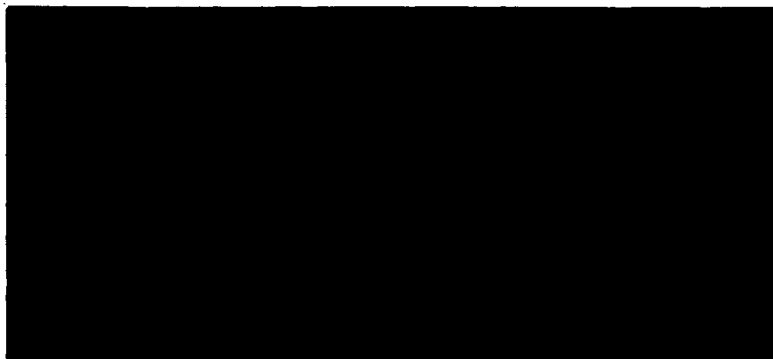




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and the Problem of Cultural Politics"**

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Consumer Cultures, Political Discourse and the Problem of Cultural Politics

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Every quarter the Henley Centre for Forecasting publishes its survey of leisure in the United Kingdom. A prestige marketing organization, specializing in long-term planning for the consumer industries, Henley has developed a strong track-record for in-depth social research. One of its survey findings makes particularly depressing, if familiar, reading. Throughout 1986 a sample profile was monitored for their main leisure patterns. What came out top were a list of late twentieth century pleasures which are principally made available through market based structures: personal shopping, eating take-away meals, DIY, video watching. Right at the bottom of the list came politics. Going to a political meeting ranked on a par with a visit to the circus as one of our last likely things to do! Politics as something pleasurable, as something to do with one's disposable leisure time, it seems, is a decided non-starter.¹

This paper is focused via two inter-related themes touched on by the Henley Centre's survey: the articulation between a series of post-war political discourses and the leisure cultures of contemporary consumer capitalism. The arguments centre primarily on British politics and

culture, though many of the debates reviewed present their analysis more globally, speaking of general characteristics of the 'advanced' industrial economies, the 'mature' democracies, and so on. The arguments advanced about changes in the relation between forms of political and cultural power are deliberately grounded in fairly precise historical and social contexts, rather than through models pitched at high levels of abstraction. Specifically, it is argued that the weakening of post-war discourses of formal representative democracy charted within liberal political theory and shifts in the sphere of leisure and private sector consumption are not discrete developments, but dynamically inter-related features of British society since the 1960's. The research is therefore concerned to bring into an analytical relation two sets of debates which are usually kept strictly separated by the boundaries of political science on the one hand and various traditions of cultural analysis on the other. The implications for the concerns of the Power Conference are twofold. First to contribute to a more dispersed conception of power which includes the spheres of leisure, consumption and personal life, but also to table an agenda for examining the articulation between different permutations of power. The arguments centre both on some of the micro-structures of power in the Foucauldian sense - specific domains and technologies, modes of address, formations of pleasure and subjectivity,

possibilities of resistance - and with the interdependence of different regimes of power.

In the closing section of the paper it is pointed out that this latter issue of the inter-relation between domains - here specifically between the processes of formal democracy and culture - has emerged as a feature of contemporary British politics. One response to the perceived decline of formal representative democracy has been to elaborate a notion of 'cultural politics', which carries with it a particular reading of commercially-based, popular culture. The paper examines those conceptions of 'the popular' and cultural politics in some detail, concluding that while they have made significant contributions to theorising the deployment of cultural power and its resistance a number of difficulties remain. A latent instrumentalism - with its historical legacy in much earlier ideas of cultural transmission - and a confusion over the specific dynamics of cultural, as opposed to political transformation (with a consequent 'over-politicization' of culture) are the two issues which are highlighted.' In conclusion it is argued that a 'politics' of culture needs to develop a greater clarity over the processes and the ends of cultural transformation.

The Decline of Civic Culture

We begin though with an earlier debate which brings political and cultural life into alignment. Mapping the rise in feelings of political apathy or distrust involves dusting down a research tradition which was once pre-eminent in Britain and the USA. This is the work of liberal democratic theorists of the 1950's and '60's who were concerned to explain, not political disaffection, but the conditions of stable, participatory democracy and 'mature' political development. Texts like Almond and Verba's The Civic Culture, 1963, or Lipset's Political Man, 1960, celebrate the democratic structures of Britain and the USA (as opposed to what are defined as the more precarious political cultures of Germany or Italy), concluding that democratic stability rests not simply on the maturity of élites or parties, but on an active and responsible civic culture which guarantees ordinary citizens participation in the political process. It has by now become almost de rigueur for writers on democratic theory to open with an exposure of the limitations of this model. The historically and culturally specific notions of stability embedded in the research, the failure to probe behind the class and gender barriers to becoming an 'active citizen', resulting in an exclusive definition of the citizen as middle-class and male - these are characteristic critiques which are marshalled.² Yet despite these inadequacies, what was noteworthy about the

research in texts like The Civic Culture was precisely the questions asked about the relation between political participation and cultural life; or what Almond and Verba termed political culture and civic culture. Noting that the day-to-day reality of the ordinary British or American citizen was rarely the idealized political culture of civics textbooks (where the citizen is forever rational, reasonable and well-informed), Almond and Verba began to interrogate the cultural determinants which equipped the 'ordinary man' [sic] to develop a high level of civic competence.³ Previous studies of the impact of culture on politics had dealt in impressionistic evidence such as notions of national character, but here we began to see the ways in which family networks, community organizations, education and leisure either stimulated or discouraged active political participation. And if the conclusions only vindicated the wisdom and maturity of British and American professional men, these studies did at least begin to raise the issue of how political culture is perceived and participated in - not in the sphere of the prominent actors, but at the level of the ordinary and the everyday and through the filters of commonsense.

Most commentators working within this tradition insist that there has been a steady decline in the forms of active democratic participation since their celebrated highwatermark in the early 1960's.⁴ While explanations for this decline vary, concern over political distrust or

alienation is recurrent in recent debates over the future of western democratic systems. To canvass some of the data on the United Kingdom alone. Voting turnout at general elections has been falling consistently since the 1950's, but it was in the '70's that a series of political surveys profiled the problem. A 1972 cross-section of the adolescent population of London, when questioned about their political values, projected a very different persona from that of the active citizen. What was manifest was a high degree of cynicism about the quality of national government. Sixty three per cent of the sample felt that 'MP's don't know what they're doing', sixty one per cent felt that 'people like themselves' had no say in what the government did.⁵ A year later an Attitudes to MP's Opinion Research Survey reinforced these findings among the adult population, when fifty eight per cent of the sample agreed with the view that 'people become MP's for their own gain and to further their own ambitions'.⁶ Four years earlier the Royal Commission on the Constitution (established primarily in response to demands from Scotland and Wales for devolution or independence) had sounded similar warning noises about growing political distrust. Reluctantly the Commission admitted to a 'general feeling of dissatisfaction with the system of running Britain'.⁷ The Commission's Minority Report went much further. It argued that there was in Britain 'a widespread and grave disquiet about our system of government', founded on a

'justifiable belief that the country is becoming less democratic' and that 'the people have not enough say in, and influence on government'.⁸ The Kilbrandon Commission's majority statement ignored these warnings, merely re-asserting its faith in representative democracy. Nonetheless, the same sort of findings surfaced in opinion polls and attitude research surveys throughout the 1970's and '80's. A large majority in a British Social Attitudes survey of 1987 felt that: 'Generally ... those we elect as MP's quickly lose touch with their constituents', while sixty six per cent believed that 'political parties were only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions'.⁹

I have focused in some detail on this discourse of political research because it is significant in organising and projecting a public debate about national political institutions and their leaders, rather than because it is an accurate commentary on them. In fact, taken together these findings raise as many questions about the perceived loss of confidence in Britain's civic culture as they answer. We should note at once that distrust is, predictably, not uniform across all social groups but is consistently strongest among the young and among unskilled and semi-skilled workers.¹⁰ Confidence in democracy, it seems, very much depends on where you are and how you look at it. Moreover, the idea of a spiralling decline in political authority, with the 1950's implicitly constructed as the moment of stable equilibrium, rests on

lingering if unspoken assumptions about the immediate post-war decades as the high point of democratic consensus. Against this coherent image of the '50's the political developments and culture of later decades will always be judged to be lacking. Such an account of the consensus years has been challenged from other sources which argue that the 1950's themselves produced strong feelings of political disassociation.¹¹ But what is significant about this body of empirical research is less the precise conclusions, than the political and cultural terrains which are linked together. This returns us to the issue posed symbolically by the Henley Centre in their leisure survey - the possible lines of interconnection between political culture and the leisure cultures of civil society.

Leisure, Consumption and Private Life

Growing apathy towards democratic institutions has not it seems taken place in a vacuum. From this body of research, apathy does not simply register a negative stance, but a corresponding commitment to quite other rituals and forms of association. As early as Almond and Verba's study, what was being remarked on was that it was 'only the rare individual' who 'considered his role as citizen more important than his role in immediate neighbourhood, family and community'.¹² When respondents in the survey were asked questions about the issues that

worried them or about what they considered to be important, they usually mentioned family and job problems or personal economic worries, but rarely political anxieties.¹³ An early 1970's UK survey into people's priorities for assessing their quality of life interrogated this relation between formal politics and personal life further. While the survey's findings registered the recurrent low levels of satisfaction with politics per se, this seemed to have little bearing on perceptions of quality of life. What the respondents prioritised were things much closer to home. It was job, marriage, family life and leisure, rather than democratic public institutions, which in general shaped images of the good society.¹⁴ Confidence in political culture might be low, but these things generally mattered little in the order of priorities most people used for running their lives. Glossing this continuing trend in the mid 1980's - under the impact of some of the newer leisure and consumer cultures - the Henley Centre advance a grandiose interpretation of the changing relation between political and leisure cultures. This is announced as nothing short of the beginning of a shift of allegiance from one structure of authority to another:

From all the evidence it is possible to derive a tentative 'hierarchy of authority' in the broadest sense, to include respect and a source of pride. The highest authorities these days are those people, institutions and 'intellectual capital' most closely associated with our personal welfare and sense of identity

Something very important is happening to the authority structures of our society. It is our view that deference to traditional authorities in Britain has now hit an all time low But does this imply the absence of any authorities at all? The answer is no. Whilst the authority of class, of the production side of life has declined, that of the consumption side has risen The authority we tend to use for this is from within rather than external.¹⁵

There are some suggestive hints here about a possible changing relationship between political and public culture on the one hand and the consumer-led and personal on the other. But these are points of departure for further research, not proven conclusions. Like so many commentators working from within the consumer industries in the 1980's Henley overstates its case in the interests of making an optimistic claim for leisure and consumption as the up-and-coming structures of authority. For if survey after survey registers disaffection with the structure of formal democracy, there is little evidence to suggest that there has been any sustained shift of allegiance towards lifestyle or consumer-led value systems. The claim is also continually made that this type of political haemorrhaging is relatively recent. Yet arguably liberal democratic systems, since their inception in the nineteenth century, have rested squarely on the assumption that for the majority of citizens, participation in politics would be passive only, with their energies and interests channelled - often forcibly - into areas of life designated as 'non-political'. As

Carole Pateman put it in relation to the relative non-participation of women in such structures over the last seventy years, for the majority of women 'faith' in democratic government has always been undercut by a quite rational perception that the political lion skin of citizenship had a large mane and belonged to a male lion!¹⁶

A more tentative, if less dramatic, interim conclusion would be to argue that despite longer continuities, the current crisis in political authority in the UK is specific to the post-war settlement and that it may indeed be precipitated by the impact of cultural transformations as much as by political and economic changes. For commentators working within the liberal paradigm, weakening of democratic institutions is largely seen as the product of political fragmentation since the 1960's, which is in turn grounded partly in poor economic performance, partly in the overloading of the collectivist state and partly in the rise of the new politics and social movements with their explicit challenge to concepts of liberal democracy.¹⁷ Such explanations fail to even ask questions about the effects of cultural processes on the shifts within political discourse. Not surprisingly we need to move outside political sociology for the integration of a cultural analysis. For there are those who do cite cultural institutions and particularly the shifting dynamics of mass consumer culture as crucial to any assessment of political disaffection.

The sociologist and liberation theorist André Gorz sees the massive expansion of leisure and consumption within 'post-industrial' societies as throwing up a challenge not so much to liberal democracy, rather to traditional socialist politics. For Gorz the de-centring of the importance of work in the lives of millions of service sector workers is leading to a crisis in the politics of production. Gorz reads this as entirely positive, breaking the Marxist legacy of 'normalizing, repressive conformity associated with the discourse of organized labour' and opening up the real struggle for human freedom, based on the assertion of 'tenderness, love, creativity, aesthetic pleasure'.¹⁸ All of this is now taking place prefiguratively, we are told, through the energies and desires people invest not in organized class politics but in: 'family life, a home of one's own, a back garden, a do-it-yourself workshop, a boat, a country cottage, a collection of antiques, music, gastronomy, sport, love, etc.'¹⁹ Gorz, like the Henley Centre, overstates his case. But if his generalizations about the decline of one form of political discourse and the rise of another remain polemical (and ultimately rest on essentialist notions of human nature), then what is again significant about the argument is his exploration at the interstices of political and cultural systems and the insistence that forms of contemporary leisure and

consumption generate their own patterns of self-determined action.

A more well-rehearsed use of cultural analysis to explore the specific sea-changes taking place with British politics since the late 1970's is one which sees a close inter-relation between market-based cultures of consumption, political disaffection and the successes of the political right. For the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman 'Britain's exit from politics' (apathy, distrust, alienation from political institutions) has been fostered by successive Conservative governments encouraging the electorate to 'buy oneself out of politics', to see politics as only a nuisance - a barrier to real life which lies elsewhere - in the world of personal freedoms, the market and so on.²⁰ Bauman is, like Gorz, probing the interface between one form of political discourse and patterns of mass taste. Arguments like these were discussed across a spectrum of left political culture in Britain in the 1980's as part of an attempt to formulate responses to the successes of the new right.²¹ Yet can the relation between politics and culture simply be evoked by an appeal to the ascendancy of market-based consumption? When Bauman and others talk of the effects of the iconography of the market in accelerating feelings of political alienation, they are employing a familiar shorthand to stand in for a more precise cultural anthropology of the present. If patterns of mass culture

do have effects on forms of political association - as is claimed - what precisely are the contemporary forms of culture which are most influential?

Market research over the last decade has been in the business of charting patterns of popular taste, not in order to gauge their effects on political imagery, but to predict future trends for the consumer industries. Here are forms of knowledge and professional expertise which have expanded rapidly with the growth of the post-war consumer industries and forms of mass culture. We are dealing with intellectuals, in the broad sense of the term, whose occupations, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, involve some form of symbolic representation in the handling of goods and services.²² But what can the prognoses of market research deliver, judged by the standards of academic discourse? Isn't marketing a system so bound up with enterprise and the firm that its findings are always fundamentally flawed? Academic distrust of these newer experts may highlight some of its own prejudices: a suspicion of market-based cultures or an unstated awareness that these 'older' and 'newer' professional discourses are in some form of competition over their respective regimes of truth - especially in the areas of cultural analysis and social science. The point here is not to argue for the superiority of marketing over forms of academic knowledge, but to insist that if we are concerned to map some of the major trends and indicators

of commercially driven contemporary culture, then we need to engage with the traditions of market research.

What criteria do market research organisations deal in for plotting change in UK consumer and leisure industries? One of the most critical factors for consumer markets is the dramatically changing population spread. Here a substantial drop in the classic teenage market (15-24 age range) is offset by a dramatic rise in 25-34 year olds. Moreover, what is termed the leading 'empty nest' group (couples without dependent children) is set to grow strongly; backed by continuing policies of early retirement and property inheritance, making them the key market in many sectors.²³ Among the elderly, the most marked change is the predicted rapid rise in the number of 'old old' (ie those over 75). Turning to household demographics, the marketing predictions are for a continuing decline in average household size (reflecting a fragmentation of family type and style) and an acceleration of the migration from inner city and older urban areas to the commuter countryside and to medium-sized country towns.²⁴

Such findings are familiar from both government statistics and commercially commissioned research. But what of consumption and current leisure cultures? Here three themes come through strongly: the rise of more segmented consumer markets, accompanied by proliferating and

intensified forms of individualism and the consolidation of home-centred leisure. Taken together, the marketing argument follows a characteristic logic. Economic and cultural change is accelerating the break up of those traditional mass markets (youth, the working-class, women) which were the stable building blocks of post-war consumption and replacing them with much more volatile and segmented consumer profiles: the working woman, 'grey power' or the young elderly, the proliferating images of masculinity and so on. Moreover, specific forms of individualism projected around personal control, individual distinctiveness and particular styles of life, rather than status and social emulation, now lead in many market sectors - for food, fashion, holidays, etc.²⁵

Finally, a recurrent stress in current market research is the consolidation of home-based leisure. Backed by seventy per cent UK home-ownership, recent developments in electronic leisure technology such as cable and satellite TV, video, home computers and by the partial collapse of confidence in public leisure venues, improving and investing in the home - materially and symbolically - is an area in which a wide cross-section of consumers are likely to spend a high part of their discretionary income. But the move towards home-centred culture is contradictory and does not simply work to shore-up familialism. Market research now defines the home as a multi-purpose leisure site, where its members inter-act as much as consumer

individuals around specific products and lifestyles, as members of the traditional family unit.²⁶

Taken together, these indicators generated by professionals within the consumer industries are not massively distant from the more academic discussions of sociologists and cultural anthropologists about the changing structures of 'advanced' industrial societies. Shifts in the organisation of consumption and production, demographic changes, transformations in the spheres of leisure cultures and domestic life are noted by both sets of commentators. My point here is less to enter into a debate about the precise nature of such developments - which remain only suggestive in a paper of this length - but to return to the broader arguments about the possible relationship between these changes and the sphere of formal politics.

If we can now begin to understand the conception of post-war democracy as a specific moment in twentieth century political history, we should also observe that as a system 'to be believed in' it rested on particular assumptions about the organisation of public and private life, about cultural norms and values, about the presentation of the self, about the gendered dimensions of so-called civic life. This infrastructure is no longer as secure as it was once perceived to be. Economic, demographic and political changes, but also shifts in the sphere of commercially organised leisure, have all had

their effects. In particular, contemporary cultures of consumption project images of the good society which sit uneasily with the discourse of formal politics. This is often an issue of style and presentation, but in a quite profound sense. The political language of formal democracy is most comfortable with verbal or written discourse, working through rational methods of persuasion and organised as policies, demands, etc. Its traditional methods of mobilising have been via various forms of collective action and versions of the massed self: the mass party, public meetings, rallies, etc. The growing televisualisation of national politics in Britain since the 1950's has partly shifted these ground rules of political culture, but not substantially. Current forms of leisure and consumption work with a quite different agenda which implicitly cuts against these political modes of representation. Mobilising what are principally visual and aural stimuli, they float images or lifestyles. Their appeal is principally through regimes of pleasure and an address to much more intimate and multiple senses of the self. These features are not in any sense of course new (individualism has been a dominant mode of address within advertising throughout the post-war period), but current forms of consumer culture have marked an intensification of the process.

My general point then, to conclude this part of the argument, is that the loss of confidence in the system of

formal representative democracy charted within political science needs to be investigated not simply in relation to purely political or economic factors, but against a background of cultural transformations. Apathy or political cynicism may indeed involve a transference to other value systems and centres of interest. Such remarks of course are points of departure for further work. For example, to what extent this phenomenon is recent, how far it pertains to the political experience of specific social groups are questions needing further elaboration.

Mass Culture and Mass Democracy

This is certainly not the first time that commercial leisure has collided with formal politics - transforming both areas in the process. Recent historical work has shown how the emergence of mass culture and the sea-changes in definitions of 'the political' in the broad period from 1880 to 1920 were not discrete developments, but dynamically inter-related. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed large-scale and qualitative upheavals in popular cultural forms. New industries - the national popular press, commercial music hall, spectator sport and later cinema and radio - reworked the production and consumption of culture. Popular culture, backed by intensive capital investment, commercial entrepreneurship and a growing conception of national markets, went hand-in-hand with new expectations

of pleasure, now predominantly set up as entertainment and relaxation. These sea-changes had quite profound effects on the social experience of subordinate group and classes.

Gareth Stedman Jones identifies the years 1870-1900 as a period of 're-making' of the British working-class, quite as crucial as the seminal years 1790-1830. In contrast to that earlier moment, the newer forms of leisure-consumption are geographically separated out from the nodal points of mass trades union activity or the politics of the new mass party.²⁵ But more importantly, the definitions and expectations surrounding these two domains begin to be tightened. Charles Booth in his grandiose survey, Life and Labour of the People of London, 1887-91, characterizes this shift dramatically as one where 'pleasure, amusement, hospitality and sport' come to replace 'trade union, friendly societies and politics (including socialism) as the central forces of working class life'.²⁶ Booth, of course, rehearses here the early form of an argument about the relation between mass leisure and politics which has resonated ever since. For here is modern popular culture in its guise as the motor of manipulation - neutralizing and pacifying political activity.

Yet if this reading is naive in its model of how popular culture works, it is right about one thing. For it was during the early years of this century that a new bargain was struck between political discourse and

cultural life. What occurs is not, of course, a decline in working-class politics, but a re-definition of the boundaries of 'politics' and 'culture', of where one stopped and the other began. It is no accident that the growth of mass leisure coincided with the moment when the discourse of mass democracy was itself being forged and implemented. The first decades of the twentieth century witness the transformation of this latter area. The professionalization of electoral politics, the creation of the mass party, above all the enshrinement of the doctrine of formal political representation (institutionalized in the Representation of the People Act, 1918) were key indicators. But what is equally significant is the new balance that these transformations strike up between politics and culture. What was being established here was a distinctive field of relations, marking out the culturally possible from the politically possible.

Theories of Popular Culture: Contemporary Cultural Politics

It is the historical inter-relationship between political and cultural forces which continues to structure forms of contemporary cultural analysis and strategies of cultural intervention in a British context. One coherent cultural response to the perceived stalemate of formal representative democracy outlined earlier has been the idea of cultural politics. Influential in left of centre

intellectual circles, it involves a re-reading of the significance of popular cultural forms and a conception of cultural transformation which pushes at the boundaries of formal politics. Cultural politics in this guise explicitly seeks to address those spheres of everyday life which are part of the repertoire mass commercial leisure and which have been carefully structured out of the language of twentieth century democratic politics. It is this conception of the politics of culture and its permutations of power which forms the basis for my concluding remarks.

First though we need to situate this particular interpretation of culture in its broader political and intellectual contexts. In Britain in the 1980's it was not left of centre arguments which were initially to the fore in identifying the ways in which culture was working to transform the political field, but those of the new right. Thatcherism not only attempted to shift political style and language away from the vocabulary of consensus politics, it also annexed a variety of motifs partly drawn from the sphere of contemporary mass culture, working them into its own forms of populism.²⁸ The rhetoric of the new right for much of the decade (as distinct from many of its policies) condensed a series of heroic or romantic political images, which while not actually negating the language of representative democracy, privileged quite other issues. A modernist discourse of transformation,

the virtues of effective national leadership, a fixed epistemology of political and economic truths - these were distinctive stylistic features of Thatcherism. Moreover, it was the radical right who made the claim that it was they who were successfully responding to transformations in the cultural and personal orientation of key social groups within British society. The language of consumer choice, the identification of economic individualism with political and cultural freedoms (particularly over the freedom to spend money), the glamorisation of the market economy - while this type of imagery did not originate with the political doyens of the new right, it was run together for much of the 1980's into a distinctive configuration. Major policy initiatives - such as the sale of public sector housing, the consumerisation of state services, the privatisation of major public utilities via the logic of popular capitalism - underwrote the commitment to consumption, choice and cultural as well as economic liberty.

The political and ideological success of the new right over the past decade has formed one important context in which debates over popular culture and cultural politics have been projected. But these have not been framed simply as a reaction against consumer capitalism. In the words of Stuart Hall, who has played a major role in setting the agenda here, studying the popular has necessarily involved 'learning from Thatcherism';

attempting to understand the terms on which the political right have drawn on the language of popular pleasures, desires and aspirations, often culling them from the sphere of popular culture.²⁹

A series of seminal studies have taken as their subject matter various strands of cultural activity in post-war Britain, broadly associated with specific commodities or commercially based forms of production and consumption. Many of these have become familiar via cultural export as key texts of 'British cultural studies'. We might include here accounts of the symbolic resistance provided by the 'styles' of post-war British youth cultures; the contradictory pleasures and demands thrown up for women by the commercially marketed cultures of femininity (magazines, popular fiction, etc) or the forms of empowerment working-class people have derived from the cultures of commodification and consumption.³⁰ While there are significant differences of approach, a revalorisation of popular cultural forms, with a critical distance from earlier paradigms on mass culture, constitutes an ongoing emphasis. Significantly, the earlier approaches singled out for critical attention are not simply those espoused by cultural conservatives. For example, elite models of cultural classification, where culture had an exclusive referent in high-culture (and more particularly art-based practices) and was endowed with trans-historical notions of value, were equally

privileged within idealist aesthetics and intellectual marxism in the inter-war period. Similarly, concepts of 'cultural duping', with commercial leisure cast as stimulating false needs and producing social passivity, were arguments advanced by widely differing constituencies in the 1950's and 60's in both Britain and the USA - from establishment figures like the art historian Kenneth Clark, through liberals such as J.K. Galbraith to more radical intellectuals like Richard Hoggart and Betty Friedan.³¹

In reassessing popular culture recent authors have drawn on various tools of cultural analysis to counter those earlier interpretations. Many of these concepts have become familiar features of radical syllabuses and reading lists. The impact of semiology and structural linguistics has enabled textual readings of cultural objects which foreground the active ways in which meanings are ascribed to commodities by consumers - meanings which at times subvert or disrupt dominant values. While a stress on the significant distance between the production of cultural forms and their reception foregrounds the sense which individuals and social groups themselves construct out of popular rituals. Further, there is often a distinctive reading of the market contained within such forms of analysis, which highlights both the cultural dynamics of commodification and the market as the unstable point of exchange between producer and consumer - rather

than as simply either the site of profit maximization on the one hand or the sphere of total consumer freedom on the other. More often than not the legacy of Gramsci is to be felt in this understanding of popular culture - especially Gramsci's conceptualization as the popular as a site of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups.

The intellectuals who have polemicized for this approach have not merely sought to transform the cultural agenda within higher education institutions, which is their base in a formal sense. A working alliance with cultural producers and entrepreneurs outside Britain's universities and polytechnics - with magazine and newspaper journalists, television programmers, arts and cultural policy makers, small and medium size service sectors businesses - has built up a more expansive intellectual milieu with broader notions of cultural transformation.

And if the political rhetoric of the new right has given added stimulus to such strategies, the other major point of critical dialogue has been the social democratic politics which we have charted. Here the engagement has been particularly with labourist and Labour Party codes of politics. In conjunction with arguments derived from the new social movements, cultural politics has formed part of the broader challenge to the boundaries of formal politics, bringing into visibility concerns which had been

relegated to the 'non-political' side of civic culture. Consumption, personal identities, pleasure, desire and fantasy are recurrent icons in the writing on popular culture and frequently their challenge is posed to the perceived narrowness of what socialist discourse has become' in its politically organized forms.

Such an overview is to chart what have become a familiar series of interventions. But my concluding remarks are concerned to probe this 'political' strategy for culture in light of the historical developments which have been mapped. The paper has advanced a series of arguments about the historical relationship between the domain of formal democratic politics and the sphere of popular culture in Britain. Current notions of cultural politics theorise that relationship in very specific ways and strategically push at the boundaries of the two domains - arguing for culture to be acknowledged as a valid field for 'political' intervention. Yet there remains a confusion within this paradigm over the precise sense in which culture is to be politicized. This is not simply a confusion of vocabulary and terminology (linguistic confusions rarely are simply that), it signals a much more fundamental ambiguity over the status of culture as a site of 'political' activity and over the political strategies for cultural change. Commentators working within this approach might respond by insisting that such a confusion is productive, for it is precisely

what gives cultural studies and cultural politics its cutting edge. Nevertheless, I would argue that this lack of clarity is ultimately disabling.

'Evaluating the potential progressiveness of popular culture', as John Fiske puts it, has been central to the way in which the paradigm has defined its objects of study.³² It is to state an obvious, but one which is of significance, that such cultural evaluations are performed by highly trained intellectuals with the aid of very specific forms of professional competence. To insist on this is not to romantically yearn for some more authentic, popular reading of cultural forms, but it is to point up an awareness of the professionalisation of this field of cultural analysis - a professionalisation which has an extensive prior history. For Fiske's characteristic demand for the progressive evaluation of popular culture carries with it the legacy of much older systems of cultural intervention - and notably an inheritance from the discourse of social reform. It is this nineteenth century tradition of educative expertise initially directed as intervention from without into the habits of life of recalcitrant social groups, which first isolates culture as a site of strategic transformation. The production of 'the social', as Jaques Donzelot terms it, as a specific domain which includes culture, but which is separate from politics and economics, is a distinctive nineteenth century development.³³ The link between the

early cultural technicians and contemporary cultural commentators is not of course in the precise assessment of popular culture, but rather in the type of instrumentalism which is integral to both approaches. In the case of the nineteenth century expert such an instrumentalism is explicit as part of the strategy for reform, while in its latter day version it is much more understated. Nevertheless, contemporary notions of cultural politics do continually interrogate culture from the point of view of transformative intervention, which is termed 'political'. In what sense it is 'political', whether this is merely a rhetorical device or something more concrete, remains unclear as a result of the continual slippage between the ambiguously specified areas of politics and culture.

I have focused on these two related problems contained within the paradigm of what has been termed cultural politics - a latent instrumentalism and a confused conception of the political - not simply to point up theoretical inadequacies, but because such difficulties do have implications for interventions in the cultural arena. If there is to be intervention in the field of commercially based popular culture, we should be clear about who is intervening, with what systems of knowledge and in order to achieve what strategic aims and goals. Loose notions such as the self-empowerment of subordinate groups, or ideas of 'cultural democracy' need to be rendered much more specific. What also needs clarifying

are the distinctive modes and strategies of transformation appropriate to the cultural domain, rather than merely borrowing models from the political arena. Such questions can best be pursued in relation to more concrete work on particular cultural forms, but the need for this process of clarification is long overdue.

Footnotes

1. The Henley Centre for Forecasting, Planning for Social Change, London 1986, Vol 1, p.119.
2. For critiques of post-war liberal democratic theory which engage directly with Almond and Verba's concept of civic culture see: D. Kavanagh, 'Political Culture in Great Britain: The Decline of Civic Culture', in G. Almond and S. Verba (ed), The Civic Culture Revisited, 1989; C. Pateman, The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory, Cambridge, 1989, chapter 7.
3. G. Almond and S. Verba, The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations, Princetown, 1963, pp.29, 117, 206.
4. See for example: S. Beer, Britain Against Itself. The Political Contradictions of Collectivism, London, 1982, pp 144-46; J. Alt, The Politics of Economic Decline: Economic Management and Political Behaviour in Britain since 1964, Cambridge, 1974, p.200; V. Hart, Distrust and Democracy. Political Distrust in Britain and America, Cambridge 1978.
5. Quoted in V. Hart, Distrust and Democracy, op. cit., p.45.
6. Opinion Research Centre, Attitudes to MP's, London, June, 1973, quoted in D. Kavanagh, 'Political Culture in Great Britain', op. cit., p.145.
7. Report of the Royal Commission on the Constitution, Research Paper 7, Devolution and Other Aspects of Government: An Attitudes Survey, London, HMSO, 1973, p.10.
8. Ibid.
9. A Heath and R. Topf, 'Political Culture', in R. Jowell, S. Witherspoon and L. Brook (ed.) British Social Attitudes the 1987 Report, London, 1987, p.54.
10. For distrust among the young see: R. Inglehart, 'The Silent Revolution in Europe: Integrational Change in Post-Industrial Societies', American Political Science Review, 65, 1971; V. Hart, Distrust and Democracy, op. cit., p.38. For evidence that political distrust tends to be more manifest among the less formally educated and among sections of the working-class see: Royal Commission on the Constitution, Vol 1, op. cit., p.21; V. Hart, op. cit., pp.58, 61-2.

11. For evidence of political disaffection in Britain in the immediate post-war period see: Mass Observation Archives, University of Sussex, Puzzled People, 1948, p.151; also more impressionistically: R. Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy, London, 1957, pp.230-1. For more recent histories of the 1950's which question the nature of the political and cultural consensus see: S. Hall and T. Jefferson (ed.), Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain, London 1976; S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson and B. Roberts, Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order, London, 1978; A. Sinfield, Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain, California, 1989; L. Heron (ed.), Truth, Dare or Promise. Girls Growing up in the Fifties, London, 1985.
12. G. Almond and S. Verba, The Civic Culture, op. cit., p.117.
13. Ibid.
14. M. Abrams, 'Subjective social indicators', Social Trends, No 4, 1973, pp.35-50.
15. The Henley Centre for Forecasting, Planning for Social Change, op. cit., p.119.
16. C. Pateman, The Disorder of Women, op. cit., p.6.
17. See for example: S. Beer, Britain Against Itself, op. cit., pp.1-5; J. Alt, The Politics of Economic Decline, op. cit., p.200; R. Inglehart, 'The Silent Revolution', op. cit., p.241.
18. A. Gorz, Farewell to the Working Class. An essay on Post-Industrial Socialism, trans. M. Sonenscher, London, 1987, p.91.
19. Ibid., p.80.
20. Z. Bauman, 'Britain's exit from politics', New Statesman and Society, 29 July 1988, p.37.
21. See for example: S. Hall, 'The Culture Gap', Marxism Today, January, 1984; J. Williamson, 'Consuming Passion', New Socialist, No. 24, February 1985; F. Mort, 'The Great Texas Chain Store Massacre', New Socialist, February 1986; G. Mulgan and K. Worpole, Saturday Night or Sunday Morning? From Arts to Industry - New Forms of Cultural Policy, London, 1986; C. Leadbeater, 'How have-nots can share working-class triumphalism', New Statesman and Society, 21 August 1987; C. Leadbeater, 'Power to the

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22. See Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, London, 1984.
 23. The following demographic and cultural profile of the United Kingdom is largely taken from The Henley Centre for Forecasting, Leisure Futures, Autumn, 1988. But see also for the late 1980's: Central Statistical Office, Social Trends (annually); Central Statistical Office, Regional Trends (annually); British Social Attitudes Reports (annually).
 24. The Henley Centre for Forecasting, Leisure Futures, op. cit.
 25. G. Stedman Jones 'Working-class Culture and Working Class Politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class', in Languages of Class: studies in English working class history, 1832-1982, Cambridge, 1983. Jones' argument about the relation between working-class politics and culture is confined to his study of the London East-end; he also oversimplifies the effects of the new leisure cultures on working class political activity. For discussions of the same debate see: D. LeMahiea, Culture for Democracy, 1988; C. Waters, British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, Manchester, 1990.
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 28. See especially S. Hall and M. Jaques (ed), The Politics of Thatcherism, London, 1981.
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