

**Be it jogging or TV, aerobics or video, the cultural face of Britain has been revolutionised since the 50s. The only problem is that the Left, by and large, hasn't seen it as particularly important.**

Stuart Hall

# The Culture Gap

ORWELL WAS WRONG about many things. But one thing he *did* get right was the general relationship between culture and social change. *1984* turns out, whatever its other faults, to be an uncanny anticipation of some major cultural trends in modern society. And the essay he wrote about 'Socialism and the English Genius' in the early years of the war — entitled *The Lion And The Unicorn* — was a brilliant attempt to ground the prospects for a genuinely indigenous British socialism in a reading of the tensions within British national-popular culture. In the actual year, 1984, this is a theme worth returning to.

There are sectors of the Left — especially those touched by the alternative currents of the 1960s — which do understand the relevance of cultural politics to the present conjuncture. They see the connection between cultural questions and the task which socialism has — to become part of everyday life, to make itself 'the common sense of the age'. But the Left as a whole has not distinguished itself in this area. Indeed, one major but neglected factor in the crisis of renewal which faces the Left today is the difficulty it has had keeping pace with the enormous cultural changes which have occurred since the 1950s. This has implications for the Left's ability to relate itself to the society around it as *it is*. It also has consequences for the Left's ability to renew its own vision and perspectives on the future — to imagine the future of socialism in ways which are in touch with the cultural categories the mass of ordinary people use to imagine theirs, as we approach the closing decades of the twentieth century.

## The fifties debate

There was a debate along these lines in the dark days of the 1950s when, face to face with the massive consumer boom which flourished under the aegis of Harold Macmillan (remember 'You've Never Had It So Good?'), and after a second defeat at the polls, Labour entered one of its earlier

nights of travail. Can it be, Mr Gaitskell inquired at the Blackpool Conference, that the whole culture on which the labour movement rests — the 'cloth cap' communities of traditional working class areas and occupations — was being eroded by the telly, the fridge, the new car, the washing machine and the glossy magazine.

It is instructive now to recall how that debate went. The Gaitskell view was part of the whole revisionist attack by the Right — the attempt to shift the labour movement into more centrist, 'post-capitalist' paths. It was predicated on the 'embourgeoisement'

## consumer capitalism *did* refashion and reshape social relations

thesis — the belief that, with affluence, the working class was becoming middle-class, and that class itself was a fast disappearing phenomenon. Put that way the proposition was patently absurd, as well as politically dangerous. Class relations do not disappear because the particular historic cultural forms in which class is 'lived' and experienced at a particular period, change. On the other hand, because of its resistance to the political strategy and analysis in which the proposition was embedded, the Left was largely driven into an equally untenable — but 'correct' — corner: the defence of 'Clause 4' of the Labour Party Constitution and the denial that *anything* had changed or could change under capitalism. (Clause 4 remains enshrined; though that piece of formalism has actually contributed precious little to deepening the concept of *social* ownership: the statist form of nationalisation has, meanwhile, continued to decline into widespread unpopularity, even amongst socialists).

## A cultural revolution

Failing to think the thing through, because they did not accept the categories of analysis which the Right provided, the Left too found itself boxed in. For, in fact, as we

all know now, the slow, uneven, contradictory impact of consumer capitalism *did* refashion and reshape social relations and cultural attitudes quite widely and irrevocably. Contrary to the popular view on the Left, there is nothing 'un-Marxist' about that proposition. Capitalism, throughout its history, has constantly restructured itself, and the cultural relations in which we are all netted. The fact that it is a deeply exploitative system has never prevented it from continuing, even in the midst of crisis, to be a *dynamic* system, constantly revolutionising the ground off which it lives.

British society — and thus the labour movement which is part of it — was extensively reshaped, culturally, by the long postwar boom, the most sustained period of expansion certainly this century. And, though the rhythm of capitalist development since then has been more uneven, the consequences of this reshaping have not disappeared. Nor, indeed, has its dynamic. The new technologies have not failed to emerge because the old technologies are falling apart. The growth in mass consumption, though it did not destroy or overturn the barriers of class divided society, did profoundly modify everyday life-patterns, the social experience and expectations and the lived universe of the majority of ordinary people. One can find evidence of this in a hundred everyday ways — in the new kinds of modern conveniences which found their way into ordinary homes; in the changes in patterns of leisure, entertainment, holidays; in shifts in patterns of drinking and entertainment, or food consumption. The areas most visible to public comment at the time — and impossible to deny — lay in the new youth culture — the revolution in musical tastes, styles of dress and modes of behaviour.

## A transformation in living

It is, of course, perfectly true that participation in the new mass consumer culture was and is very one-sided, and by no means a universal experience. Its distribution was highly skewed — often in

predictable class ways. Certainly, the system has not been able to sustain this level of popular consumption — though, as a result of the bargaining strength of the unions, money wages were maintained for a long period, into at least the early 1970s. The 'splurge' was one-sided in another, deeper sense. It was 'mass participation' *principally* through personal consumption in the mass market — a feature which undoubtedly strengthened the daily experience of 'the market as provider', running counter to, and often at the expense of, more socially responsible, welfare-oriented, common provision. This may well have also strengthened modern forms of 'possessive individualism' and privatisation. That is certainly the negative side.

On the other hand — to take but one area only — it transformed the immediate lives of many working class (and other) women, who would never have come into the labour market or broken some of the leading-strings of domestic drudgery without modern appliances in the home; and who may therefore be forgiven for refusing to regret their appearance simply because they bought these appliances, when they could afford them, from Rumbelows rather

social labour itself has matured and developed, are still not available in sufficient amounts to the working people who produced them and need them!

### Trolley warfare at Tesco

The foundations of class society were not destroyed by the high wage, high spend market-oriented consumer society which came into existence in this period — it would be absurd to overestimate the shifts which occurred. But it would also be quite wrong to imagine that its effects culturally have been totally eroded by the fact that the system is now in deep depression or that people can't afford all the new goods and services they would like to be able to buy. The new trends helped to remould habits, patterns, the models of everyday life. And these have a profound impact on what people now expect; on the threshold of their aspirations and expectations, on how they lead their daily lives.

This underlying drift of cultural change, producing a more loosely-textured, more diffuse and diverse daily experience (not, for that reason, a less exploited one), has never been properly analysed or drawn into the political calculations of the Left. I believe, myself, that over time it made a

state welfare benefits. What did change in the 1960s and 1970s was this rhythm of gratitude and deference. There is nothing 'respectful' about Tesco's or Sainsbury's. If you want a trolley, you had better bustle on in there, pay your money and take your choice. *Of course*, if the consumer sharks or the bargain-today boys could rip you off, so they would. No one could have any illusions — or require any monetarist instruction — about the character of trading in the mass market. But at least you aren't required to tug your forelock and look 'deserving' as you approach the till.

### Double-sided and contradictory

The resistance on the Left arose in part from a failure to predict the possibility of capitalism's postwar recovery—against the background of the 30s depression and the influence of a sort of Leninist law of inevitable capitalist crisis and decline; and partly from a failure to understand the double-sided and contradictory nature of mass capitalism. The Left was not incorrect in seeing the massive manipulation, the advertising hype, the ballyhoo, the loss of quality, the up- and down-market division, which are intrinsic to commercial consumerism. The difficulty was that this manipulative side was *all* that was seen. But, of course, since the inception of commercial capitalism and the drawing of all relations into the net of market transactions, there has been little or no 'pure' culture of the people — no wholly separate folk-realm of the authentic-popular, where 'the people' existed in their pure state, outside of the corrupting influences. The people have always had to make something out of the things the system was trying to make them into. People therefore used some of the opportunities opened up to widen their area of experience and choice, at the same time and in the same moment as their hard-earned wages circulated back through the tills and the ad markets into the coffers of the new entrepreneurs.



*Kids in Hamleys computer department*

than the Co-op. As an aside: there is, sometimes, in the reaction of the Left to these matters, an inverted puritanism which hardly bears inspection. Middle class socialists, heaving under the weight of their new hi-fis, their record collections, their videos and strip pine shelving, cheap prints and Chinese lanterns sometimes seem to prefer 'their' working class poor but *pure*: unsullied by contact with the market. Yet the only tenable position for a true cultural materialist must be a deep sense of outrage that the fruits of modern industry, technology and know-how, which

considerable contribution to the resistance to the more *statist* features of welfare-state socialism. It strengthened what Ralph Miliband has called the trend towards 'de-subordination'. I mean the loss of deference of an older and more paternalist kind which, in its modern form, was a strong feature of welfarism. Clients of the welfare state were expected, by Labour and Tory councils alike, not to push and shove for their rights, but to be *grateful* for what has been done for and to them. What did not change was the numbers of people who could not survive without the crutch of

Consumer capitalism works by working the markets; but it cannot entirely determine what alternative uses people are able to make of the diversity of choices and the real advances in mass production which it also always brings. If 'people's capitalism' did not liberate the people, it nevertheless 'loosed' many individuals into a life somewhat less constrained, less puritanically regulated, less strictly imposed than it had been three or four decades before. Of course the market has not remained buoyant and expansive in this manner. But the capacity, for a time, of the

system to pioneer expansion, to drive and develop new products and maximise new choices, while at the same time creaming off its profit margins, was seriously underestimated. Thus the Left has never understood the capacity of the market to become identified in the minds of the mass of ordinary people, not as fair and decent and socially responsible (that it never was), but as an expansive popular system.

### Trends of tomorrow

Another reason for the Left's resistance to "cultural change probably derives from the belief that the market has delivered most — as it usually does — only to those who already have the market advantages of wealth, power, status and influence: the sense that what we have been talking about is, for the majority of ordinary people beset by the harsh necessities of life, a *minority* experience. But is it? It certainly wasn't in the long boom. And while the recession prevents the mass of people from participating to the same degree on a regular or stable basis, it certainly does not prevent them, when they can, from wanting — and often having — not yesterday's but today's goods, both for themselves and their children. Television is now a majority interest and video could soon be. Britain is the largest market in Western Europe for the sale of personal computers, just as, for better or worse, the move to computer languages and thinking through video games is a mass, not a minority privileged interest, for children and young people. In part, of course, this is the product of a massively capitalised swamp advertising campaign. But more importantly it is also a perfectly correct perception that this is where modern technology is, these are languages of calculation of the future.

We must not confuse the practical inability to afford the fruits of modern

they bought these appliances from Rumbelow's rather than the Co-op

industry with the correct popular aspiration that modern people know how to use and master and bend to their needs and pleasures modern things. Not to recognise the dialectic in this is to fail to see where real people are in their heads. A labour movement which cannot identify with what is concrete and material in these popular aspirations, and expropriate them from identification with the private market and private appropriation, will look, increasingly, as if it is trapped nostalgically in



*You pay your money and you take your choice*

ancient cultural modes, failing to imagine socialism in twentieth century terms and images, and increasingly out of touch with where real people are at. What the Left often sees only as minority trends have long since become majority aspirations. The question is, in what political environment are these aspirations to be developed and realised? Is it really only the capitalist market and consumerism as a way of life which can connect with them?

### The style of the Left

The Left's resistance to cultural change is reflected in our everyday practices and languages. The style of propaganda, party political broadcasts, of much educational and agitational material locks us into very traditional and backward-looking associations. Our political imagery is even worse in this respect. We virtually fought the 1983 election on the 1945 political programme. I am not suggesting that the Left can survive without a sense of history. Our own people know too little, not too much history. But developing a real popular historical consciousness on the Left is *not* the same thing as thinking the present in the language and imagery of the past.

Of course, there are many exceptions to this — I am deliberately exaggerating. The alternative left currents of the 1960s were markedly different in their willingness to expropriate to the uses of the Left the language, imagery and technologies of the present. And they did use these, with effect, to project, if not a hegemonic vision of the future, then certainly a powerfully alternative vision to what already existed.

Many of those who pioneered these new modes of communication remain committed to the Left, willing and anxious to put their talents and services at the disposal, not just of small campaigns and one-issue causes, but of the whole movement. They are a key sector of modern intellectuals the mass labour movement needs to bring over to its side and harness to a popular political project. Organisations pioneering a new relationship between power and the people, like the GLC, have demonstrated what can be achieved in the course of this kind of mobilising of new sectors and new skills

### From the NHS to the Marathon and Aerobics

What is at issue here isn't a matter simply of goods, commodities, and technology. It is also a matter of attitudes and practices. Culture has never consisted of things — only of the particular pattern of relations established through the social use of things and techniques. Here again, it is a general failure of the Left to see and make contact with the popular and democratic elements in daily life, because of the forms in which they are presently packaged or observed. Take, for example, the current craze for body maintenance, the widening concern about questions of health, exercise, an unpolluted environment and the influence of ecological considerations. This appears as a spontaneous popular movement in civil society, ahead of rather than sponsored by 'the authorities'. It can look rather like a mere personalised fad — biological Do-It-Yourself: very apolitical and retreatist. And yet, they touch very popular attitudes indeed, and form part of a distinctively contemporary consciousness. These attitudes arise, in part, from an awareness that the ecological environment is as much of a social enterprise as other, more mundane aspects; that social irresponsibility arises as much in the exploitation of community health as it does in the exploitation of labour power. They may take a more personal form — and that, in itself, tells us something about the disillusionment with *statism* and the idea of the providing state as the bearer of socialism. But they belong to exactly the same complex which led to the foundation of the National Health Service in the 1940s and its massive popular defence in the 1980s. It represents an important ideological current: not the refusal of the welfare state as such but the correct view that state-provided social programmes only become part of a more democratic movement when matched by equivalent movements of self-activity in civil society itself. Raymond Williams

once remarked that the 'long revolution' consisted in the slow reach for popular control.

**From smoking to Mother Earth**

The ecological and environmental impulse has, in addition to its own intrinsic democratic potential, links with much wider, and more obviously 'political' trends. It has a powerful link with the pro-abortion movement, and with feminism and its commitment to enlarge the freedom of women to control their own lives. But it also has connections to the growth of health and safety legislation, a

highly significant advance in trade union work in recent years, and one where the unions can clearly be seen, not simply as defensive, but as advancing into and laying down the conditions of work and life in modern industry. To take another small example, it has links with the taking of responsibility for the public environment of others in the anti-smoking campaign. To take a very large instance, the whole thrust has clear links with the peace movement and the deepening sense of our interdependence in survival and the finite nature of 'Planet Earth'.

Yet — because of the more personalised

and apolitical form of this ecological and environmental impulse — this is a cultural movement from which the Left and the labour movement have remained, until now, largely insulated. But the forging of links is not inconceivable, especially against the background of other countries. Whatever one may say about the 'historic compromise' policies of the Italian CP, it has remained a mass, popular force — as compared, say, with the disastrous and understandable drop in popularity of the French Party. And one of the reasons for this is that the PCI understands that it must maintain a popular presence. That

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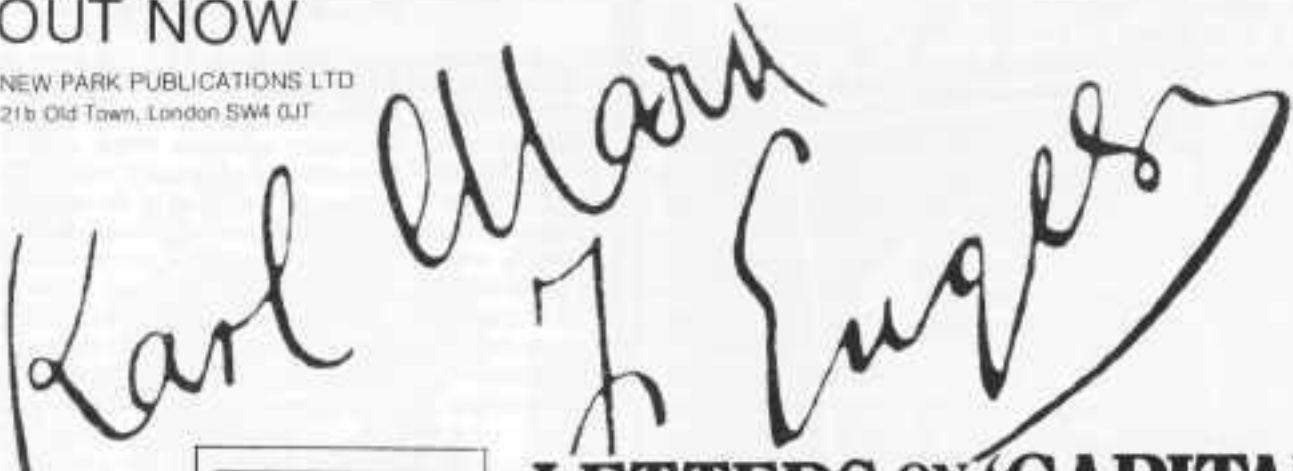
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there is no popular occasion, no popular festival, no issue or cause about which the masses feel and no emergent movement in mass society where the Left can afford not to be *present*. Why should socialism be a popular political force when it is not a force in the popular cultures and aspirations of the masses? Again, the fact that things can be done, even in more reticent Britain, along these lines is evidenced by the popular identifications which CND and to a lesser extent GLC, have begun to forge. We need more not less; across a wider spectrum of activities; and as part of the building of a self-active, democratic popular force, not as mere fancy opportunism.

### Thatcherism and the market

Horrendously, the Right has been far more successful in recent years than the Left in connecting with some of these popular movements and trends in civil society. Of course, they have connected with them in their own populist way. The intention of the radical Right, which has been most penetrative, has not been the conversion of masses to the religion of the market and unemployment. Rather, it has been the subtle capacity to identify the positive aspirations of people *with* the market and the restoration of the capitalist ethic, and to present this as a natural alliance. Thatcherism has been remarkably successful at moving the counters around so as to forge a connection between the popular aspiration for greater freedom from constraining powers and the market definition of freedom. It has created a chain of equivalences between the reaction against state bureaucracy, so deeply inscribed in the Fabian version of social democracy, and the quite different passion for self-sufficiency, self-help and rampant individualism. But, like all ideological and political interventions — which is what Thatcherism is — these connections are neither 'natural' nor necessary. They represent an attempt to inflect and expropriate and

### It is part of the Right project to turn the tide on every front

absorb what are often democratic currents into free market channels. We have suggested already how and why in the earlier period the market came to be a popular mass experience. The Right, after all, has no hang-ups about making money and stimulating the instinct for money making as the driving force of society. In simple terms, that is what the capitalist

system *is*. So to address itself to isolating and developing the competitive side of that contradictory experience was an obvious and natural way for the radical Right to align itself with popular aspirations or, to put it another way, make itself populist. This is one feature of the wider phenomenon we have seen in this decade of the Right showing itself once again capable of recuperating itself, renewing itself, taking on the challenge of the social democratic consensus and eroding its basis, and



*Exercise has become more popular— the London marathon*

learning once again to address the people in accents which seem to groove more naturally with life as they live and experience it. This is the naturalisation of the Right which has proved the real changed ground on which the Left in the 1980s has been forced to operate. It is part of the Right project to turn the tide on every front — in civil society and moral life as much as in economic habits and expectations. Its project, in short, is to become hegemonic, to address the common experience, to speak to and for 'the nation'.

### After 1984

The question is whether the Left can also operate on the same ground, turn these popular experiences and emergent attitudes and aspirations to *its* advantage. Or whether its only alternative is to become aligned with important but increasingly minority and traditional constituencies which need defence in the face of the current onslaught, goodness knows, but which are not where the mass experience of the common people any longer is at. This is not an argument for abandoning either the traditional Labour constituencies or those particularly hard-pressed and disadvantaged minorities with

whom the labour movement now needs to forge real alliances in action at the grass-roots level. But it is an argument for not seeing these existing constituencies in anachronistic cultural terms. Blacks, for example, in addition to being massively unemployed and socially oppressed have constructed a whole culture of resistance around the appropriation of modern sounds and advanced technological equipment. It is patronising to imagine them as if they only just came down from the

technological tree. Also, it is an argument for recognising the complexity and diversity of cultural experience in Britain today and developing strategies which address the mass common experience, which project a programme on behalf of the majority and begin to conceive the future in ways which will connect with the perspectives of the whole society. The approach which takes a rather patronising tone to where ordinary people are at, and addresses them as if 'we' know better — by no means unknown in labour movement circles and, in sectarian form, in the Left as a whole — only serves to marginalise the Left from the parameters and circumstances of everyday life which ordinary people inhabit as a fact of daily modern existence. The democratisation of the labour movement's own practices is the point from which the broader movement will stem. It would be fatal if the Left became so disconnected from what that daily existence is really like — not just in Brixton or Clydeside but in less depressed areas of the south east or of London — that it appeared too out of touch to speak pertinently to anyone about how things might be for socialism *after* 1984.