intellectuals, in a necessary and legitimate division of labor, create the consciousness of a class out of the fragments of that class's experience. Second, intellectuals provide a political strategy by providing a map of the structure of domination and the terrain of struggle.

In fact, most practitioners of cultural studies tacitly accept this; otherwise their practice would be incomprehensible. But they have a debilitating guilty conscience about it. Of course, this is not to say that the consciousness of subordinate groups is necessarily false. That would be absurd. Whether a given consciousness is false or not is a matter for analysis and demonstration and, politically, it entails acceptance by a given subordinate group. For that moment of recognizing false consciousness is the basis for empowerment. At this moment, one lifts oneself out of one's immediate situation and the limits of one's own immediate experience and begins to grasp the idea of dominating structures. In this sense, the model of the intellectual as a social psychoanalyst is both powerful and useful. And it is indeed strange that a tradition of thought such as cultural studies, which has been and remains so deeply influenced by psychoanalytical modes of thought, should refuse to recognize false consciousness while recognizing repression in the psychoanalytical sense.

This is not to deny the tensions implicit in the position of intellectuals as a specific class fraction within the mode of production. But I am sure, if we are honest, that we can all recognize the existence of false consciousness and thus the fact that we do not always either

know or act in our own best interest. I am sure, in fact, we all recognize that there are those who know more about a subject than we do and whose advice about how to cope with a given problem we would accept. I am sure also that we are all aware of the ways in which the pressures of everyday existence—of earning a living, of maintaining relationships, of bringing up children—lead us to act in ways which we recognize, at least in retrospect, as irrational and, to put it mildly, socially and personally sub-optimal. The interesting question is why people, out of a misplaced sense of guilt or political correctness, choose to forget this when they put on their scholarly hats.

The refusal to recognize the possibility of false consciousness, the associated guilt about the status of intellectuals, and the fear of elitism have all contributed to undermining cultural studies' role within education. In its origins—and not just because its practitioners were located in academia—it saw education as a key site for its intervention. Educational policy and reform were a key focus of its activity.

Certainly, in the case of Williams, participation in the workers' education movement was formative and crucial. There were two aspects to this movement that cultural studies inherited. On the one hand, cultural studies wished to make education relevant to the experience of working people by recognizing their experiences, including their cultural practices, as valid subjects for study and as resources to draw upon in the classroom. Hence cultural studies' close association in its early days with the local and oral history movement as represented, for instance, by the journal *History Workshop*. But on the other hand, the movement by its very stress on education acknowledged that it was both possible and important politically to learn things that were not immediately available in experience and to reflect on that experience from the necessary distance that the classroom provides. The things

to be learned included the valuable skills and knowledge which until then had been the reserve of the dominant class. Such a view of education—and of the role of cultural studies within it—claimed the whole of culture, including dominant cultural practices, for its field, provided a legitimate and valued role for intellectuals, and was not afraid to discriminate. Unfortunately, in my view, the educational influence of cultural studies has become potentially baleful and far from liberating because it has pursued the role of introducing popular cultural practices into the classroom indiscriminately at the expense of the wider political and emancipatory values of intellectual inquiry and teaching. The situation reminds me of a cartoon I saw some years ago in which two toddlers were playing in a sandpit overseen by a young female teacher. One toddler says to the other, “Why is it always the ones with Ph.D.’s who want us to make mud pies?” Whatever the reason, the tendency of cultural studies to validate all and every popular cultural practice as resistance—in its desire to avoid being tarred with the elitist brush—is profoundly damaging to its political project.

The rejection of false consciousness within cultural studies goes along with the rejection of truth as a state of the world, as opposed to the temporary effect of discourse. But without some notion of grounded truth the ideas of emancipation, resistance, and progressiveness become meaningless. Resistance to what, emancipation from what and for what, progression toward what? The cultural studies literature plays much with the word “power.” The problem is that the source of this power remains, in general, opaque. And this vagueness about power and the structures and practices of domination allows a similar vagueness about resistance.

Here we need to make a distinction between resistance and coping. Much cultural studies literature focuses, quite legitimately and fruitfully, on the ways in which cultural practices can be under-

stood as responding to and coping with people’s conditions of existence. For Angela McRobbie and others, shopping grants women a space for autonomous self expression. For others, romance literature and soap operas provide the same function through fantasy. In the bad old days, we called this escapism; in those ascetic, puritan, socialist days escapism was a bad thing. Today, while it may be an understandable response to constrained social circumstances, and while it is clearly neither manipulated nor merely passive, and while these social subjects are not given any other options, escapism does little, it seems to me, to resist the structure of domination in which these subjects find themselves. In fact, escapism may (understandable as the practice is) contribute to the maintenance of that structure of power. This surely is Foucault’s main theme—the widespread complicity of victims with the systems of power that oppress them. It is not a question of either patronizing this group or imposing one’s own cultural standards on them, but of recognizing the systemic constraints within which they construct their forms of cultural coping and how unemancipative these can be. Surely the aim should not be to bow down in ethnographic worship of these cultural practices, but to create a social reality in which there are wider possibilities for the exercise of both symbolic and (in my view more importantly) material power. Can we not admit that there are extremely constrained and impoverished cultural practices that contribute nothing to social change? We may wish to salute the courage and cultural inventiveness shown in such circumstances, but at the same time still wish to change them.

STRUCTURES OF DOMINATION

Let me return to the question of power and the structure of domination, because here I think is possibly the main point of contention between political

economy and cultural studies as it is presently constituted. To put the matter simply, political economy sees class—namely, the structure of access to the means of production and the structure of the distribution of the economic surplus—as the key to the structure of domination, while cultural studies sees gender and race, along with other potential markers of difference, as alternative structures of domination in no way determined by class.

That patriarchal and ethnically based structures of domination preexisted the capitalist mode of production and continue to thrive within it is not in question. It is equally plausible to argue that forms of domination based on gender and race could survive the overthrow of capitalist class domination. Nor is the fact in question that until recently much political economic and Marxist analysis was blind to such forms of domination. But to think, as many cultural studies practitioners appear to do, that this undermines political economy and its stress on class is to profoundly misunderstand political economy and the nature of the determinations between economic and other social relations for which it argues.

There are two issues here. First, in what ways are the forms of this racial and gendered domination—and the awareness of and struggle against them—shaped determinately by the mode of production? Second, what might be the connections, if any, between the struggles against forms of domination based on class, gender, and race? Might there be any strategic priorities between them? Another way of putting this question is to ask whether the overthrow of existing class relations would contribute to the overthrow of gender-and-race based domination (or vice-versa) and to ask which forms of domination, if overthrown, would contribute most to human liberty and happiness.

It is hard to argue against the proposition that modern forms of racial domination are founded on economic domination. This is true in the slave trade and

its aftermath in North America, in the form of immigrant labor in Western Europe, and in the various forms of direct and indirect colonialism throughout the world. While the forms of awareness of and struggle against such domination have been culturally varied, and will be so in the future, little dent will be made in domination if black is recognized as beautiful but nothing is done about processes of economic development, unequal terms of trade, global divisions of labor, and exclusion from or marginalization in labor markets.

The same goes for gender. Again, it would be hard to argue against the proposition that the forms of patriarchy have been profoundly marked by the ways in which the capitalist mode of production has divided the domestic economy from production as a site of wage labor and capital formation, by the ways in which women have been increasingly incorporated into the wage labor force often and increasingly at the expense of white male labor, and by changes in and struggles over the mode of reproduction and disciplining of labor power. It is plausible to argue, indeed I would argue, that contemporary feminism developed largely as a response to the growing tension between changes in the structure of the labor market and in the mode of reproduction of labor, driven by changes in the mode of production on the one hand and more traditional, inherited forms of patriarchy on the other. Again the cultural forms in which women and their allies come to recognize and struggle against this domination will be varied and of varying efficacy. But I am sufficiently old fashioned to believe that no empowerment will mean much unless it is accompanied by a massive shift in control of economic resources. It is an interesting but open question whether such a shift is compatible with the existing class structure of developed capitalism.

In short, I would argue that one cannot understand either the genesis, forms, or stakes of the struggles around gender

and race without an analysis of the political economic foundations and context of the cultural practices that constitute those struggles. The political economy of culture has never argued that all cultural practices are either determined by or functional for the mode of production of material life. But it has argued, and continues to do so, that the capitalist mode of production has certain core structural characteristics—above all that waged labor and commodity exchange constitute people's necessary and unavoidable conditions of existence. These conditions shape in determinate ways the terrain upon which cultural practices take place—the physical environment, the available material and symbolic resources, the time rhythms and spatial relations. They also pose the questions to which people's cultural practices are a response; they set the cultural agenda.

Political economists find it hard to understand how, within a capitalist social formation, one can study cultural practices and their political effectiveness—the ways in which people make sense of their lives and then act in the light of that understanding—without focusing attention on how the resources for cultural practice, both material and symbolic, are made available in structurally determined ways through the institutions and circuits of commodified cultural produc-

tion, distribution, and consumption. How is it possible to study multi-culturalism or diasporic culture without studying the flows of labor migration and their determinants that have largely created these cultures? How is it possible to understand soap operas as cultural practices without studying the broadcasting institutions that produce and distribute them, and in part create the audience for them? How is it possible to study advertising or shopping, let alone celebrate their liberating potential, without studying the processes of manufacturing, retailing, and marketing that make those cultural practices possible? How at this juncture is it possible to ignore, in any study of culture and its political potential, the development of global cultural markets and the technological and regulatory processes and capital flows that are the conditions of possibility of such markets? How can one ignore the ways in which changes in the nature of politics and of struggle are intimately related to economically driven changes in the relationship of politics to the institutions of social communication such as newspapers and broadcasting channels, and to the economically driven fragmentation of social groups and cultural consumers? If this is reductionist or economicist, so be it. It is, for better or worse, the world we actually inhabit.

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