

"Power in Popular Culture"

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**POWER IN POPULAR CULTURE: TRANSFORMATION,
DISCRIMINATION AND THE POLITICS OF FLEXIBLE
ACCUMULATION**

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A NOTE TO READERS: First, let me apologize for completing this paper so late. Second, let me warn you that it remains a very rough and incomplete draft, especially after the first few pages. If you are kind enough to read it, I would certainly appreciate any comments and criticisms that you might have. Please seek permission before quoting.

"It is a world transformed. Where things are not what they seem. It is the world of the TransFormers...A world of heroic autobots and evil decepticons."

For much of the 1980s, TransFormers were among the most popular action figures for young boys in the United States. Marketed by Hasbro, they translated the abstract aesthetic of the Rubik's cube into the concrete logic linking play and war. In one manifestation, they were familiar objects from the male toy box -- cars, trucks, dinosaurs and insects -- but, subject to the proper manipulations, they could rapidly be turned into well-armed soldiers and potent weapons, destined -- in the language of their boxes -- for the never-ending battle between good and evil.

It is tempting to devote the whole of this hurried paper to an exploration of the cultural politics embedded in the relationship between these toys, their users, and a military-industrial complex that manufactures simultaneously our consumer goods, our weaponry, and our myths. But my purpose in quoting epigrammatically from the fractured legend on the box in which the TransFormers were sold is in fact to open up a more general area of inquiry. What fascinates me about these quasi-sentences is that they articulate with remarkable succinctness the interplay of two discourses that seem to have become increasingly salient in the United States since the beginnings of the last decade, not only in the messages directed at children but in more general forms of expression in both the mass media and popular language.

The first, which I shall call "the discourse of transformation", emphasizes the capacity in hybrid beings to switch fluidly back and forth between distinct and even contradictory possibilities and positions. "It is the world of the TransFormers...", a world in which the old coherences can no longer be assumed. We know this discourse in the celebratory language of multiple identities, in the attempts to grasp the modal personality of postmodernism in the more doleful metaphors of schizophrenia, in Hollywood figurations such as Superman, Robocop, and the Terminators, in Madison Avenue images of the yuppie businesswoman -- at once hardworking careerist and sexy homemaker, and in Donna Haraway's artful Manifesto for Cyborgs.

The second discourse, ostensibly quite different, I shall call "the discourse of discrimination." Constituting the world as one in which old boundaries have grown permeable and appearances can no longer serve to mark intention and identity, this discourse emphasizes that crucial moral differences still exist and valorizes the capacity both to recognize the differences and to reinscribe the line between them. "It is...a world of heroic autobots and evil decepticons." We know this discourse in the Reagan rhetoric of evil empires and Nicaraguans invading Texas, in the language of those who claim to be saving innocent fetuses and crack-addicted babies from their murderous mothers, in the imagery of popular movies such as *Something Wild*,

After Hours, and Blue Velvet, and, most notably perhaps, in the panic idiom of the War on Drugs, an idiom given particularly vivid expression by Daryl Gates and his supporters in licensing their assaults on the poor black neighborhoods of south-central Los Angeles.

The general question around which this paper is organized is really quite simple: How can we make sense of the fact that these particular discourses have been so salient over the last decade or so in the United States? The first step, I believe, is to problematize those readings that would treat them either as successive -- the language of a newly dominant postmodernity replacing the increasingly desperate nostalgia of a fading modern sensibility -- or as irreducibly opposed -- the idiom of a tolerant liberal left challenging the rhetoric of a tough-minded and assertive right. As I shall indicate more fully below, the two discourses can, in fact, be seen as both chronically coincident and closely linked. Having aggregated them in this manner, however, it is equally necessary, as a second step, to disaggregate them into their dominant and subaltern usages. Whatever their "origins", one of their most important characteristics -- and an important clue to their articulation -- is that both of them have been taken up by dominant institutions and widely circulated in the corporate media. Moreover, it is here that an analysis of their salience should begin for any attempt to identify and make sense of subaltern resistances must surely start with an understanding of the dominant frames within which people act.

More narrowly, then, how, then, can we make sense of the fact that these discourses, understood as coincident and linked, have been increasingly salient in the language of dominant institutions and the corporate media? Put succinctly, the argument I shall develop, as at least a partial answer to this question, is that the two discourses articulate significant responses by the ruling bloc in the United States to the ways in which the shift since the early 1970s from Fordism to an emerging regime of flexible accumulation and attendant changes in the nation's class structure have created a crisis in the "mode of regulation", a crisis threatening not only the persuasive force of dominant imagery and narratives but also the effectiveness of existing mechanisms associated with the disciplinary production of class-specific subjectivities. These discourses both contribute in themselves to an attempted resolution of the crisis and, more importantly, mark the traces of other, non-discursive practices mobilized to the same ends. Like the other papers for this panel, then, my argument, at its most general, explores the complex and contested ways in which the boundaries of community and the constitution of subjects are being redefined in a particular location at a specific historical moment.

To make this argument, I shall proceed in five stages. First, I shall amplify my introductory comments about the relationship between the two discourses. Second, I shall explicate more fully the idea of a crisis in the mode of regulation, as laid out by David Harvey, and the related need to distinguish within Gramsci's arguments about hegemonic influence between the general project of generating consent and the more specific project of shaping people's habits and dispositions in a class-related manner. Third, in an attempt to develop a more complex understanding to the latter project, I shall offer a sympathetic critique of Althusser's famous essay on ideology and the ideological state apparatuses. Fourth, by integrating these reflections with a fuller account of the

problems associated with the shift to flexible accumulation, I shall outline one way of interpreting the growing salience of the two discourses in the dominant media. And, finally, I shall offer some general remarks about the relationship between this analysis and current approaches to the workings of power in popular culture, especially as they have been played out in the debates between neo-Gramscian and postmodern perspectives in the cultural studies literature.

Before proceeding, it is perhaps worth pointing out that my understanding of these issues has been shaped by the following considerations. I have been trained as a cultural anthropologist; I have been working since the early 1980s on the cultural politics of class transformation as they have been played out in the lives of people migrating between an area of peasant production in west-central Mexico and proletarian jobs in Silicon Valley; I am currently developing a parallel project on the experiences of people living at the bottom of the rapidly changing class structure in southeast Michigan; like many anthropologists, I have been turning to the burgeoning literature in cultural studies to try to understand more effectively the ways in which mass media and communications, consumerism, increasingly pervasive forms of governance, and new systems of class relations have been affecting the people with whom I work; so far, my knowledge of this literature remains partial; and the only ethnography which I am able to use here is the experience of living for twelve years as a participant observer -- or, as the INS would have it, "resident alien" -- in this particular culture.

CONFIGURING THE DISCURSIVE FIELD

How should we understand the relationship between the discourses of transformation and discrimination? It is perhaps worth noting first that, while the former seems to be about individuals and the latter about collectivities, each is frequently extended metaphorically to encompass the other pole. Within this broader field, however, the two approaches that I mentioned earlier remain the most common.

The first of these treats the discourses as marking an historical shift in the dominant "structure of feeling". According to this reading, the discourse of transformation is the language of a newly dominant postmodernity, one that articulates the contemporary experience of heterogeneity, fragmentation, surfaces, paradoxes, and permeable boundaries. The discourse of discrimination, by contrast, is considered the language of an increasingly residual modernity, one that alludes with increasingly desperate nostalgia to once more relevant images of homogeneity, wholeness, depth, unity and boundedness. It is the language both expressed and embodied by Ronald Reagan in his evocations of Cold War polarities, cowboys and indians, and the simple agonistics of good and evil. Yet this reading seems rather too glib. It was, after all, the latter discourse that managed to evoke a more effective response with the U.S. electorate throughout the 1980s. Truth and justice may no longer serve to animate persuasive master narratives, but "The American Way" seems still to have some life in it. More generally, one of the most striking features of the last decade has been the continued coexistence of the two idioms side-by-side.

The second approach recognizes this sustained coexistence and treats the discourses instead as markers of coincident and contending political visions. According to this reading, the discourse of transformation, with its emphasis on easy movement between differences, expresses a left liberal vision that both advocates a pluralistic society and valorizes those individuals capable of containing variation within themselves and moving easily between distinct groups. This was the discourse of Dukakis in the 1988 presidential campaign and remains the language of the so-called "cultural left" in struggles over multiculturalism and of proponents of a relatively open immigration policy. The discourse of discrimination, by contrast, is held to express a conservative vision that both advocates a homogeneous social core and valorizes individuals capable of knowing clearly what belongs in people's bodies and what does not. It was, of course, the language with which George Bush campaigned against Dukakis and remains the idiom of "defenders" of the canon, the "Just Say No" campaign and nativist opposition to immigration. Yet, on closer inspection, this distinction also begins to break down. Most notably, the language of diversity, multiplicity and fluid movement has readily been appropriated by dominant institutions such as universities and major corporations; and it has found filmic expression in Republican Kevin Costner's re-reading of the history of western expansion. If, indeed, the discourses do still mark opposed positions, it has become increasingly difficult to know who will be using them at any given moment.

Viewed in this way, then, the two discourses appear as they do in the legend from the TransFormer's box, at once coincident and complexly linked. Indeed, whatever the contexts in which they initially developed, one of their most important characteristics -- and an important clue to their linkage -- is that both have been utilized by dominant groups and widely circulated side-by-side in the corporate media. Having aggregated them in this manner, however, it is -- as I indicated earlier -- immediately necessary to distinguish analytically between dominant and subaltern usages. Moreover, it is necessary to look at the former first, for the significance of subaltern responses can be gauged only when the logic of dominant usages has been identified. This is, at least, the basis on which I shall proceed.

[From this point on, I shall provide only a summary outline of the argument in its fullest form.]

CRISIS AND THE MODES OF HEGEMONIC INFLUENCE

How, then, can we make sense of the fact that these discourses, understood as coincident and linked, have been increasingly salient in the language of dominant institutions and the corporate media during the last decade? The first step, by now perfectly familiar in this kind of analysis, is to treat them not simply as reflective or expressive forms but as markers of a double instrumentality, as both modes of intervention in themselves and as sources bearing the traces of other, non-discursive influences. Put simply, it seems reasonable to treat their widespread use within dominant areas of expression as *prima facie* evidence that they have been bound up in the general process by which the ruling bloc in the United States pursues its

hegemonic project. But this step, in itself, does not get us very far. To understand the specific nature and significance of their place within this project, it is clearly necessary to identify in detail the particular context within which they have been mobilized. The present section and the one that follows suggest how to go about conceptualizing this context by drawing in turn on the analytical framework outlined by David Harvey in his recent book, The Condition of Postmodernity, some brief reflections on Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, and a sympathetic critique of Althusser's essay on ideology.

Put succinctly, Harvey's general argument, drawn from the work of the "regulation school", is that the history of capitalism can be understood as a succession of distinct "regimes of accumulation", each involving a particular arrangement of class relations and a correspondingly distinctive "mode of social and political regulation". (For definitions, see Harvey 1989: 121ff.) More specifically as regards the contemporary moment, he argues that, since the early 1970s, capitalism has been undergoing a breakdown in the "Fordist" or "Fordist-Keynesian" regime of accumulation, dominant since the mid-1940s, and seems to be moving towards a new regime which he describes as a one of "flexible accumulation". In the United States (and in other core countries), this shift has been accompanied by significant changes in the class structure and in the occupational structure through which it is refracted. Concomitantly, both the rapidity of the change itself and the widespread sense of hardship it has engendered among people in the United States have generated an incipient crisis in the established means of regulation.

Translated into the closely related language of Gramscian analysis, these developments can be understood as placing an increasing amount of strain on the processes and practices by which the ruling bloc works to create and maintain hegemonic control. To take full advantage of this framework in understanding the current crisis and the place of the two discourses within it, however, I believe that it is necessary to emphasize a distinction central to Gramsci's understanding of hegemony. While he interpreted the pursuit of hegemony partly in terms of the ruling bloc's capacity to generate or appropriate images and narratives capable of creating within the subject population a generalized sense of community and common interest, he also stressed -- most clearly in "Americanism and Fordism" -- how the hegemonic project simultaneously involves the attempt to shape people's habits and dispositions differentially so as to facilitate their insertion into a heterogeneous and hierarchical framework of occupations and classes.

In the recent neo-Gramscian work that I have read in cultural studies, however, this second dimension of the hegemonic project has received relatively scant attention. To try to develop its implications further I shall therefore turn to a classic essay on the issue, Louis Althusser's famous article, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. (Notes Towards An Investigation)", (written in 1969-70 and published in Althusser, ed., Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, 1971).

READING ALTHUSSER

What can be learned from a return to Althusser's essay? I should make it clear right away that I am not recommending either blanket approval for the

whole argument or an uncritical application of its core features concerning the production of class-specific subjects to the contemporary situation. What I am suggesting, however, is that, caught between its Lacanian structuralism and its relative ahistoricism, there lies a particularly clear attempt to systematize this dimension of Gramsci's approach and that, by subjecting the essay to a critique that is sensitive to the context of its production, it is possible to identify a useful analytical frame and some extremely instructive weaknesses while developing a keener awareness of the significant differences between the setting which the essay addresses and the contemporary situation in the United States. Put another way, rather than trying to rescue a rational kernel from the mystical shell, I am suggesting that it is possible to extract a succulent filling from within a rather tasteless sandwich.

While the essay can be contextualized in many different ways, it is particularly useful for my present purposes to cast it as a response to a burgeoning body of scholarship produced within the French left during the 1950s and 1960s in which primary emphasis was given to the role of consumption and consumerism in the workings of contemporary capitalism (e.g. Barthes, Debord, Baudrillard). Destined to exercise a considerable influence on Anglo-American cultural studies during the 1970s and 1980s, this work focused heavily on the media, images and spectacle; it privileged discursive modalities of power, textual analysis, and a formal interest in the semiotic; and it alternated between images of cultural power involving the transmission of relatively empty, generalized messages to an essentially uniform audience (e.g. Barthes, Debord) and the workings of a plurality of distinct and unarticulated discourses (e.g. Foucault).

Althusser's approach to the workings of capitalist power was quite different. Reading Gramsci through Lacanian lenses, he argued that capitalism reproduced itself through the disciplinary production of class-specific subjects, using both repressive state apparatuses and the ideological influence of a wide array of public and private institutions (operating within a terrain ultimately organized by the state) to allocate people to different locations within the class structure (as refracted through the occupational structure). These processes, he claimed, worked not only by equipping people with the appropriate skills but also by instilling in them habits and dispositions appropriate to the niche for which they were destined. Moreover, although the media were one vehicle for exercising such influence, other institutions, most notably schools, played at least as important a part, operating not only discursively (in the narrow sense of the term) but also non-discursively, through "ritual" processes that turned actions into patterned practices and practices into habituated dispositions. Finally, Althusser pointed out, these influences did not simply stamp themselves on a dull and passive mass, but worked on people whose class-specific locations, experiences and forms of struggle provided them with a basis for potential resistance.

In this manner, then, Althusser brought back into focus the increasingly underemphasized issues of production, work, class and exploitation. He cautioned against an exaggerated fascination with the media and discursive modes of influence. By emphasizing the inculcation of substantive values and beliefs, he implicitly criticized analyses of culture and power that concentrated on formal issues of meaning. And, by linking multiple sources and directions of

disciplinary influence to the overarching logic of capitalist class relations, he offered a mode of analysis that effectively mediated the cultural generalities of some analyses and the unstructured discursive pluralism of others.

For all the merits of this argument as a conjunctural intervention, however, the essay was problematical in several respects. Most importantly in the context of the analysis I am developing, Althusser seemed to assume a relative isomorphism between the class structure and the occupational structure, a system in which people were allocated to more or less fixed positions within these structures, and a process of disciplinary influence that worked solely according to a logic of inclusion, placing everyone within these integrated frames. That is, his model assumed unitary and coherent subjects occupying clear and distinct slots within the occupational structure for sustained, even life-long periods. In so doing, it failed to theorize adequately the idea of mobility in and out of the structure as well as up and down it (and the ways in which this might complicate the processes of inculcation). Put more concretely, Althusser did not deal adequately with the experiences of those who made up the reserve armies of labor and the chronically unemployed, that is, most commonly at the time, women, resident minorities and foreign migrants. Beneath its tone of scientific generality, the analysis was to a large degree a theorization of the experiences of white men. Correspondingly, it was unable to address the ways in which both sexism and racism could be contingently articulated to the process of inculcating class-specific values and beliefs in men and women, whites and minorities, citizens and immigrants.

Minimally, then, two major conceptual revisions can be suggested. First, it is necessary to distinguish the idea of producing class-specific subjects (which implies a system of unitary and coherent subjects) from the idea of producing of class-related subjectivities (which allows for the possibility of attempts to inculcate in given individuals more than one set of habits and dispositions). Second, it is necessary to recognize that disciplinary influence can work through exclusion as well inclusion and that this process can affect not only the people excluded but also those still brought within the boundaries of the system.

RETURNING TO THE DISCOURSES

How can this rapid tour through the work of Harvey, Gramsci and Althusser help us make sense of the growing salience of the discourses of transformation and discrimination over the last decade?

To begin with, it is important to flesh out my earlier skeletal outline of Harvey's account of the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation. Given time constraints, I shall move straight to a consideration of the changes this transition has wrought in the class and occupational structures in the United States and in the relations between them. Crudely speaking, the Fordist occupational structure dominant from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s can be understood as having had a pyramidal shape. The space between the growing number of low-paying, non-unionized jobs in the secondary labor market at the bottom of the system and the professional/managerial jobs towards the top was still filled, thanks to the post-war social contract, by a relatively thick band of well-paid, unionized blue-collar jobs in the primary labor market. Moreover,

while the occupational structure was by no means isomorphic with the class structure, both the reserve army and the chronically unemployed segment of the population were relatively small. Correspondingly, mobility in and out of jobs and downward through the occupational structure were relatively limited. And the middle sections of the structure were sufficiently thick to serve as a solid material base on which to sustain at least the illusion of dominant narratives about the American Dream, a nation of the middle-classes, and a nation of immigrant success.

Since the early 1970s, these arrangements have undergone an accelerated process of change. The occupational structure has come increasingly to assume a "rocket" shape as a small bulge in the professional/managerial sector has been accompanied by a significant erosion of the blue-collar middle and a rapid increase in low-paying jobs in services and deskilled light assembly at the bottom. At the same time, the class structure has come to diverge increasingly from the occupational structure as both the reserve army and the chronically unemployed sector have grown significantly. More generally, the degree of mobility has increased at all levels of the structure, from the "yuppie bulge" (where the mobility is intense though largely lateral), to the middle, where there is now considerable mobility both down the structure and out of it, to the bottom where the rapid growth in both part-time and temporary employment have greatly increased the intensity of movement in and out of work. In cultural and political terms, the importance of the increasing amount of movement is perhaps exceeded by the changing composition of those who move. Whereas women, minorities and first generation immigrants dominated the ranks of reserve army labor in the Fordist period, they are now increasingly joined by white men.

It is these developments that have created a crisis for the hegemonic project of the ruling bloc. In part, this crisis relates to the process of generating consent through the provision of persuasive integrating narratives that constitute those in power as the proper or most effective guardians of imputed collective interests. Narratives about the American Dream, middle-class security, and immigrant success have become increasingly precarious as the material conditions that preserved at least the illusion of their validity have been steadily undermined. But the crisis also, and in some ways more importantly, relates to the second dimension that I identified in Gramsci's approach to hegemonic influence, namely the disciplinary production of class-specific subjects. In a radically different alignment of class relations and occupational possibilities, the earlier goals and mechanisms of disciplinary influence no longer seem appropriate to the same degree.

It is here that my critical reading of Althusser becomes particularly important for what it suggests is that the revisions that I offered even in relation to the conceptualization of Fordist conditions in France in the 1950s and 1960s become much more important for the understanding of post-Fordist conditions in the United States over the last decade. First, with the massive increase in mobility both between locations in the occupational and class structures and in and out of employment, it is increasingly necessary for the ruling bloc to encourage in people the capacity to combine within themselves different kinds of class-related repertoires of subjectivity and to move easily back and forth between them. Second, with a significant growth in the chronically

unemployed, it becomes increasingly necessary to supplement disciplinary processes of inclusion with processes of exclusion and to direct these not only at foreigners but at unemployed citizens as well. This serves simultaneously to make the victims seem responsible for their fate and to make those with access to work particularly wary of putting their jobs at risk.

This brings us back finally to the discourses of transformation and discrimination. What I would like to suggest is that, to understand their growing salience in the language of dominant institutions and the corporate media over the last decade, we must recognize the ways in which the discourses themselves and the material practices that they trace constitute significant responses to two crucial aspects of the crisis in the mode of regulation, particularly as it relates to the disciplinary production of class-specific subjects. Thus, the language of transformation both cryptically articulates and allows for an explicit celebration of the capacity to develop hybrid orientations and to move freely between different positions and possibilities, while the language of discrimination at once licences and traces an extensive series of measures that have been used during the 1980s to animalize and satanize those in the lower reaches of the nation's class structure. Together, they constitute just one set of techniques by which those in power redraw the boundaries of national communities and reconstitute the kinds of subjects who can operate on either side of these divides.

CONCLUSIONS

"Transformer: A device for changing power from one...current to another."
(Concise Dictionary of Physics and Related Subjects.)

How, finally, does the argument I have outlined here relate to broader issues in the work dealing with power in popular culture, especially as it has been carried out in cultural studies? Broadly, I shall offer three kinds of conclusion.

First, it challenges the ways in which postmodern perspectives conventionally organize the field. Most simply, it disputes historical accounts that argue for a gradual decline in the relevance of production, work, class and exploitation as foci of analysis. It also disputes the claim that we have undergone over the last two decades a simple shift from one kind of sensibility or "structure of feeling" to another. And it challenges modes of dividing up the theoretical terrain that emphasize the need for a dramatic break from earlier forms of theory and that prevent the maintenance of critical dialogues within evolving and internally diverse traditions of interpretation.

Second, my argument challenges the tendency in both postmodern and neo-Gramscian work to become increasingly seduced by consumption, leisure, the media, discourse, the text, style-leaders and textable moments of subaltern response to the relative neglect of production, work, non-media sources of influence, non-discursive material practices, everyday life, ordinary people and the minutiae of their daily actions. It does so not by recommending a simple reversion to the second set of terms but by advocating an approach that is capable of keeping both sets in focus at the same time.

Finally, through a dialectical encounter with the limits of my own analysis, I am led to argue for a much more serious attention to ethnography than is normally found in both postmodern and even neo-Gramscian work. While it is clearly incumbent on anthropologists to adapt their methods as they enter the kinds of settings in which cultural studies has developed its expertise, there is also a lot to be said for sustaining the kind of ethnographic approach that allows for attention to the full range of people's experiences and for the possibility of tracing their responses to dominant languages and images rather than inferring them from reading between the lines of textual sources. As anthropology transforms itself through its encounter with cultural studies, it is important that it not be drawn into the discriminating kinds of practice that keep it at home among texts rather than abroad among their users.

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