

China

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A revolution is not a dinner party.
— Chairman Mao

Whatever the Chairman might think of it, the Cultural Revolution Dinner Theater (紅色經典, literally, The Red Classics) is located east of the Fifth Ring Road in Beijing, well beyond the newly constructed skyscrapers and glitzy hotels of the central Chaoyang business district as well as the private gated communities of the rich, both of which continue to creep eastward in Beijing's ever-expanding urban sprawl.¹ We visited the theater one evening in early July, about a month before the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. (It took some cajoling as well as several detours before the taxi driver managed to deliver us to this freestanding building situated on the edge of yet-to-be-developed fields.) The Cultural Revolution Dinner Theater is a dark and cavernous rectangular space, constructed of rough-hewn lumber, with a large stage on one end, numerous circular banquet tables in the center, and a number of smaller dining areas on a U-shaped elevated platform surrounding this arrangement, lining three sides of the room.

From its out-of-the-way location to its exclusive use of Mandarin for all transactions (pricey food, ordering, and entertainment), the Cultural Revolution Dinner Theater caters not to a Western audience but to an upwardly mobile and urbane Chinese middle class hungry for amusement and delight. Indeed, on the night of our visit, we appeared to be the only Westerners in an audience of a couple hundred people, the overwhelming majority of whom appeared to be in their late twenties and thirties, with a smattering of folks in their forties. (There were no elderly diners.) In other words, much of the Chinese audience imbibing food and drink that evening amid spectacular re-creations of revolutionary tableaux, Red

Guard denunciations, and passionate song and dance were in fact born after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). For them, the Cultural Revolution is literally history. In a country in which it is still an interdicted topic of official political discussion in the classroom, state media, and other public fora—perhaps unsurprisingly—can be represented only when it is commodified, bought and sold as a pleasant evening of food and song. Paradoxically, analysis of the Cultural Revolution, and of the legacies of Chinese socialism more broadly, seems to be permissible only when it is privatized and rendered a function of the market.

In *Social Text* 55 (1998), a special issue titled “Intellectual Politics in Post-Tiananmen China,” Wang Hui insists that a new understanding of the achievements and tragedies of China’s socialist legacy is an urgent matter in need of immediate address.² Yet, he asserts, Chinese intellectuals have thus far been unable to respond adequately. China has always been an Other to the West—a social text to be deciphered and dissected by missionaries, Sinologists, economists, political scientists, and human rights advocates. Judging from the diners’ reactions that evening, China is also now an Other to itself. And while we could not help but think that the re-creation of Revolutionary scenes paraded before us that July evening must have engendered some sort of ambivalent, even uncomfortable, admixture of emotions with its Chinese audience members, the distracted consumption and conversation that was punctuated by moments of collective singing (revolutionary ditties learned by all Chinese schoolchildren) and impassioned flag waving (we all had pennants on our tables within easy reach) also made us think that this was nationalism without history.

How might we go about interpreting, understanding, and reading this extraordinary social text called “China,” in the face of persistent Orientalism and self-Orientalism and in an age when the ghosts of socialism are still all around us? Bertrand Russell wrote an entire volume titled *The Problem of China*, emblematic of an insistent tendency to regard China as a puzzle to be solved, an inscrutability to be rendered transparent.³ Such “problem of China” approaches tend to imply not only that China is a problem but also that there is also a solution, one that can be applied with relative ease once the problem is identified. Yet the issue is not that we merely need to obtain more, and more accurate, information about the Middle Kingdom (although we could certainly use it). Nor is the problem simply a cognitive one, insofar as we try to fit new information about China into preexisting Western categories (although we inevitably tend to do so). The problem—if we choose to call it that—is in fact much deeper and much more intractable because it is ultimately epistemological. That is, the challenge is to understand China as a problem of knowledge—as a problem of history and theory—not a problem to be solved, but a *Problematik* to be reckoned with.

This *Problematik* is both historical and theoretical. Coming to terms with it demands dismantling the false opposition between history and theory. Historicized, theory inevitably becomes a question of the politics of knowledge, and indeed of the geopolitics of knowledge. For one thing, the proper name *China* is not even China's own name for itself, but a Western appellation. How did the multiethnic Qing empire become a modern nation-state, reconstituted as one formally equal sovereign nation-state among others? What conceptions of space, time, and politics have been erased, and how successfully?

Given China's semicolonial history and its tensions between (state-) capitalist and communist visions of modernity, it cannot be studied in isolation, as a preexisting thing in and of itself. Nor can China's existence be reduced to Western (for lack of a better adjective) representations of China. Rather, China and the West must be studied in relation to one another. At the risk of being overly schematic, Western studies of China have been, historically, more or less Eurocentric in their assumptions. In contrast, and for some time now, the field of Chinese history has moved largely beyond such assumptions and turned to more "China-centered" approaches, to borrow Paul Cohen's term.⁴ That has been an indubitably productive shift, and it has generated many detailed regional studies and rich local knowledge.

Reading China as a social text, however, highlights the ultimate impossibility of isolating the text from the context, the impossibility of locating a fixed border between the two. China becomes not a problem as such, but a comparative problem. Such an understanding moves us beyond both Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism to a third, more dialectic location, which allows us to tell decentered stories. The potential that this approach holds is exemplified by the recent tendency to focus on the margins and the borderlands of the Qing empire and of earlier dynasties.⁵ At their best, such accounts seek to avoid the pitfalls of both Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism. Instead, they hold the potential to tell stories about how different historical, political, cultural, and social entities come to be constituted as oppositional to one another.⁶ Although these are comparative accounts, they are at the same time doubly decentered, neither Eurocentric nor Sinocentric but seeking to deconstruct the very categories that they are comparing.

In a more contemporary context, we might note that commentators in both the West and in China largely assume that China is a "transitional state": neoliberal practices and policies will eventually come to absorb it into a teleology of Western capitalist development. Yet given the fact that a "developing" Chinese socialist state now props up a significant segment of the flagging U.S., and indeed global, economy as the holder of enormous amounts of Western debt, we should also consider that it may be China that comes to absorb Western globalization into its particular national and

political logics. As Gan Yang suggests in *Social Text* 55, such a consideration works to delink (neo)liberalism from its privileged presumptions of democracy and freedom.⁷

In short, reading China as a social text demands, most of all, that we not reduce it to a preconstituted object of knowledge. Rather, we need to ask how China and the objects in relation to which it exists have come into being, and how they become stabilized—and destabilized—discursively as objects of knowledge. The answers to these historical and theoretical questions must be sought both within and beyond Beijing's Fifth Ring Road, inside as well as outside of "China"—whatever the ultimate referent of that term might be.

Notes

1. Indeed, there are numerous Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants all over China.

2. See Wang Hui, "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity," trans. Rebecca E. Karl, in *Social Text* 55 (1998): 9–44. See also Wang Hui, "The 1989 Social Movement and the Historical Roots of China's Neoliberalism," trans. Theodore Hutters, in *China's New Order*, ed. Theodore Hutters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 43–115.

3. Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1922).

4. See Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writings on the Recent Chinese Past*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

5. The most notable study of the margins of the Qing empire is Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

6. See, for example, James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

7. See Gan Yang, "A Critique of Chinese Conservatism in the 1990s," trans. Xudong Zhang, *Social Text* 55 (1998): 45–66. In the same special issue, Wang Hui calls for a challenge to the "teleology of modernization that has dominated Chinese thinking for the past century." Indeed, *Social Text* 55 is a notable example of such critical approaches contesting a discourse of capitalist development.

Cold War

Nikhil Pal Singh

Totalitarianism was, in the words of George Kennan, the authoritative “nightmare” of liberal democracy. Kennan’s formulation betrayed considerable skepticism about the empirical validity of the concept he helped to author, one in which the primary divisions of the post–World War II world were understood in ethico-political terms and predicated upon a transvaluation of the wartime opposition between fascism and democracy. Yet Kennan, as William Peitz suggests in “The Post-Colonialism of Cold War Discourse,” a prescient and underappreciated essay in *ST* 19/20 (1988), was merely one participant in a much wider and more profoundly dishonest historical conversation. As the “theoretical anchor” of cold-war political culture, the theory of totalitarianism enacted a displacement of fascism outside the main historical currents of Western moral, political, and intellectual life. In the hands of its most important intellectual architect, Hannah Arendt, it short-circuited her prior recognition of Nazism within the family of Western imperialisms and as the exemplary modern instance of rationalized, technology-driven state terror.

Peitz expanded his argument in *ST* 22 (1989), citing Aimé Césaire’s famous charge in *Discourse on Colonialism* that “Hitler applied to Europe colonialist procedures, which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the Blacks of Africa.” By contrast, the theory of totalitarianism not only linked fascist destruction of what Arendt termed “authentic political life” to the Soviet regime, it also suggested an extended chain of reasoning about existential dangers posed by “terrorist uses” of technology by those lacking proper philosophical conditioning and historical preparation for exercising state power. Thus, for midcentury cold warriors like Arthur Koestler, the “the yogi and the commissar” exemplified “the irrational credulity of *all minds* that have not

reached the stage of science.” Likewise, Karl Popper described “enemies” of the “open society” as those whose response to the shocks of modernity led to rejection of the “anti-magical scientific empirical mode of thought,” even as they accessed modern technologies of governance and instruments of violence.¹

Even if its primary explanatory terrain concerned the post–World War II division of Europe, conceptual elaborations of totalitarianism provided a generous field for rearticulating racist and colonialist divisions of the world and its peoples that had allegedly been left behind in the U.S.-led break from the logics of fascism and empire. In his generative misreading of Peitz, Anders Stephanson claims that Kennan’s account of totalitarianism viewed the Soviets as a “gigantic mediation between East and West,” and had little to do with considerations of the non-West (“Comment on an Aspect of Peitz’s Argument,” *ST* 19/20, 1988). Yet, in a sense, this underlines a more important claim, namely that the cold war elaborated new metonymic chains by which heterogeneous figures of non-Western alterity could be read along a single “sociological spectrum.” The cold war both required and provided conceptual and linguistic innovations for adjudicating decolonization within a historical discourse that remained in an exemplary sense that of colonial modernity. For example, in *Present at the Creation*, U.S. secretary of state Dean Acheson described the post–World War II “threat to Western Europe” as akin to “that which Islam had posed centuries before, with its combination of ideological zeal and fighting power. Then it had taken the same combination to meet it: Germanic power in the east and Frankish in Spain. . . . This time it would need the added power and energy of America, for the drama was now played on a world stage.”²

As a belated fulfillment of what Karl Kautsky once called “ultra-imperialism,” the cold war was not only a coordination of military and economic affairs on new and increasingly global scales, it marked out a correlative space of cultural and intellectual work in which the variegated colonial inheritances of Western modernity were articulated into new global identities and divisions that sought to underwrite a more durable civilizational compact. Put another way, the theory of totalitarianism became the hinge connecting the frame of U.S. global power to the teleological door of modernization that opened and closed on new nations according to a more deeply embedded set of norms and assumptions about obedience, deference, emotional “maturity,” trustworthiness, rational capacity, and fitness for self-government. The ever-increasing ability to kill from a distance that constituted the economic and military infrastructure of colonial power was still unable to fully dispense with the vast superstructure of racist culture. Vietnam needed to be bombed back to the Stone Age, so that Asians could finally learn to appreciate the value of human life.

Casting a cold eye on her progeny, Arendt argued that the authentic conflicts of our time might only become visible when totalitarianism was a thing of the past. Her nemesis, Carl Schmitt, lamented that the two World Wars had broken the duelist's compact of the *jus publicum europaeum* that had once erected boundaries around war, separating combatants and civilians and ridding war of its criminal and punitive character. Agreeing with Césaire (though from the other side of the human divide), Schmitt acknowledged that rebels and criminals, as well as colonial and civil conflict, remained perpetually outside this bracketing.³ Containing Soviet totalitarianism, the sine qua non of the official cold war, might thus be seen as a transitional phase in the colonial bracketing of war. What U.S. cold-war historians have dubbed “the long peace” in Europe and North America was purchased at the price of making applications of militarized force a normal state of affairs—a global civil war, or as Frantz Fanon put it, a world steeped in universal violence. Viewed from a truly global perspective, such as Odd Arne Westad applies in his recent work, the cold war was framed by (the failure of) decolonization, not the reverse. Ironically, the Soviet “empire of justice,” rather than contradicting, often played second fiddle to the U.S. “empire of liberty.” Both were invested heavily in bringing backward and deficient peoples into the orderings of science and state.⁴

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (a work that is now perhaps too easily dismissed for its monological account of the workings of colonial discourse) remains an important touchstone for this discussion. The ill fit of the book's final chapter on U.S. global power as the “latest phase” in the geostrategic and conceptual course of modern imperialism signals precisely the break/nonbreak constituted by the cold war. Where Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri frame this period retrospectively as part of a move from imperialism to empire in which “global society must be defended,” this process occurs through rather than against the discursive and material orderings of colonial violence (see Leerom Medovoi in *ST* 91, 2007). The “inner solidarity” between democracy and fascism that Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and others so tantalizingly observe remains obscure lacking this insight. As I have written elsewhere, though “democratic liberalism comes to imagine fascism as its monstrous Other, fascism might be better understood as its doppelganger or double—an exclusionary will to power that has regularly reemerged, manifesting itself in: those zones of internal exclusion within liberal-democratic societies (plantations, reservations, ghettos, and prisons); and those sites where liberalism's expansionist impulse and universalizing force has been able to evade its own ‘constitutional restraints’ (the frontier, the colony, the state of emergency, the occupation, and the counterinsurgency).”⁵

Officially, the U.S. cold war was marked by the development of

expressly nonracialist and anticolonialist foreign policy and military cultures against the backdrop of the Holocaust experience and under pressure from cultural pluralist influences and civil-rights struggles inside the country. Yet, none of this contradicts the development of the United States as a permanent warfare state, mobilized through the manipulation of an omnivorous culture of fear, whose terrain of reference is explicitly biopolitical in the sense that it repeatedly links biological and quasi-biological threats to populations defined as national and civilizational entities. The preeminent U.S. cold-war historian John Gaddis has written that we were “all irradiated on that morning of September 11, 2001, in such a way as to shift our psychological make-up—the DNA in our minds—with consequences that will not become clear for years to come.” In turn, he suggests that the U.S. foreign-policy response, freed from the totalitarian threat, could now return to a truer origin: “There were, as well what we would call ‘non-state actors’—native Americans, pirates, marauders and other free agents—ready to raid lightly defended positions along an advancing frontier . . . An expanding ‘civilization’ spread out along an insecure frontier had the right of preemption. . . . In responding to the horrors that took place on September 11th, 2001 . . . the Bush administration, whether intentionally or not, has been drawing upon [this] set of traditions.”⁶

Violence over the land is rationalized as a civilizing mission and biopolitical imperative. From westward expansion to the West Bank, this was something that Arendt foretold but also forgot: the protototalitarian scene of settler-colonialism continues to haunt the posttotalitarian world.

Notes

1. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar, and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1945); Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945).
2. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1987 [1969]), 376.
3. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; New York: Schocken, 2004); Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum* (1950; New York: Telos, 2004).
4. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
5. Nikhil Pal Singh, “The Afterlife of Fascism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 105 (2006): 79.
6. John Lewis Gaddis, *Security, Surprise, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4, 107.

The Social Life of the Collective

Andrew Ross: One thing that I will not ever regret is being part of a collectivity—I like collectivity and all that it entails, even as labor-intensive and energy-intensive as it is. It’s a fairly rare experience, I think, and at that time it felt that way.

Sohnya Sayres: The feeling was that something new was happening. A really different mix was taking place and a different kind of agenda was taking place. There were challenges in the air. How do you make it work, how do you turn it into everyday life—how do you lift up people’s boat, in a sense.

Bruce Robbins: We never really developed anything like a procedure for recruitment. It tended to be people being attracted into the gravitational field and either working or not working for a certain period. I mean, it had a lot of flux to it. People would move to New York or move away from New York. And of course there were political fights because people naturally wanted allies on the collective.

Randy Martin: There was quite a lot of elasticity to the collective. With different people showing up for every meeting and open discussions, it could take a year to get a piece vetted. It’s funny to think about those as the glory days of collectivity, given the trade-offs for any kind of production.

Sohnya Sayres: Oh, we weren’t efficient, we weren’t polite. It was very fractious.

Andrew Ross: I was always for the face-to-face thing, yeah, absolutely. Because it was all about persuading other people to come over to your side. If you were advocating for a manuscript, you had to get four advo-

cates. You had to get four folks to vote yes. For a long time it was four. And so you had to persuade people who were on the line.

John Brenkman: An article would start another great debate internally, not over what to do but what to think. It was a very lively environment. It certainly made being an assistant professor a whole lot more interesting than it otherwise probably would have been.

Andrew Ross: We were pretty clear that the bulk of the collective meetings were for the discussion of a topic. That the manuscript reviews were important but they got them out of the way first so that someone would propose a topic or someone would present and then we had a debate. And that was an important part of it. Then there were things like the Socialist Scholars Conference. We always put on the more intellectual panels. I remember Fred put on the first ones about the AIDS crisis. I don't think anyone else there at the time would have considered putting on a panel about the AIDS crisis. So there was the sense that we would be out in front, introducing new kinds of activism or thinking to other segments of the Left. And we were doing other things, as well, like the soirées.

Bruce Robbins: At the soirées, an invited visitor would give a talk and we'd have a respondent. We did quite a number of them. There was food and drink. People would bring stuff, and you'd pass the hat—or maybe there'd be like a till at the door and people could put in \$5 or something like that. And there was lots and lots of conversation, formal and informal. Probably more informal than formal. And there was, you know, *Social Text* had a circle around it. There were actually various circles now that I think about it. There was an inner circle—people who did most of the work and whose ideas for the journal probably imposed themselves more than others. There was a slightly looser circle around that, and then lots of people who just knew people—who were friends of friends and would come to these things in the audience.

Anders Stephanson: The soirées were all at Michael Brown's loft down on Spring and Sixth Avenue. We would buy an immense amount of wine and cheese and then we would charge a kind of cover fee, but it wasn't as though we made any money. Those were the kind of social gatherings for *Social Text* aficionados—for people who wanted to come and have a chat about serious stuff and have a little cocktail and have a little wine. Those were important things. Stanley came out with the idea of purposefully, pompously calling them "soirées." So we always put that into the invitation.

Sohnya Sayres: There were also branch-off things like the Bakhtin circle, which met at our house all the time. That was another quality of the

time: people said, there's this incredibly interesting critic who's coming to attention now, big books; we need to sit down and study these together. And sometimes that was part of the meeting. We got through the business part, we got through all the other, and if you had time to catch up with all of that, then you'd sit down and read a couple of chapters of Husserl. I guess in some way with Mike [Brown]'s loft and the loft where George [Yudice] and I lived, it circulated around a number of locations downtown. This nexus, this neighborhood, it made it pretty easy to do that kind of thing, to extend into the evening.

Randy Martin: There were these huge meetings in lofts, so obviously there was a New York real-estate component to *Social Text*.

Andrew Ross: In the early 1990s, the meetings alternated between Bruce's loft and my place on Hudson Street. But it was important to meet in someone's house and that the actual space was big enough—they had to be lofts. They had to be big enough so you could all sit.

Sohnya Sayres: The fun part was that we felt that we really had a vehicle. So if we were in a conference, we could go up to people and say: "I know this is a long shot, but would you consider letting us publish your work?" At the best moments, we all felt empowered to be out there in the world with our antennae up, bringing things back and discussing them with the group, keeping our senses open. I remember walking up to Bertolucci and saying, "Hi, I'm from *Social Text* and I would like to talk to you." It was sort of that craziness. I got a press pass to some screening. And as it turned out, Bertolucci was delighted to have an intellectual conversation.

Collective

Brent Hayes Edwards, Anna McCarthy, and Randy Martin

Editorial collectives share features with artistic and political collectives. To compare them is first of all to recall that any collective is inherently, as Andrew Ross reminds us in his essay in this issue, an “adventure in mutuality.” At every level, a collective operates not by deference to hierarchy, much less by the fiction of unanimity, but instead by the premise of the “reciprocity of practice,” as it is phrased in the collectively authored essay on the aesthetics of Language poetry that appeared in *Social Text* 19/20 (1988). As is obvious throughout this anniversary issue, collectivism can involve but does not necessitate collaboration, the difficult process of directly making something together. “Reciprocity of practice” implies something broader and harder to define: a mutual attention—a poetry collective is “a community of writers who read each other’s work,” as the Language poets put it—that is taken to be the sign of a set of shared interests or commitments that can only be discovered and recalibrated in the active self-reflexivity of the group. Whether it involves a farm, a protest march, a dance, or a periodical, the recourse to collectivism also involves a conviction that social organization is necessarily itself political. Or, as it is announced in the prospectus in the first issue of *Social Text*: “the journal’s editorial organization is, we believe, an integral part of its theoretical and political project” (*ST* 1, 1979).

The artistic collective offers a critique that sits at the intersection of authorship and ownership: a project-driven ensemble, it treats historical conjuncture as both occasion and material for its work. The creative process is above all a means of intervention with the goal of enlarging an engaged community. The artistic collective sacrifices durability for relevance and devises technical solutions geared to maximize impact on an audience that it could directly claim to have gathered and furthered. The manifesto, the

improvised performance, the interventionist public work—all of these vehicles for art-making insist upon a radicalism of form adequate to the demands of the world outside the work. To note the experimentation at the core of collective *poesis* is also to recognize that aesthetic form itself is the ground that is shared and explored; as Raymond Williams has argued, the artistic collective becomes “a community of the medium, of their own practices.”²¹

The political collective, animated by what is sometimes referred to as praxis, seeks to install or instantiate, in its own ways of being, ways of thinking and relating that suggest alternatives to (or repair deficiencies in) the prevailing state of social affairs. Embodying the change it seeks in the world, the political collective expresses a confidence in the force of shared commitments as compensation for the debilitating effects of conventional socialization, while germinating a conviviality that would produce political action of undeniable relevance and efficacy. Collective political work thus implies a kind of public demonstration and provides a medium of practice in which the performance and circulation of ideas and actions allows sustained theorization to take place.

As a form of organization and model of labor, the collective has undergone a distinct modulation over the course of *Social Text*'s publication history. The journal was initially founded with not one but three editorial groups—in La Jolla-Irvine, Madison, and New Haven—and its “decentralized structure” was taken to be “symptomatic of the dispersion that affects intellectual life in America” (“Prospectus,” *ST* 1, 1979). Within five years, however, *Social Text* became centered in a single collective based in New York, and—especially as the politics of academic labor became increasingly central to its concerns—the contents of the journal have often reflected its particular interinstitutional and urban setting. In the early 1990s, the journal's affiliation with Duke University Press further reshaped the editorial functioning of the collective, as the artisanal, often painstakingly slow and irregular way the journal had been produced in its first decade, issue by issue, was replaced by the rationalized standard timeline of the scholarly quarterly.

In the context of the academy, the story of the *Social Text* collective begins with the desire to establish a counterpoint to possessive individualism and singular authorship, insisting instead on the social conditions and ramifications of knowledge production. Against the deadening metric of disciplinary accountability, the journal turned to the putative high ground of theory and insisted on the flexibility and relevance of Marxism as a problematic in the analysis of culture and society. Peer review might once have served the purpose of ensuring professional autonomy, but the politics of late-twentieth-century disciplinarity demanded that the peer-review editorial system trade blindness for oversight. This profoundly

altered the contract of professionalism, linking judgment over the validity of knowledge to its determinate forms of production (manifest as tenured lines bestowed with academic freedom). As the university's aims and methods increasingly find justification not in the model of a public good of enlightened citizenship, but rather in the realm of "value-added," protocols of empirical evaluation become the technology par excellence of higher administration, fueled by the ratings-driven demands of incessant comparison. To this condition, the collective held out a modest and partial antidote.

In the case of committed academic journals, editorial collectives are a kind of subvented labor, with support for participation predicated on preexisting salaried work and on institutional input. The political commitments of teaching, activism, administration, research, presentation, or other facets of academic life are partially transferred into publishing, without the presumption that the publication per se could substitute for or summarize all these other kinds of engagement. The editorial collective foments a deliberative process that aims to set its own context and hence to make something generative of its internal disciplinary difference. Issues under development may reflect a concern afoot in a particular intellectual domain or may be topical to a political or cultural critique. The mix of disciplinary backgrounds at the editorial table creates pressure for each contribution to achieve a kind of internal translation: to consider readers beyond its own formative circuits; to assemble literatures, criticisms, and interests from outside its initial conditions. In this regard, the editorial collective enacts a kind of mediating force—not only among potential publics, but also between its own immediate context of encounter and its subsequent applications. This mediating force lives on through published work even beyond the immediate context of the journal, in the ways that essays resonate laterally, beyond their initial topics and fields. At the same time, even as particular pieces reverberate at a distance from the journal as they are taken up through reading, citation, and reappropriation, the editorial collective continues to orient a horizon of assembly for further intervention.

As a form of intellectual culture, the collective depends upon the intimacy of face-to-face encounter. Editorial decision making takes place through discussions that involve unexpected changes in current as much as obstinate positioning; the patterns of influence cannot always be anticipated. There is a romanticism here, which risks ignoring the ways that personal affinity and intellectual charisma come to play a crucial role in any group dialogue, and which risks overlooking the ways that disciplinary expertise can come in through the back door, as it were, giving authority to advocacy or critique at certain moments in the process of deliberation. On another level, there is a temptation to imagine that the will of the col-

lective, appropriately honed through the medium of the journal, can find a definitive purchase in the public realm, offering a needed corrective to the latter's omissions or ill-considered positions. Nevertheless, the mode of collective editing is meant to call the bluff of the romanticism of peer review, which is designed to conceal (rather than to confront) these same risks under the guise of "neutrality" and "disinterest." It is precisely what seems *dépassé* about collectivism—its fragility, its frank avowal of interested affiliation, its conviction that the difficulties it brings to light cannot be avoided or rationalized away—that makes it so crucial today, in an age of accounting and quantification.

A final dimension of the collective as a kind of editorial agency bears noting: its capacity to mutate and remake itself as times, and members, change. This is not to say that the *Social Text* collective, in any of its varieties, has somehow transcended the conditions or contradictions it sought to remediate. Still, the capacity to restaff and rally with shifting participants under the name of an abiding project is one way that collectives insist upon the continuity of predicament while allowing for transformation in the ways that it is met. Adaptability is of course a condition of any institution that strives for longevity. But it takes on a special poignancy in an organization centered not around the vision of a single ego, mission, or disciplinary foundation, but instead around the reciprocal practice of a changing group that agrees to discover and rediscover its political common ground in the very ways it comes together.

Note

1. Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), 45.

Commodity

Michael Ralph

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

—Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” (1887)

This somewhat enigmatic passage is useful for thinking about why the commodity resists neat categorization: whether it is illusory or real, scientific or “theological,” a fundamental problem for social thought or a “trivial” matter, of a piece with the reality we all share or a “very queer thing,” the commodity has—since the time when this phrase was first penned and in the first one hundred issues of *Social Text*—provoked a series of critical conversations about a modernity that isn’t nearly as secular as we had anticipated it might be—nor as modern.¹

In rejecting the evangelical frame of a capitalist modernity that would split the world into those who have and haven’t been brought into alignment with the conversion it proffers (whether through enslavement, colonialism, or structural adjustment), we now recognize that the intersections between economic systems—and regimes of value—are more complex and variegated than thinkers like Marx initially surmised. Yet, in the continuity that obtains between drastically different social formations, our most sophisticated theories of economy and society have settled on “the commodity” when referring to anything that is bought or sold, borrowed or traded, suggesting that any entity that can be objectified and reified—and set into an exchange equation—can be commodified (which could conceivably apply to *any* entity).

If commodification is endemic to the logic of capitalism, it is perhaps because the space of the sacred—that which cannot have a market value

affixed to it—has apparently receded. On the flip side, even a commodity that is produced using the most sophisticated technology available comes into being, initially, as a secular revelation. This suggests that there is plenty more to be said about the “metaphysical subtleties” and “theological niceties” that occasion its arrival. We have, at least since the days of scientific socialism, come to realize that secular societies produce their own forms of religious thought and practice (*ST* 64, 2000, “Word Secularisms at the Millennium”)—their own techniques of sorcery. If capitalism is something like a religious phenomenon—if indeed neoliberalism might be glossed as “market fundamentalism”²—the financial crisis of 2008 has occasioned a crisis of faith. *Crisis* is, in its inception, a medical term, referring to the moment when the human body encounters an illness that will lead to recovery, if the proper remedy is introduced, but death, if not.³ If the commodity is to capitalism what the communion wafer is to the body of the Christ—a fragment that reproduces the essential features of the whole—the Fall (of 2008) and its attendant financial crisis demand that we reappraise the wisdom of the Father.

Perhaps we need to consider more carefully what it means to have monetary value affixed to the work we produce—to the human body (not to mention its parts and products). We might then wish to reevaluate what it means to believe the capacity for labor is something that we “own,” that human rights are something we “possess.” Transplant organs could be dismissed as medical prostheses separate and distinct from their former owners if only they did not need to be inserted into debilitated bodies while they are still “alive.” What about the shrines that practitioners of the Afro-Cuban religious tradition *regla ocho* assemble using blood, hair, and pieces of bone? They require, for their ritual efficacy, the consent of the deceased spirits whose human remains are deployed in these spiritual technologies.⁴ This suggests the prevailing idea that people ought to be able to control their *own* bodies—the errant notion that every human being is made up of a master and a territory or capacity to be controlled—is itself part of the problem. In that vein, Geeta Patel’s sense that sexuality and capital are “thoroughly integrated and implicated in the constitution of persons and subjects” (*ST* 89, 2007) is especially instructive, since it calls attention to the particular forms of historicity and alterity that are structured by differential access to state resources and emotional and commercial endeavors.

Yet, despite the role that commodification plays as the central feature of a capitalist architecture that has proven more resilient than anyone could have anticipated, it remains rife with contingencies. So it is productive to ponder the range of historical events that occasion commodity speculation (natural catastrophes, military invasions, and fatal accidents). As close to a third of *Social Text*’s first one hundred issues have been published

since the debut of the “war on Terror,” we perhaps ought to be especially concerned with thinking about how and why war remains such a reliable “technique for converting uncertainty into calculable gain,” as Randy Martin puts it (*ST* 91, 2007). This harkens back to the formative years of a global infrastructure we now discuss in benign terms as the “international monetary system”: recall that military excursions furnished the first opportunities for massive investment at the dawn of European exploration. From the early medieval idea that money was a gift from God (and that it was therefore sinful to profit or gain interest from it), by the sixteenth century European monarchs routinely fought wars and sponsored overseas voyages using credit provided by the continent’s wealthiest bankers. Meanwhile, the transition from medieval notions of commerce to early modern conceptions of exchange value was structured by a series of contradictions. While wealthy British landowners shared wealth derived from their fiefdoms to finance diplomatic skirmishes as early as the thirteenth century, prevailing conceptions of profit generally attributed the success of a choice harvest to the natural bounty of select estates and not to the economic prowess of the lords who governed them. Thus there was little regard for the role of financial expertise in the production of merchant capital where Christian conceptions of customary feudal commerce were concerned. This partly explains why, as soon as the Norman conquest of 1066 was complete, William I invited Jewish merchants to England in the effort to bolster national trade and industry. Freed from the suspicion of profit that characterized Western Christendom, they served as financiers, moneylenders, and pawnbrokers, eventually obtaining an official bureaucratic designation in the Great Exchequer (or Exchequer of the Jews) by which they levied and collected the king’s taxes—that is, until the tense relationship between religion and commerce that obtained in feudal England generated suspicions that congealed in the Edict of Expulsion of 1290, which called for all Jews to leave England (a policy that would not be formally overturned until 1656).

Where we are concerned with the transition from quasi-theological conceptions of sovereign debt and medieval diplomacy to modern democracy and the sense of freedom that accompanied it, we might pin one origin of the modern credit-debt system that undergirds “secular” capitalist modernity to the Fatal Accidents Act of 1846, which displaced the law of deodand as a mechanism for resolving tragic collisions. In the previous conception of “accidental” death or injury, any such event was attributed to a capricious spirit, making the object—the deodand—“accursed”; thus the only legitimate form of redress was to transfer the culpable object, or the value of it, to God’s earthly sovereign, the Crown.⁵ In the new formulation of the problem, damages were now shared with the family of the victim, and instead of the value of the personal object (the chattel) responsible, what

was now at stake was the value of a human life, which would eventually be based on a calculation of the individual's projected future earnings. (This was the case in British law, at least, though not necessarily in other realms of sovereignty. The French tradition in tort law, for instance, departs from nineteenth-century workers' compensation cases, then was developed more systematically during early-twentieth-century automobile collision cases.) It is no coincidence that the 1830s and 1840s represent the moment when corporate ownership would no longer consist of a charter granted by the state (e.g., the Dutch West India Company, the British East India Company). Corporations would now derive their efficacy from the "right" to participate in market competition through the legal shield of limited liability, which enabled a financial institution to become incorporated as a single social actor, in the eyes of the law, and to be protected from exorbitant losses through the prevailing idea that corporate research and development—and the products it generates—benefits society as a whole.

Thus, while there would clearly be other new forms of modern subjectivity (i.e., the corporation), the human body became a secular object in profound new ways. The Anatomy Act of 1832 licensed the use of cadavers of ordinary citizens for surgical training (whereas before, only the corpses of convicted murderers could be used for medical research). Soon the coroner (derived from the Latin *corona*, meaning "crown") was no longer a state official responsible for examining corpses and accident scenes to determine if and when the sovereign was responsible for a death (and how much the state would need to pay in damages, in that case); she or he would now work with and for ordinary citizens, whether elected or appointed to office. In this way, tracing the advent of modern techniques for adjudicating the value of a human life back to the Fatal Accidents Act of 1846 sets the stage for thinking about forensics as a means for healing breaches in civil society (by assessing damages in civil cases, and determining guilt in criminal cases). In this connection, the Fatal Accidents Act fits snugly in the middle of a series of legislative initiatives (Britain's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, Joint Stock Act of 1842, and Limited Liability Act of 1855) that reshaped modern capital. This example is instructive since it points the way back to theories of the commodity that emerged in a post-social movement moment. In trying to explain the post-cold war demise of prospects for a socialist utopia, some Marxist scholars have cited the commodification of one's craft—and, by extension, one's self—as the chief explanation for why intellectuals and artists now appear more concerned with personal, rather than collective, prosperity. This is ultimately a theory of sin camouflaged as a theory of the commodity. Ironically, the insistence by some critical theorists that all art and scholarship needs to be "political"—the sense that it must service the lofty goal of Revolution—inadvertently reproduces the founding logic of capitalist modernity where, at

least in its most popular iteration, métropoles funded ships that would sail the world promoting Christianity, commerce, and civilization. These essential features of modernity—most European sovereigns, philosophers, and explorers would have it—were needed to displace a savage tradition of fetishism, which lacked the capacity for a transcendent image of religion (God, the Father) and a transcendent theory of value (where money would eventually serve as the universal equivalent). Only in this version, artists are too mired in the dirty world of money to serve the transcendent goal of Revolution (as opposed to revolution, where part of the goal would be to avoid the certainty of mission that tends to undermine progressive social change, leaving power in the dubious hands of a few sanctioned leaders).

Though *Social Text* has, from its debut, defined its mission by the effort to frame Marxism in “the broadest sense of the term” (“Rallying Social Text,” *ST* 70, 2002), critical social theory enmeshed in the revolutionary disenchantment of the past few decades has played host, on the one hand, to theorists who had started to believe Marx had been wrong (as if there is a single way to be right) about how capital works and, on the other hand, to Marxists who fought ever more fervently to defend their faith in its orthodoxy. Given these trends, the oeuvre of this (in)famous German philosopher might seem an odd place to end a discussion of the commodity form. On the flip side, this might be just the way to spark renewed interest in this particular category of historical object, including more careful attention to the intriguing proposition that use-value and exchange-value are not aspects or features of the commodity, but two different dimensions of it that each appear at different moments in the process of exchange, as part of the structure of recognition that commerce entails. But if Marx is much appreciated and much maligned, it is my sense that a few of the key suppositions with which people tend to proceed in their study of his scholarship are patently wrong, and these have implications for everything I have said here about how we might think about the commodity.

The most egregious error by Marxist scholars—and their sworn enemies—is the tendency to read Marx as an atheist and to translate that suspicion of religion into their reading of his work. Marx’s version of religion was an ethical humanism that offered principled strategies about how to build a just society without evacuating a sensuous engagement with the world that is central to the human experience (though in the era of critical social theory’s “posthuman” turn, we might extend this consideration to all living organisms). If Marx was not religious in the way we might generally use the term, he was intensely mystical, intrigued by a capitalist modernity that remained mired in enchantment. Whatever his personal beliefs—and despite the ubiquity of that tired phrase “religion is the opiate of the people”—Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish was designed to illustrate that capitalism is not nearly so sophisticated (or

rational, or scientific) as its adherents imagine it to be. If Christianity conceived of itself as superior to primitive religion, Marx found something compelling about those savage traditions (read by Enlightenment thinkers initially as animism, then later as trifling superstitions) that privileged a material, embodied engagement with spiritual forces, with social systems that remained mired in a sensuous experience with the world, instead of seeking to transcend it.

Just as our systems of political authority have never ceased to incorporate mystical elements, our most rational discourses on the economy never cease to include our gravest fears about how value accrues and depreciates. For this reason, our most sophisticated theories of the commodity treat it as a historical object that is constituted under particular conditions and regimented through discrete forms of situated practice. In other words, like the human body, the commodity is best apprehended as a phenomenon whose contours are solidified by the broader configuration of power in which it takes shape, though—because it surfaces in economic transactions which presume that the object is utterly reified—people continue to frame commodification (in particular, the commodification of the human body) as a process that could potentially evacuate human agency, though it never succeeds in this regard. Instead, the commodity unfolds in a historical process whose outcome is always uncertain. Thus, despite the different academic traditions in which these perspectives obtain, clearly there is something of a thematic resonance in Freud's decision to label as "fetish" those forms of desire that we deem "primitive," "savage," and "taboo" (even as they captivate us) and Marx's decision to use the same term as a strategy for unraveling the universalist pretensions of Western secular modernity. Fetishism was, for Marx, "the religion of sensuous desire,"⁶ something we should bear in mind when reading his discussion of the "commodity fetish." The commodity is defined by its distance from that which has already transpired and its relationship to a form of historicity that has not yet arrived, as with modes of sexuality that likewise resist neat circumspection.⁷ This complicated medium of desire reveals the fallibility of institutional designs to harness its power. Instead we see, in the modern economic polity, an *ungeheure Warensammlung*, a "monstrous collection of commodities,"⁸ where the "uncanny return of the monster" (Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, *ST* 72, 2002) that resists containment never ceases to pose a problem for the kind of social formation that we have been calling "neoliberal."

The commodity is a very queer thing.

Notes

1. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
2. David Graeber, “The New Anarchists,” *New Left Review* 13 (2002): 62.
3. Gregory A. Beckett, “The End of Haiti: History under Conditions of Impossibility” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008).
4. See Stephan Palmié, “Thinking with *Ngangas*: Reflections on Embodiment and the Limits of ‘Objectively Necessary Appearances,’” *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 4 (2006): 852–86.
5. See William Pietz, “Death of the Deodand: Accursed Objects and the Money Value of Human Life,” *Res* 31 (1997): 97–108.
6. Karl Marx, “The Leading Article in No. 179 of the *Kölnische Zeitung*,” in *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, vol. 1, ed. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 189.
7. José Esteban Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13 (2007): 353–67.
8. Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1859; Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1972), 7. I follow Thomas Keenan in translating *ungeheure Warensammlung* as a “monstrous collection of commodities,” in place of the inadequate phrase “an immense collection of commodities” that prevails in English-language publications. See Thomas Keenan, “The Point Is to (Ex)change It: Reading Capital, Rhetorically,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 157. This formulation resonates with Hegel’s sense that modern forms of economic exchange constitute a “‘monstrous system’ (*ungeheures System*) of mutual ‘dependency’ (*Abhängigkeit*)” (Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009], 52–53n90, as quoted from Georg W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe: Das System der spekulativen Philosophie*, ed. Klaus Düsing and Heinz Kimmerle (Hamburg: Meiner, 1986), 229–30.

Culture

Patrick Deer

Modern cultural criticism, like the younger discipline of cultural studies, has long struggled to reconcile the antagonistic logic at the heart of the idea of culture. *Social Text's* project as a journal has been energized throughout by the contradictory genealogy of the term itself—the inner dynamism and instability generated by the pull between culture defined, in Arnoldian terms, as the highest “cultural” achievements of a civilization’s elites set apart from both nature and politics in a separate, disinterested sphere, and its contrary anthropological definition as a “whole way of life.” This ethnographic expansion of the range of culture, generated in part by the colonial encounter with the “primitive,” which must be understood on its own terms, and by the collision with working-class voices and cultural practices at the heart of Marxist social theory, allowed it to include the whole way of life of other populations: now culture could include the popular and demotic, the marginalized and oppressed subjects of modernity.

This contradictory inheritance from the nineteenth century was complicated and enriched by the emergence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of successive instantiations of culture within mass communications, signifying systems, and subaltern cultural productions generated out of decolonization and continuing class struggle. The picture is complicated by culture’s intimate ties to the state: to administration, governmentality, and war. By now, the culture concept’s combination of expansionist energies and inner antagonisms makes it a slippery and untrustworthy idea: it offers at once too much and too little. *Social Text's* long romance with culture offers some invaluable lessons about its continuing viability, or what it means, as editors Brent Edwards and Randy Martin asked in 2002, to pursue “the question of cultural politics after cultural studies” (“Rallying *Social*

Text,” *ST* 70). While the modernization of ideas of culture has generated rich responses from its critics and analysts, especially in the emergence of the oppositional project and institutionalized practices of cultural studies, this seemingly ubiquitous and inescapable concept remains haunted by its constitutive contradictions. There is no escape, it seems, from culture.

How to track this trajectory through the pages of *Social Text*? This, in a journal that was instrumental in its early years in opening up a space for cultural studies in the United States by importing its theoretical avatars, that subsequently and vigorously intervened in the debates spurred by the very success of that upstart discipline’s institutionalization within the U.S. academy, that found itself as a result a target—notoriously—in the neoconservative “culture wars” but rebounded, reinventing itself as a space precisely for “this elaboration of the question of cultural politics after cultural studies” (Edwards and Martin, *ST* 70). One way of telling the story of *Social Text*’s long romance with the culture concept would be to see the journal’s engagement with culture as a sustained playing out of the contradictory genealogy, expansionist energies, and the unresolved antagonisms of the term itself. The elite vision of high culture, as Matthew Arnold influentially observed, “implies the idea of the state.”¹ Indeed, in this version, as David Lloyd and Paul Thomas have memorably argued—adapting Marx’s formulation—the modernizing state declares that citizens cannot represent themselves, therefore they must learn to be represented—by culture (“Culture and Society or ‘Culture and the State’?” *ST* 30, 1992).² But there is the other side to culture: by giving its name to the halting cries, the “barbarous yawp,” and the roar in the street of the excluded and oppressed, the cultural critic claims the right to include their voices and tell their stories along with those of the “sweetness and light,” the brightest and the best. In the long history of the idea of culture, which is the shadow history both of subaltern political struggles and of the institutionalization of the modern humanities and sciences, the uses of culture have of necessity required the defining, policing, and expelling of its others. It is a modern idea that offers those who wield it the promise both of social cohesion and a community of interests, and of endless antagonism.

This is the now familiar genealogy of culture elaborated so influentially by Raymond Williams in the “keyword” entry for the term that was generated out of his research for his book *Culture and Society* (1958), that strange and lonely product of his postwar isolation and his own personal struggle to free himself from his Leavisite training as a literary critic and to “alienate his knowledge,” as Stuart Hall put it, in the cause of the whole way of life of the British working classes.³ In this issue of *Social Text* we have followed the keywords route in a variety of directions, familiar and unfamiliar.

From the start, as Williams's example makes clear, culture has been bedeviled by its improper origins. Counterposed to both "nature" and to the depredations of commercialized commodity culture in nineteenth-century "civilization," it might in Matthew Arnold's formulation offer a realm uncolonized by the market, by religion, and by politics, the autonomous realm of arts and letters imbued and sacralized as the very highest point of a civilization's development. This is the seduction of culture, its appeal as an irreducible particularity that energized Catherine Gallagher's critique of Williams (and, by implication, of U.S. cultural studies) in *ST* 30, the memorial issue for Williams. Yet, as Williams himself argued, the elitist versions of high culture that emerged so forcefully by the mid-nineteenth century already had to contend by the late nineteenth century with both the institutionalized "cultural" practices of arts and letters and the anthropological definitions of culture as a whole way of life generated out of colonial ethnography.⁴ How ironic for those whom culture offered an escape from the colonization of the aesthetic by the commodity, the Arnolds and the Eliots, like their latter-day heirs, that culture found itself reinvigorated by the violent worldliness of the imperial encounter and the working-class struggle for literacy, education, and political representation: the culture concept's expansionism was both spiritual and abstracting and intensely material and particular. The question has been from the very start: if culture can be co-opted and appropriated so successfully, as it seems to have been so flexibly and fluidly designed to serve, then what is left of it for the purposes of either consolation, edification, or resistance?

In thirty years of publishing left cultural criticism of an exceptionally high quality, *Social Text* has showed a sustained willingness to engage the constitutive antagonisms of the modern idea of culture. In the first issue's "Prospectus" (*ST* 1, 1979), in a section titled "Mass Culture," the editors, Stanley Aronowitz, John Brenkman, and Fredric Jameson, drew on these constitutive contradictions in the name of a reinvigorated Marxist engagement with "Theory, Culture, Ideology." Their founding manifesto echoes Williams's own theoretical shift as he moved in the late 1970s from the richly generative yet often critiqued "culturalist" conception of a "whole way of life" to the more theoretically nuanced semiotic conception of culture as a "signifying system." The theoretical move left many unanswered questions. The editors declared:

Recognizing the inadequacies of earlier Marxist aesthetics, in particular the reflection theory of art and the interpretation of aesthetic discourse in terms of reductive ideological categories, *Social Text* calls for a view of artistic practices that sees them as actively responding to the entire set of discourses, symbolic formations, and systems of representation that define a particular society's cultural and political life. We are especially interested

in analyzing art's capacity to stall or spur social transformations in a given historical situation.

Here is a more semiotic and broadly expansionist conception of the purview of the cultural critic: we can analyze any aspect of the "systems of representation that define a particular society's cultural and political life." This is the moment of the first full wave of high theory's importation in UK and U.S. circles, a time that we might look back to with some melancholy nostalgia. The astute reader will note with a jolt the use of the word *art* in that last sentence. It is a reminder that "culture" has also become a pervasive conceptual and categorical coverall: where we might hesitate at the use of the words *literature*, *art*, or even *society*, we can blithely use the word *culture* and sound respectable, even hip. But the *Social Text* founding editors counterposed their use of the inclusiveness of culture, of its imperial or globalizing tendencies, we might say, to a more antagonistic deployment of their terms of analysis, by opposing dialectically "mass culture" to the "avant-garde": "*Social Text*, therefore, proposes to raise the following question: How can the relation between mass culture and the avant-garde lead us to grasp the interaction between the emancipatory and repressive, critical and reproductive, utopian and integrative tendencies in each?" This is the dialectical, indeed antagonistic, approach to culture that has yielded some extraordinary moments in *Social Text*'s publishing history across the years.

What are the landmarks? First, the moment of emergence: In the same opening issue, there is Fredric Jameson's "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," arguably an essay that stands favorable comparison to his later, less dialectical "Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism."⁵ The insistence on the bounded category of "mass culture" generates both Jameson's rigorous readings of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* as allegory for seventies oil shock and fear of recession and a simultaneous insistence on the emancipatory potential of mass cultural forms that is less evident in the more dystopian and totalizing later analyses of postmodernism. Free, as yet, of the need to abstract "mass culture" into the "cultural dominant" of his mid-eighties theorizing, Jameson's analysis still reads like a generative road not taken. A landmark of the journal's shift toward a Birmingham School-style cultural-studies approach can be found in Lawrence Grossberg's five theses in "The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture" (*ST* 8, 1983), in which rock itself is a protean other to the essay's rigorous cultural analysis, submerged into forty-three wonderful footnotes like the chords of a rackful of punk and post-punk LPs. In Richard Johnson's bracing and still salutary survey of the field, "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" (*ST* 16, 1986), we see a humane response to the emergence of a dual antagonism, both

within and without the idea of culture. For Johnson, cultural studies must respond, urgently yet patiently, to both the attacks of the new right neocons on the legitimacy and politics of left cultural studies and also to the threat posed by institutionalization and codification to the outsider project of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) of the Birmingham School. In like spirit was Gallagher's 1992 critique of Williams, mentioned above, that drew spirited responses from editors Aronowitz and Andrew Ross (*ST* 30). Jameson articulated his own critique of "the desire called Cultural Studies" in a compendious review essay of the landmark Routledge cultural studies anthology edited by Larry Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler ("On 'Cultural Studies,'" *ST* 34, 1993).

But the bracing skepticism of critiques of cultural studies published in the journal's own pages couldn't stem the expansionist energies of a guest issue on "Corporate Culture" edited by Evan Watkins (*ST* 44, 1995). And the journal also responded to profound changes in academic culture wrought by the neoliberal restructuring of higher education by publishing several issues on academic labor and unionization struggles (see *ST* 49, 1996; *ST* 51, 1997; *ST* 70, 2002; *ST* 90, 2007). This is the context, I would suggest, of an antagonistic logic at the heart of the idea of culture itself, within which we should read the turn toward the rhetoric of the "culture wars" in the 1980s and 1990s.

The truth of the matter is that "culture" wars are not about culture. They are about ideology and about attacking institutions and theories and practices held by those whose ideas are deemed illegitimate or "uncivilized." Nor are the culture "wars," as any military veteran could point out, real wars. They are ideological skirmishes in which words and cultural artifacts are used as weapons to serve other noncultural and worldly agendas. But careers can be derailed, journals damaged, and, worst of all, voices silenced. That was the lesson of the Sokal affair, triggered by an essay published in *ST* 46/47 on "The Science Wars." A hoaxer took advantage not of a journal's refusal to believe in gravity, nor of its credulity in the face of a science writer manipulating his mastery of his opponents' rhetoric (not an act of war, but of ironic imitation), but rather of *Social Text's* long-standing engagement with the antagonistic energies of culture. In this case, the scientist as hoaxer merely ensured that the gulf between the "two cultures" of science and the humanities that C. P. Snow famously lamented in the 1950s was forced a little farther apart. How convenient for those committed to blocking dialogue, to silencing dissent, and to masking the conflicting energies within culture and to subordinating them to the ideological. The journal adapted and rebounded, energized in large measure by its continual commitment to wrestling with the idea of culture. Defending the oppositional potential of culture and exploring the gendering of culture, for example, Judith Butler took on various adversaries of

“merely cultural” theorists and of the “merely cultural” political activities of new social movements, especially queer activists, in the 1997 double issue “Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender,” edited by Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz, and Trish Rosen (*ST* 52/53). Butler’s essay drew a spirited response from the feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser. Jameson’s 1993 critique of cultural studies would generate a delayed, but rather triumphant, rebuttal in George Yudice’s guest-edited issue on cultural policy (*ST* 59, 1999), which used *Social Text* to announce the revival of a reinvigorated form of cultural studies, already pioneered by Yudice, Randy Martin, Toby Miller, and Tony Bennett, which both contested the privatization of culture spurred by neoliberal globalization and engaged with state policy makers.⁶ Miller followed up the move into cultural policy with an issue on cultural citizenship in *ST* 69 in 2001. The same desire both to expand the reach of cultural analysis and to bound and limit the expansionist energies of the idea of culture during the era of neoimperial war making motivated the “Ends of War” issue which I edited more recently (*ST* 91, 2007). This issue sought to expand the rival definitions and uses of culture to include war culture, a modern cultural tradition constructed out of total warfare and mobilized to serve the technologies of violence.⁷

Social Text offers thirty years of responses to the question of what a “cultural politics after cultural studies” might look like. One answer would be that no one owns the idea of culture, yet all seem to lay claim to it, and those who wield it will often get burned by its antagonistic energies. Another would be that history teaches us that there are no culture wars, only wars *on* culture in the name of ideology, struggles that are driven by the idea’s infectious contradictions.

Notes

1. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy, with Friendship’s Garland and Some Literary Essays*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 135.

2. For a fuller discussion, see David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1998), and Michael Denning’s excellent discussion in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004), 75–96.

3. See Raymond Williams, “Culture,” in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1983), 87–93; and Stuart Hall, “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities,” *October* 53 (1990): 11–24. More recently, the keywords approach has also yielded the following immensely useful collections: Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds., *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), and Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, eds., *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

4. On the colonialist genealogy of culture, see Robert J. C. Young’s invaluable discussion in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (New York:

Routledge, 1995), 29–54. For classic studies of the struggle for a working-class culture, see, for example, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998); and Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). See also Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991).

5. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 53–92.

6. See also Toby Miller’s authoritative edited volume on the field, *A Companion to Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), and George Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

7. See Patrick Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).