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AGAINST THE COMMODIFICATION OF EVERYTHING

Anti-consumerist cultural studies in the age of ecological crisis

Cultural studies is in a difficult position if it wants to find itself on the side of democracy against neo-liberalism in this age of ecological crisis. A great deal of the deconstructive, anti-essentialist, post-humanist, post-modernist thinking of recent decades has undermined the grounds upon which earlier generations understood the commodification of the world to be distasteful. In the absence of any normative conception of humanity, community, or nature, why not succumb to the deterritorializing thrill which the marketization of everything promises? The liberal defence of consumer culture which characterized a whole genre of work in cultural studies is clearly unable to answer this question, predicated as it is on a now wholly anachronistic critique of mid-century discourses of austerity, restraint, and patriarchal normativity.

This might seem to leave us with a choice of either reverting to the prescriptive Marxism of pre-1960s cultural theory or accepting the job offered to us by the neo-liberal university: of training smart, reflexive, ironic hedonists to work and consume efficiently in the knowledge economy. However, there is another way. An attentive and nuanced reading of post-structuralist and post-Marxist philosophy, as well as older resources for cultural theory, can provide the basis for a democratic and anti-essentialist critique of consumerism as a normative paradigm which erases difference and silences political discussion by the violent imposition of particular modes of relationality (in particular that of the customer/seller relationship) on every social scene. It is from the perspective of a politics which tries to keep open the possibility of other, multiple modes of relationality, rather than one which wishes to impose a singular utopian blueprint on the future, that cultural studies can play a useful role in critiquing the hegemony of consumerism and competitive individualism without succumbing to the temptations of too much socialist nostalgia.

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Versions of anti-consumerism

'Anti-consumerism' has a bad reputation, within cultural studies and beyond it. This should come as no surprise. While this term may designate any number of possible perspectives, most of them would presumably involve telling people not to consume, at least some of the time, and there are few things from which humans or other animals derive such evident pleasure as from consumption of various forms. As such, anti-consumerism can be hard to distinguish from an anti-hedonism which would look unfavourably upon any pursuit of pleasure as such. Resistance to any kind of anti-consumerism (real or imagined, explicit or implied) therefore derives from a number of perfectly legitimate sources. The long history of Puritanism and its legacies in Anglo-Saxon culture (Gilbert & Pearson 1999, pp. 148–149) has left a powerful residual memory of a time when any kind of enjoyment for its own sake appeared to be suspect in the eyes of authority: even today the instinctively punitive and disciplinary attitude of state and media institutions to almost every possible manifestation of youth culture and to all forms of recreational 'drug' use (including, increasingly, use of alcohol and tobacco, especially amongst women), can easily create the impression that the right to party is really one to be fought for. The Fordist industrial economy, as Gramsci argued at its outset (1971, pp. 277–318), depended in part on a willingness to endure a degree of austerity and an unprecedented level of self-discipline on the part of its highly regimented and homogenized ranks of workers and consumers. Within the traditions of the political left, the anti-hedonism of the great institutions of the labour and communist movements is well-remembered by citizens of Eastern Europe and by anyone interested in, say, the history of the Labour Party in the UK (which included proposals for the prohibition of alcohol in its first election manifesto). A strong vein of feminist scholarship has demonstrated the connections between a disparaging or dismissive attitude towards practices of consumption and a similar attitude towards their predominant practitioners (in modern cultures, women), be it exhibited by economists, historians, activists, political leaders or cultural critics (Nava 1996). For all of these reasons, it is easy to see any kind of anti-consumerism as the preserve of the grey old men against which so much radical thought and action has been directed since the 1960s.

The problem with this perspective is that it has become, recently but decisively, thoroughly anachronistic. We now live in an era when, throughout the capitalist world, the overriding aim of government economic policy is to maintain consumer spending levels. In the UK today we see this aim pursued even at the expense of risking major social problems through the artificial suppression of borrowing rates and inflation of property prices, both of which enable previously unimaginable levels of consumer borrowing (Valentine 2005). This is an era when 'consumer confidence' is treated as the key indicator *and* cause of economic effectiveness. On top of this, the widespread

pressure to subject every possible social relation to the norms of the consumer/provider transaction is both widely documented by social, politicians and cultural commentators and easily recognized by lay observers. At the same time, there is today no reasonable evidence with which to contradict the environmentalist assertion that on a planetary scale *consumption as such* is currently going on at a rate which literally cannot be sustained, in so far as it itself threatens the very biological survival of humans and related species (Worldwatch Institute 2004). Under such circumstances, celebrating the pleasures of consumption is a far from subversive activity, and it is not only killjoys who may have some anxieties about the implications of a culture whose only medium is forms and units of consumption (in other words, commodities).

Before going any further, it is necessary for us to try to distinguish between two sets of categories: consumerism/anti-consumerism and consumption/anti-consumption. This is a distinction which can only be quite unstable, but which is necessary nonetheless. At its most basic, the term 'consumption' has to designate any activity which involves or depends (however indirectly) on the destructive exploitation of natural resources. Only an asceticism which was literally suicidal in its implications for human life could oppose consumption so defined *as such*, necessary as it is to mere physical survival. Perhaps more important is the implicit distinction between practices which merely involve consumption so understood, and which leave behind nothing more than the memory of its pleasures, and those which transform the resources consumed into tangible products of some lasting value. It is on this basis that perspectives which regard consumption as at best a necessary evil have a long and respectable history in many cultures, whether consumption is contrasted with contemplation or with artistic creativity, with industry or with husbandry. Against this perspective, important strands of cultural studies have argued for practices of consumption as at least potentially creative in themselves, in so far as they involve practitioners in deliberately significatory choices (creating meanings through the 'signifying practices' of fashion and anti-fashion, for example), and longer traditions of connoisseurship have valued selective consumption (be it of literature, art, music, food, wine, furniture, fashion, philosophy, sex or scenery) as a form of expert activity. Considered in the context of this history, the current ecological crisis presents an arguably unprecedented situation, because it does in fact create a situation in which *any exploitation of natural resources whatsoever*, however 'creative' its ends, is potentially problematic. As such 'anti-consumption' has already emerged as a key feature of much ecological discourse, concerned with finding ways to limit consumption in general, and not necessarily reproducing any of the traditional tropes which have informed 'anti-consumption' discourse in the past (Carter 2001, p. 46). Any defence of 'consumption' which relies on a critique of such traditional tropes therefore risks anachronism itself.

'Consumerism' is a term which has two widely-used meanings in addition to its occasional, neutral usage to designate the general growth in shopping as a substantial activity for large populations in the affluent world. On the one hand, the term is used to refer to an ideology, a socio-political programme and a looser set of attitudes and/or practices, which can all be seen as relatively dispersed elements of a coherent formation, and all of which tend to render the consumer/retailer transaction the normative model for all social interaction (Bauman 1990, pp. 210–211). On the other hand, the term is sometimes used much more narrowly to refer to the 'consumer rights' movements which have emerged in the affluent economies in recent decades, and even, occasionally, to those critical elements thereof concerned to promote various types of 'ethical' consumption (Nava 1992, pp. 184–199). In fact these two sets of meanings are perfectly contradictory, as consumer movements emerge from the recognition and politicization of consumption as a *specific* social activity generating specific political problems which will not be solved by other projects, while consumerism understood in the former terms works precisely to generalize and naturalize this activity as the basis for *all* social relationships.

For the rest of this paper I will be using the first definition of 'consumerism' given above, for two reasons. Firstly, we have no better term for that undeniably potent ideology which privileges the consumer/ retailer transaction as the normative form of social relations and which seeks to promote it as such even in social spheres where it does not manifest itself spontaneously or easily (such as in the relationships between students and teachers). Secondly, in writing or speaking about 'anti-consumerism', it seems clear that it is implicit or organized opposition to the normativity of ideological 'consumerism' which we are talking about. I am not personally aware of any significant opposition to consumer movements as such, except from those institutions (McDonalds, Nestlé, etc.) which stand to lose from them, even if some representatives of traditional Marxist and/or Labour movement positions may express scepticism as to their political effectiveness.

This identification of consumerism as an ideology is by no means original. Arguably, it merely identifies the extension of the logic of commodity fetishism to new areas of social life, and a tendency to such extension was in fact always implicit in Marx and Engels' understanding of commodity fetishism (Marx 1992, pp. 39–40). My perspective differs from much of twentieth-century Marxism in that it does not regard the effects of consumerism and commodification as merely illusory. Put crudely, much of the 'cultural populist' (McGuigan 1992) critique of Marxist anti-consumerism remains potent in so far as much of the latter was predicated on the assertion that processes of commodification worked only at the level of ideology, conceived as distinguishable from material reality. The classic example here is the repeated assertion that consumer products were in fact indistinguishable from

each other, and that branding and marketing practices worked to create illusory differences between them (Adorno 1991). Predicated on the assumption that the logic of 'standardization' was fundamental in advanced capitalist economies, this perspective has turned out to be quite mistaken, and is clearly anachronistic in the age of post-Fordist niche-market production (Harvey 1989). Put very crudely, while the differences between types of washing powder may be small, and may be apparently unimportant to social critics whose lives do not lead them to make any emotional investment in their laundry, to dismiss them as illusory is in fact a thoroughly idealist gesture, ignoring the power of capital to generate *real material differences*, however slight. This is an important point for any current political analysis. Contemporary consumerism is tightly linked to the hegemony of neo-liberalism and its institutional promotion of 'choice' and difference in the provision of public services: such differences are produced often against the wishes of both service users and providers, but they are nonetheless *real* once they have been produced. More fundamentally, the global ecological crisis has to be understood as a consequence of the fact that capital's power of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 1976, pp. 81–106) is very real.

This raises some important issues. While a certain feminist critique of Marxist 'anti-consumerism' has become commonplace within cultural studies (Nava 1992), and justifiably so, some of its potential philosophical correlates have been less clearly articulated. So it is well established that a dismissive attitude towards the 'superficial' and 'artificial' nature of many commodities and the supposed differences between them can be criticized for its apparent indifference to the real lives of many women and young people, for whom domestic products, or fashion, or various other types of commodity (music recordings, for example) may play too substantial a role to be so lightly dismissed. What is less commonly observed is the idealism inherent in such a perspective, which claims that the identifiable concrete material differences between consumer commodities (their differing molecular structures, colours, tastes, sounds) are of no 'real' importance, implying that the fact that these objects all belong to a single general class or type is the only issue of importance in according any conceptual identity or difference to them. The same criticism can be applied to any perspective which draws on a crudely Bourdieuean account of the social uses of consumption (Bourdieu 1984): the assumption that selective consumption is *solely* a practice of symbolic social differentiation always risks dismissing the aspirations of those groups excluded from elite forms of consumption, denying the status of those aspirations as legitimate desires for a materially better, more enjoyable life. Put very simply: fine wine *really is different* from small beer, washing powders *really do differ from each other* (however slightly), and these differences, quite literally, *matter*, however indifferent individual commentators may be to them personally [we

could relate this line of argument to Deleuze's (1994) entire critique of 'representational' thought].

At the same time, this form of 'anti-consumerism' is generally associated with a sociological perspective which is now thoroughly discredited. Again, however, the extent of both its pervading influence on most branches of Western thought and the extent to which it is now discredited are not observed as often as they should be. Almost all social commentators in the middle decades of the twentieth century seem to have assumed that the prevailing form of highly administered, centralized, bureaucratic and 'vertically-integrated' institutions typical of the time represented the ultimate destiny of capitalist modernity as such: standardized production, economies of scale and centralized planning seem to have characterized most visions of a possible future, be they utopian, dystopian or mundane (this is what linked the future visions of Le Corbusier, Stalin and his many apologists, Fritz Lang, Aldous Huxley, and many others). In this context, the assumption that the *commodification* of culture equated to its *standardization* was axiomatic for commentators such as Adorno (1991). Interestingly, this was an assumption which always owed more to Weber – who saw modernity as characterized by the irreversible extension of bureaucracy's 'iron cage' (Weber 1930) – than to Marx, whose vision of capital's endlessly transformatory power seems to have been more influential on conservative commentators like Schumpeter (1976, pp. 81–108) than on most leftists at this time. One of the reasons for the lasting prestige of Antonio Gramsci is the fact that his analysis of emergent industrialism never took this route, instead understanding Fordism as a historically specific form of capitalism, appropriate to the technological opportunities and limitations of the period, and it is for this reason that Gramsci's framework has provided the most useful basis for analyses of the passing of Fordism and its consequences (Harvey 1989). It is apparent now that the standardization of commodities which characterized consumer culture (and hence, to some extent, all culture) in the middle decades of the last century was largely a response to the technological limitations of the industrial economy during the early years of mass affluence. The notion that standardization and commodification were necessarily continuous with each other – like the assumption that a centralized, regimented and planned 'mass society' was the inevitable destiny of modern societies – has clearly turned out to be inaccurate, and it was this view which fundamentally authorized a dismissive attitude to the 'reality' of the material differentiation engendered by processes of capitalist commodification. To be clear, my point here is that the dismissal of the 'reality' of commodification was not only symptomatic of the latent sexism of commentators such as Adorno (Huyssen 1988), nor was it only symptomatic of an idealist inability to recognize the reality of material differentiation achieved by capital in its production of new commodities. It was also symptomatic of a mistaken but widely-accepted historical sociology which

actually departed from a Marxian account of capitalism as a specific set of processes and relations in favour of a more monolithic and functionalist account of modern societies as inevitably characterized by features which were in fact specific to the moment of Fordist industrialization.

It is important to understand the specifics of these debates if we are to understand the novelty and specificity of contemporary consumerism and anti-consumerism. In so far as contemporary consumerism works to impose forms of commodification and their attendant relationships on new areas of social life, it forces a range of differentiations on areas such as the provision of public services and puts users in the position of consumers of those services, who are able/forced to choose between a range of provisions. Of course, what it offers less and less of is any opportunity to participate in other ways (as a citizen, as a participant in local politics, etc.) in the decision-making processes which influence the nature of such service provision. This is perhaps the key mechanism of neo-liberal governance: to offer more 'choice' but less democracy (Finlayson 2004). What has to be avoided here, however, is any easy slide into the twentieth century rhetoric which would therefore condemn such choices as 'unreal' or 'illusory'. The fact that they may be the 'wrong' kinds of choice, that they may offer no scope to participate in broader decision-making processes, that they may be constituted so as to offer no choice which poses any serious threat to established practices or power-relationships does not alter the fact that they amount to real choices between materially different things.

It is only on this basis that we can understand the importance within recent British anti-consumerist discourse of a critique of 'choice' not simply as a rhetorical trope (which has been central to neo-liberal discourse since the early days of Thatcherism) but as a material and institutional reality. Recent critiques of government policy have argued that the project to offer users a wide choice of types of provision within the health and education services has little support from a public more interested in the security and predictably offered by a high level of standardized service-provision than in the opportunity to choose which hospital to receive treatment at or which specialist school to send their 11 year-olds to (Whitfield 2006). Going even further, research in the US has recently argued that *excessive* choice is an endemic feature of contemporary life which produces more anxiety than happiness (Schwartz 2005). This line of argument closely parallels the work of social theorists such as Giddens and Beck who see the rise of 'reflexivity' (social, personal and institutional) as the characteristic feature of contemporary cultures and that of commentators such as Bauman and Sennett who see both the emotional and civic consequences of this shift as far from benign (Sennett 2000, Bauman 2001). According to this view, the social processes which are offering a bewildering and often unwelcome number of life choices to individuals are undermining the bases for any coherent forms of community through which genuinely democratic

power could be exercised, and force individuals to micro-manage the minutiae of their lives to an extent which makes it impossible to invest emotionally or concentrate intellectually on wider social and political issues.

The commodification of everything: consumerist ideology in the neo-liberal era

Perhaps the starkest manifestation of consumerist ideology of recent times has been the deployment of the 'consumer/producer paradigm derived from 'Public Choice Theory' within public policy discourse on service provision and management. Put simply, this paradigm rests on the assumption that there is a fundamental conflict of interests within the public sector, and that that conflict is between the interests of 'producers' (mainly professionals such as teachers, nurses and doctors) and 'consumers' (service users). The assumption that these two groups constitute a mutually antagonistic dyad is derived directly from the assumption that the best way to conceptualize their relationship is in terms of that between buyers and sellers in a marketplace. Sellers are assumed to have a direct motivation to maximize their 'profits' by offering as little as possible to customers at as high a price as possible (Clarke 2006). As such, service professionals are assumed to be motivated to maximize their pay and minimize their workloads, but also to minimize the degree of innovation and intensive effort that they are expected to bring to bear (all of which are conceptualized as 'costs' to the providers). According to this paradigm, only a combination of punitive state regulation and enforced introduction of market mechanisms to the relevant sectors will prevent providers from forming monopoly cartels which enable them to maximize their interests and the expense of service users. As such, the introduction of markets to public services, the opening of the sector to private competition and the policing of the work of professionals by government are all seen as necessary mechanisms to protect the interests of service users (Leys 2001, Whitfield 2006).

The problems with this paradigm are apparent as soon as one begins to spell it out. The fact that neither good health nor education *can* be adequately conceptualized as the outcome of seller/buyer transactions is obvious. What is missing from such conceptualizations, apart from any notion that professionals might be motivated by the pleasure to be derived from achieving successful outcomes in service provision, is the necessarily relational nature of the processes by which goals are arrived at in sectors such as the health and education services. Successful education or health care both depend upon a very high level of willing collaboration between providers and users of services and on a degree of trust and deference on both sides of the relationship at different points in the process. Without the willingness of users to defer to the expert authority of providers at key points in the process, and without the

simultaneous willingness of professionals to defer to users in determining and identifying their needs at key points, no successful outcome can really be expected. More importantly, the processes which generate such outcomes are clearly collaborative in nature and as such are not easily reducible to a buyer/seller transaction.

Both popular scepticism and organized political opposition to the imposition of a neo-liberal model can therefore be seen as manifestations of contemporary anti-consumerism. Indeed, in so far as the processes of commodification and marketization which are resisted by this anti-consumerism are endemic to any project to deepen and extend the reach of capitalist social relations, it can be understood as a specifically anti-capitalist project. This is an interesting point, as what we have here is an 'anti-capitalism' which opposes capitalism not necessarily conceived as a total social system but as a set and type of social relations which should not be imposed where they do not serve the interests of the public, and which opposes it not so much in the defence of a particular set of class interests but in the defence of the democratic right of citizens to determine the types of social relation which will constitute their relationships both to each other and to the institutions which provide essential services.

At an international level, this democratic and communitarian opposition to the imposition of the consumer/retailer model on all relations forms an explicit and often central element of the rhetoric of the 'anti-capitalist movement'. One of the key slogans of this movement in France has been 'le monde n'est pas une marchandise' – literally, 'the world is not a commodity', more normally translated as 'the world is not for sale' (Bové *et al.* 2001). The privatization of public services and the despoliation of natural resources in order to generate new commodities from them are here understood as part of a continuous process, which has in turn be understood by commentators such as Harvey as a contemporary form of that 'primitive accumulation' which Marx identifies as necessary to the constitution of capitalist social relations. The transformation of 'common' goods – be they public services or natural resources – into units of commodity exchange is here understood as a process which is destructive simultaneously of the environment, of human communities, and of the capacity of democratic institutions to influence social outcomes (a capacity which is severely undermined when all key decisions about service provision and resource administration and allocation are consigned to the market) (Harvey 2005).

The issue of how cultural studies might stand in relation to this political conflict is not entirely straightforward. For all of the conceptual divergence within the field in recent times, one philosophical presupposition perhaps constitutes its most basic unifying assumption: that, in the words of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'an anti-essentialist theoretical position is the *sine qua non*'. Where, for Laclau and Mouffe anti-essentialism is the *sine qua non* of a

'new vision for the Left'[1] for cultural studies it is arguably that of the entire disciplinary field as it now stands: whatever the political and methodological differences which may be obtained between different researchers and schools of thought, if it does not assume that social identities are the contingent products of discursive practices, then it probably is not cultural studies. To be clear – I have no intention of challenging this presupposition, which I myself adhere to. The fact that 'social', 'identities', 'contingent', 'discursive' and 'practices' are all terms which are far more problematic than is often acknowledged need not detain us here (Gilbert 2004).

   The problem for my concerns here and now is that an anti-essentialist perspective is one which is very easily articulated to a neo-liberal paradigm. Interestingly, this is equally true of positions developed within both of the major 'anti-essentialist' theoretical programmes of recent times: the decon-structive – psychoanalytic 'post-Marxism' of Laclau and Mouffe, and the 'machinic' materialism of Deleuze and Guattari, which has been developed into a highly abstract anti-essentialist ontology by Manuel DeLanda (2002). In both cases key terms emerge initially out of an attempt to name at an adequate level of abstraction capital's power of 'creative destruction' and in the process take on a sense which is ambiguous as to its precise ethico-political valency. For Laclau, 'dislocation' is a term used to name the process by which 'sedimented' social practices and meanings are disrupted such that their historical contingency and that of the identities which they ground becomes apparent, and it is a process explicitly associated with the transformatory power of capitalism in the modern era (Laclau 1990, pp. 41–60). In Deleuze's work with Guattari the term 'deterritorialization' takes on a similar meaning (Deleuze & Guattari 1983). While the terms are by no means identical in meaning, and Deleuze and Guattari's cannot be properly understood without a grasp of their complex conceptualization of 'territoriality' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988), both designate in part a certain deconstructive process which destabilizes established configurations of power, meanings, materiality and practice and which is associated at least in party with capital's capacity for 'creative destruction'. While all of these writers are clear, if read carefully, that it would be a nonsense to regard dislocation or deterritorialization as goods in themselves, it is also clear that they are understood as necessary preconditions of any positive political developments, at least in the context of societies characterized by unwelcome hierarchies of power, and in the case of Deleuze and Guattari this has led to quite a widespread reading which understands them as celebrating deterritorialization (and hence, on some readings, unregulated capitalism) in and of itself. The relevance of these issues for us here is that they illustrate the extent to which it is possible to observe that capitalism itself is an anti-essentialist force:

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all
> social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the
> bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations,
> with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are
> swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can
> ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man
> is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life,
> and his relations with his kind.
>
> (Marx & Engels [1848] 1998: 38–9)

This is a particularly important observation to make at the present time,
because many of the residual assumptions of a previous political era seem to
inflect ongoing work in cultural studies, at least in the assumption that merely
reproducing anti-essentialist assumptions is inherently 'radical'. The period of
the New Right saw a powerful articulation of economic libertarianism with
social conservatism which made it very easy to imagine a precisely counter-
vailing force – economically communitarian but socially libertarian – as its
'natural' opponent, and for political traditions such as the British New Left
(which was and to some extent remains largely hegemonic within the field of
cultural studies) which always predicated their projects on precisely such an
articulation of socialism and libertarianism, the temptation to treat this
articulation as organic and inevitable was always great. As such, the easy
assumption that social libertarianism, anti-racism, liberal feminism or anti-
homophobia are positions which necessarily express some kind of positive
'resistance' is deeply entrenched and hard to shake. The problem for such an
assumption is the fact that these positions are now *already part of the common
sense of neo-liberal culture*, in part because of the ideological success of various
social movements and in part because a highly deregulated and mobile
capitalism facing no major systemic rival has absolutely no need for ideological
residua such as homophobia, sexism, nationalism and racism, all of which only
serve to impede the smooth flow of commodities through the cultural and
economic circuits of the globe. Where these residua remain potent, they
certainly cause problems, and there is every reason to attack them: the point is
not that they do not exist any more, or that liberalism is now somehow a
'reactionary' position, but simply that to implement a cosmopolitan project is
now to extend rather than to resist the globally hegemonic ideology of liberal
capitalism. This does not, let me stress, mean that this is necessarily a bad thing
to do. This does not mean, either, that raced, gendered and sexed hierarchies
no longer obtain: only that the idea that they should be dismantled is no longer
one that the world's most powerful institutions disagree with.

   To observe this is not to argue that oppression and inequality have gone
from the world. Nor is it to argue that all power relationships can now, after
all, be reduced to relations of class. Rather, it is to observe that any position

which wishes to address these issues and to go beyond the mere extension and legitimation of neo-liberal cosmopolitanism must pay attention to the specific interactions between the politics of, say, race, and the project of neo-liberalism. So, for example, the destruction of urban black communities in our cities can only be fully understood in the context of a neo-liberal project which is willing to incorporate black people precisely to the extent that they conform to its needs, as cheap or skilled labour in the service economy or as producers, consumers or distributors of key commodities (legal or otherwise) and is systemically ruthless in its exclusion of those (most notably young men and the aged) least equipped or willing to abandon those communal traditions and practices for which neo-liberalism has no use.

In this context, any liberal celebration of consumption, consumerism, or the destabilization of identity risks merely asserting the veracity of the fundamental claim of neo-liberal ideology: we are all individuals, free to choose our own destinies, as long as we shake off the shackles of tradition and community. The question this leaves us with is whether we are therefore to be reduced to a choice between adopting such a position and making a conservative defence of tradition, community, and identity. Of course this is not the position I am going to take, although it is the position taken by most actually existing forms of opposition to neo-liberalism today (far-right nationalism and religious fundamentalisms being the most obvious examples). For, what really constitutes the basis for a radical democratic opposition to neo-liberalism is not the fact that it undermines tradition, identity, or community as such, but that it does so by imposing a singular model on every social scene irrespective of the desires, wishes or actions of those inhabiting it. Within the 'anti-capitalist' movement, this is the primary basis for opposition to neo-liberalism: not the assumption that the very existence of markets and commodities is bad *per se*, but that the *imposition* of marketization and commodification, especially at the expense of more democratic forms of social organization, is (Kingsnorth 2003).

What is most objectionable about neo-liberalism from this perspective, then, is its violent imposition of the buyer/seller paradigm onto every possible set of social relationships. Neo-liberalism asserts that only one type of social relation – what we might call one *mode of relationality*, is ever legitimate or desirable. From this perspective, a radical democratic anti-capitalism does not need to assert the superiority of one other type of social relation, but merely to assert the potential value of multiple types of social relation and modes of relationality. However, we might take this analysis further – and further back, to Marx's critique of commodity relations – by asking if it is not, in some sense, relationality itself which neo-liberalism tries always to freeze, mask, and disable. Commodity fetishism is, at its most basic, the process by which relations are disguised as things. Neo-liberalism's fundamental drive is to impose the logic of the commodity on every possible social relation, such that were it to be fully successful, there would simply be no apparent social

relations whatsoever. The commodification of everything − experiences, memories, bodies, identities − is a well-documented feature of neo-liberal culture (Rifkin 2000), but arguably the one thing which cannot be commodified is, precisely, a relation: that which, by virtue of its excision from a network of other relations, simply ceases to exist. The only mode of relationality which neo-liberalism actually endorses is the wholly predictable, delimited and temporary transaction guaranteed by contract, which is why neo-liberal theories of governance would like to reduce all political relations to a set of private contracts (Whitfield 2001).

The philosophical correlate of a properly-conceptualized anti-essentialism is the recognition that the identity of all phenomena (including, but not limited to, social identities) is a function of their relationships to other phenomena. This does not necessarily commit anyone to a notion of culture, society or material reality as constituting any kind of 'totality', because relationality can itself be conceived as a condition of complex unpredictability wherein the multiple and potential interdependences of elements can never be wholly circumscribed or accounted for. One of the implications of the current ecological crisis is surely that, as branches of thought such as complexity theory (Cilliers 1998) and actor-network theory (Latour 2005) already imply − the interdependence of the various organic and inorganic elements which constitute the global ecosphere can be taken for granted even where the precise nature of that interdependence and its consequences can never be fully measured or predicted, and the assault on biodiversity can be assumed to have incalculable negative consequences for the future. The capitalist attack on biodiversity is precisely correlated to the neo-liberal imposition of a singular mode of relationality in so far as both are driven by the aim of reducing all material phenomena (however apparently intangible, including information, genetic codes, concepts, chemical formulae, brands, etc.) to commodities and abolishing all relations other than those of the contractual seller/buyer transaction. In this, we can actually argue that there remains a powerful grain of truth in the twentieth-century conception of commodification as standardization: commodities themselves may not be standardized, but commodification does generate a standardized mode of relationality whereby all relationships (between friends, lovers, teachers and students, family members, nurses and patients, etc.) are forced into a singular pattern and driven to take on a uniform texture. Adorno's critique of 'identitarian logic'− which refuses to respect the differential specificity of things and their 'hetereogeneity to thought' − is perhaps of more relevance here than his obviously dated account of 'the culture industry': it is the procrustean force of neo-liberalism's drive to impose its singular model on all social situations which today manifests such logic in practice at its most violent, and Adorno explicitly connects identitarian thought with processes of commodification (Adorno 1973, pp. 146−148).

A cultural studies which wants to remain politically contemporary without merely acceding to the hegemonic programme of neo-liberalism – accepting liberation from traditional assumptions and power relationships in return for the reduction of all social relations to the logic of the market – will have to maintain a critical attitude towards this drive. At the same time, however, the ecological crisis raises a further set of questions which cultural studies could play an important role in trying to address. One of the relative absences of much current green discourse is a recognition of just how fundamental to our cultural life processes of consumption and commodification now are. Where this is most widely recognized is in primitivist programmes which have a clear vision of the possible future which is clear because it is wholly negative and yet wholly utopian, involving a mere abolition of civilization as we know it. Cultural studies' recognition of the centrality of consuming practices to contemporary culture gives it a strong basis from which to address some of the most difficult questions facing any attempt to move towards a sustainable society, if only because it recognizes just how much would be at stake in the move towards a society which was not organized primarily around the ever more rapid and intensive invention and consumption of commodities. What kind of culture would make a sustainable society possible? This is a question to which we simply do not have an answer, although it is one to which cultural studies should surely be addressing some attention.

There are certainly strong precedents for doing so in intellectual traditions central or very close to cultural studies. Raymond Williams famously took up Marx and Engels' concern with the problematic gulf between 'the country and the city' in the book of that name (Williams 1973). One of Félix Guattari's last books proposed 'ecosophy' as a new politico-philosophical paradigm and Guattari was committed to the Green movement (Guattari 2005). What could emerge from an engagement with both of these writers and exploration of their possible connections to other areas of relevant work, such as Latour's 'Actor-Network Theory' (2005) is its eschewal of an approach which would necessarily focus on a conceptualization of 'culture' which was specifically focussed on systems and practices of signification, instead considering 'culture' as the systems of organization by which various material elements (including meanings, and humans, but not restricted exclusively to either) are coordinated into more or less stable configurations (Gilbert 2004). This need not necessarily, however, lead us back to a simplistic account of culture as 'expressive totality' or a concomitant concept of 'the Earth' as a singular and homogenous system of ultimately delimitable relations. Rather, it is the sheer complex unpredictability of the material relations making possible life on Earth or indeed the Earth itself which has to constitute the imaginative horizon of any politically responsible conceptualization of culture in the twenty-first century, and a wave of recent literature on the science of complexity provides a wealth of resources with which to address these issues (e.g. Urry 2002, Chesters &

Walsh 2005, Wheeler 2006). In this context, some kind 'anti-consumerism' is a necessary stance for any cultural studies, and any politics, which wishes to do more than simply comply with the demand to reduce all relations (between people, things, animals, plants, minerals, molecules and planets) to situations of commodity-exchange. If a recognition of the relationality of all phenomena is the *sine qua non* of both cultural studies and a twentieth-first century Left politics, then both stand in opposition to the relentless imperialism of the market and the institutional agents of neo-liberal hegemony.

Note

1   This was the phrase used in the explanatory paragraph included in all books in the *Phronesis* series edited by Laclau and Mouffe (and published by Verso) in the first few years of its publication in the early 1990s.

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