

POPULAR CULTURES AND POLITICAL PRACTICES

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The papers included in this volume were originally presented at a conference session on "Leisure, Ideology and Cultural Production" organized for the Society of Socialist Studies in the Spring of 1984. My purpose in organizing the session was two-fold. First, I wanted to bring together a set of presentations indicative of the growing interest in leisure and popular culture among socialist writers in Canada during the 1980s. In so doing, I deliberately sought out people whose work represented an attempt to work through the limitations inherent in economic and class reductionist explorations of popular cultural forms and leisure practices in capitalist societies. My second objective was to insure that conference presenters represented a variety of disciplinary, theoretical and research backgrounds. I felt strongly that leisure and cultural studies research in Canada had been less successful in bringing such diverse traditions together than was the case in Britain and I hoped the conference session might begin to work towards a resolution of this tendency.

The Centre for Sport and Leisure Studies at Queen's University has been committed to interdisciplinary and progressive work in leisure and cultural studies since the late 1970s and early drafts of most of the presentations made at the session were collected for circulation through the Centre's *Working Papers* series. The decision made by Garamond Press to publish a series of books based on Centre publications created the opportunity to work-up these early drafts into the present volume.

Many people have been involved with this project in various ways and it will not be possible to thank everyone. However, I want to acknowledge first the contributions of the people directly responsible for the original conference session either in an organizational capacity or as a presenter or discussant. These include Jesse Vorst, Bryan Palmer, Geraldine Finn, Meg Luxton, Philip Corrigan, Peter Donnelly, Fred Stockholder and Bob Hackett. At the Queen's end of things, Hart Cantelon and Rob Beamish were responsible for administrative,

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Richard Gruneau
May 1988

Introduction:

Notes on Popular Culture and Political Practice¹

Richard Gruneau

A friend in graduate school used to remark that his one scholarly ambition was to write a book about the hobbies of major socialist theorists. On some occasions, this pronouncement led to collective speculation that carried the joy of pure silliness. Did Lukacs own a dog? Did Kautsky have a stamp collection? Was Luxembourg a soccer fan? The basis for the silliness, obviously, lay in the contrast between such pleasurable personal amusements and the seemingly higher earnestness of socialist theory and practice. Of course, the task of building socialism was a hard and serious business, my friend used to say, but why should the political right have all the laughs?

I always felt this latter comment reproduced a somewhat unfair stereotype of socialists as all work and no play. I also recall being struck by the ease with which this stereotype could be readily adapted to the defense of capitalist consumer culture. It conjures up a whole cluster of tired and familiar arguments: Marxism's emphasis on social labour can never accommodate an adequate understanding of non-utilitarian activities; socialism is necessarily synonymous with a stifling and excessively puritanical utilitarianism; socialists are so incapable of understanding play for its own sake—and so lacking in self-deprecating humour—that they can never be in touch with the pulse of “popular” feeling.

It is one thing to explore the ideological nature of these allegations and stereotypes.² It is another thing to face up to whatever grains of truth might be contained within them. Undoubtedly, this means having to face up to the limitations and problems of “actually existing socialism” in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. But it also means rethinking traditional socialist theory and practices in Western countries as well. For it seems clear, as Tony Bennett has recently argued, that a great many traditional left programs and positions really *have* carried the baggage of cultural assumptions which have limited the abilities of

socialists to win over large segments of “the people.” Focussing on the British situation, Bennett argues that socialist cultural initiatives in particular have lacked effectiveness:

...often straddled awkwardly between a modish avant-gardism and a “workerism” of yester-year—[socialist cultural initiatives] have remained largely peripheral to the lives of “the people,” in any majoritarian sense of the term, throughout the greater part of the post-war period and certainly since the 1960s.³

Even more depressing, Bennett continues, is the extent to which a deeply-rooted and lingering “economism” has blinded people on the left to the fact that “there is a cultural battle to be fought, let alone won.”⁴ When this battle has been recognized, the left’s pursuit of strategic objectives has tended to be limited to a range of policy options centered around calls for democratizing the media by bringing them under public control. While such options are obviously indispensable for any socialist cultural strategy, Bennett concludes, they are likely to be “radically insufficient” unless coupled with strategies able to exploit various contradictions “within and between the various media as well as opening up new spaces for cultural activity outside them.”⁵

There are parallels between these observations about socialist cultural initiatives in Britain and similar initiatives in Canada, particularly with respect to the concern for democratizing the media. Bob Hackett explores these parallels with respect to the media later in this volume. There are also important differences. The legacy of agrarian reform movements and struggles of primary producers has meant that Canadian socialist writing has been less dominated by the “industrial workerism” that Bennett describes as being so apparent in Britain. Furthermore, Canada’s changing colonial position in the history of international capitalism has led to a significant engagement with nationalist issues in defining the left’s cultural agenda.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Canadian and British socialist theorists have shared a tendency to downplay or trivialize the analysis of popular cultural forms and practices until just recently. In these introductory notes I want to explore some of the reasons why this has occurred. Following this, I shall explore the change that occurred during the 1970s, when socialist theorists throughout Western societies increasingly acknowledged the importance of popular cultures as sites for the struggle over capitalist hegemony. A major redefinition of the concept of popular culture, and a renewed awareness of the oppositional politics of “the popular,” have been major features of this change.

Socialist Silences and Set Positions

How can one explain the limited ability of the left in Western capitalist societies to theorize popular cultural forms adequately and to link this theory to practice? I am persuaded by Tony Bennett’s argument that economism has been a key player in all this. The strategic emphasis on labour politics and class struggle waged at the workplace has been one of the left’s great contributions of the last

century. However, this emphasis has too often reinforced the view of cultural struggles as secondary—merely epiphenomenal and super-structural dimensions of a class struggle centered on socializing the material means of production.

An equally relevant factor in answering the question posed above lies in the paternalism and parochial intellectualism which traditionally found expressions in Communist Party doctrine on cultural production and the cultural habits of the working classes. Leninist strategic interventions in the cultural realm inevitably gave the Party the responsibility for producing a truly socialist popular culture from *outside* that culture itself. For example, the young Trotsky was prepared to acknowledge the cultural possibilities of film but, as C.L.R. James has noted, he felt that sports diverted workers from politics and he had little time for them.⁶ Faced with the Party's hectoring discourse on progressive versus reactionary forms of popular culture, it is not at all surprising that many people stopped listening altogether.⁷

Other traditions within Marxism were even more hostile to the available forms of popular cultural practices constituted within various capitalist social formations. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukacs viewed the essence of "the people" as something expressed only in an unrealized form of the popular which would emerge out of the proletariat's growing self-consciousness and realization of its historic mission.⁸ According to Bennett, the negative consequences of this particular view of "the people":

...came home to roost most clearly in the gloomy prognostications of the Frankfurt School, to some degree obliged to adopt the perspective of negativity because the proletariat in its empirical forms had proved unworthy of the immense philosophical and cultural burden Lukacs had placed on its shoulders.⁹

In this gloomy prognostication there was little in popular culture which might figure as something valuable in its own right. The proletariat was deemed bought-off—deceived and manipulated by the media and capitalism's emerging culture industry. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer took the lead in arguing that capitalist culture could be understood as a "mass culture" which created and reproduced "false" needs and a "false" consciousness. Against this one could only assert the negative power of "autonomous art" and of "critical theory" itself. From this perspective "the people" took on the character of a passive mass of consumers desperately in need of the estrangement potentially offered by an artistic and philosophical avant-garde.¹⁰

Given this array of influences it is small wonder that for most of this century socialist writers have tended to downplay the majority of everyday cultural practices and products of "the people" or else have dismissed them with little accompanying analysis. Brecht's writing on popular literature and Gramsci's recognition of the importance of the cultural struggle over "common sense" are usually singled out as notable exceptions.¹¹ Yet, however important these contributions may have been, they have long been overshadowed by other well-established socialist traditions.

Even by the 1960s—when questions about “everyday life” and popular cultural practices filtered into socialist writing in new and provocative ways—the established traditions maintained a powerful influence, especially in English-speaking countries. For example, in the two long chapters devoted to the analysis of “legitimation” in Ralph Miliband’s pioneering 1969 book, *The State in Capitalist Society*, the discussion of “popular” entertainment was relegated to a few perfunctory paragraphs.¹² When Miliband did discuss “popular” entertainment he tended to rely rather uncritically upon arguments about the ideologically-conformist character and aesthetic impoverishment of capitalist mass culture that had been articulated earlier by Horkheimer, Adorno and their colleagues at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.

Miliband was too well-schooled in classical Marxism to accept Herbert Marcuse’s argument that contemporary mass culture heralded the arrival of a fully-homogenized and “one dimensional” society. On the contrary, he cautioned against any interpretation which underestimated the “profoundly destabilizing forces at work in capitalist society” or its capacity to cope with such forces. The “realistic perspective” in advanced capitalist societies, he concluded, was “not of attunement and stability, but of crisis and challenge.”¹³ Nonetheless, in the absence of any thorough and adequate discussion of such challenges in the cultural realm, Miliband’s book did little to dislodge the pessimism and static character of radical mass culture criticism. Key elements of the Adorno/Horkheimer version of the power of capitalism’s culture industry remained implicit throughout his brief discussion.

The assumptions that popular culture was equivalent to mass culture, and that mass culture was merely a form of deception, passification, and diversion, were widely accepted by people committed to radical political positions in Canadian, British and American universities during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Socialist activists and researchers who did not accept these views in their entirety nonetheless tended to maintain an equally pessimistic view of popular culture as a sphere of life largely absorbed by capitalism’s dominant ideology. There were numerous variations of these latter dominant ideology theories, but most emphasized how the underclasses in capitalist society—exposed to bourgeois ideology on every front—had become greatly *incorporated* into the culture and lifestyles of the dominant class.¹⁴

Inevitably, the implied solution to such problems took the classic form of socialization of the material means of production. Following the argument put forward by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, it was tacitly assumed that if the bourgeoisie no longer controlled the means of material production, they would no longer control the means of mental production. In this context, popular culture could only be seen either as politically irredeemable or as strategically irrelevant.

Anglo-Canadian Perspectives on Popular Cultures and the Politics of "the Popular"

In Canada, the debate surrounding the National Questions of the 1960s and 1970s placed "Culture" on the socialist agenda in ways that threatened to disrupt the tendencies described above. Nationalist movements in Quebec and widespread concern in the rest of Canada about the threat posed by American economic and cultural power carried the potential for a radical rethinking of socialist perspectives on popular cultures and the politics of "the popular." However, this rethinking never developed as fully as one might have expected.¹⁵ Within the Anglo-Canadian left, in particular, the range of debate on politics, popular cultures and nationalism was limited from the outset by several problematic tendencies.

One of the most important tendencies centered upon the language and critical assumptions through which matters pertaining to the National Questions had come to be popularized in English-speaking Canada. From the outset, discussions about the nature of Canadian culture were framed well outside the terms of any socialist discourse. Culture was not widely understood with respect to its many determinations in the Canadian social formation; rather it was discussed in an abstract and idealist fashion. In this way Canadian culture could be represented readily as an organic "lived tradition" facing extinction at the hands of a commercially-produced and technologically-dominated American mass culture.¹⁶ Typically, such representations echoed politically conservative fears about cultural decline in the face of liberalism, industrial technology and the homogenizing pressures of rampant commercialism.

Arthur Kroker has drawn our attention to ways in which the fears noted above have dominated Anglo-Canadian intellectual life. His analysis claims to uncover a powerful tradition in Canadian writing on technology and culture which expresses "a searing lament for that which has been suppressed by the modern technical order."¹⁷ This Canadian discourse, Kroker argues, can be understood as a "way of seeking to recover a voice by which to articulate a different historical possibility against the present closure of the technological order" arising primarily from the impact of American mass communications.¹⁸

The problem, however, lies in the limited vision of "different historical possibilities" articulated within the tradition Kroker describes. Anglophone critics of American mass culture have tended to express these possibilities through a highly romanticized, almost mystical, yearning for an "identity" variously rooted in regional popular cultures or in abstract conceptions of a civilized European "Western tradition." Furthermore, such abstract and romanticized concepts of culture have often been linked to a condemnation and rejection of those material and technological developments in communication which would be prerequisites for any truly universal culture—a popular culture which recognizes human differences and provides the resources, opportunities, and forms of empowerment necessary for the widest possible realization and

expansion of human capacities. Ironically, Kroker's own analysis, written in 1984, continues to be trapped by many of the limited conceptions of the authors whose work he describes. As a result, it simply devolves into yet another form of pessimistic mass culture theory.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, socialist thinkers were actively caught up in the National Question debates and searched for ways in which nationalist and socialist projects might be harmonized. I think it fair to say that most people on the Anglo-Canadian left were painfully aware of the power of conservative traditions in these debates and understood the difficulty of adapting abstract and romantic notions of "Canadian Culture" to socialist political imperatives. Yet, given the extent to which nationalist sentiment had become a popular and seemingly oppositional cultural force in Canada, it became impossible to ignore. The problem was to articulate a distinctly socialist intervention. Unfortunately, in many instances, this merely meant substituting a left-wing version of an Anti-American mass culture theory for those more commonly employed in public discourse.

The most visible left-wing versions of Anti-American mass culture theory were often expressed through a radical populism. It was assumed that Canadian culture was not yet a capitalist mass culture, even though large sections of it were fast becoming dominated by a continental culture industry. For this reason, it was necessary to defend local popular cultural forms and other indigenous cultural initiatives against the homogenizing commercial forces centred south of the 49th parallel. In some instances, these arguments were also extended to include the defense of local cultural initiatives in the regions against the centralizing tendencies of the Canadian State.¹⁹

A somewhat different orientation was more closely tied to traditional Marxist categories. Stanley Ryerson had written a number of important works from the 1940s through the 1960s which analyzed national-democratic movements in Canada in terms of resistance to the expansion of American capital.²⁰ Libbie and Frank Park offered an even more influential analysis in the 1960s of the ways in which alliances of the Canadian dominant class had come to see "the path of profit and class stability in collaboration with foreign capital, not in opposition to it."²¹ As a result, the Parks argued, protection of the right and capacity to make decisions "in the national interest" was contingent on a widespread nationalization of Canadian industry.

The effect of these arguments was to locate the problem of American domination of Canada within a framework of dependency and underdevelopment. Key fractions of the Canadian capitalist class pursued their own interests in a continentalist fashion which worked toward economic and cultural underdevelopment throughout the country.²² Socialist responses to the accompanying patterns of dependency and underdevelopment appeared to require a two-stage strategy. The first stage would involve the mobilization of nationalist sentiment in the struggle against American control of the economy and culture. Only with