

THE MOOD OF NETWORKING CULTURE

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- + 'The great socialist project - the dream of handing power over to the people - is being realized in front of our eyes. It is being realized not by the disciples of communism, but by the preachers of free enterprise and market capitalism. None of this has anything to do with politics. We are simply talking about the logical consequences of the forces of funk.' (Ridderstråle & Nordstrøm 1994)

'One could say that the heraldic motto of post-fordism is, rightfully, "politics above all." After all, what else could the discourse of "total quality" mean, if not a request to surrender to production a taste for action, the capacity to face the possible and the unforeseen, the capacity to communicate something new?' (Virno 2004: 63)

After the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1979 [1947]), Adorno revisited the relation between culture and means-ends rationality which had provided the practical subjective side of the notion of 'culture industry', in order to see if things were really as bad as he and Horkheimer had originally thought. In this second attempt Adorno emphasises the conflict between bureaucratic and administrative rationality, as described by Max Weber in *Economy and Society* (1979), and autonomous aesthetic judgment described by Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgment* (1987 [1790]), at the expense of the conflict between the Taylorisation of industrial production and everyday life and the 'tribunal of pure reason' imagined by Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1929), which

organised the themes of the earlier text. In doing so Adorno found more room for manoeuvre. The essay begins with the startling statement that 'whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether that is his intention or not' (1991: 93). Adorno makes this claim as a way of explaining the underlying reality of a situation in which culture has become the common denominator of everything. This is a consequence of the triumph of administrative rule for which culture functions as a general equivalence, and through which everything can be arranged, assembled, distributed and evaluated. These circumstances are not met with Adorno's rigorous negative dialectic but instead offer the opportunity for a more pragmatic response because:

'It is neither possible to accept uncritically the concept of culture, long permeated by ideas of departmentalisation, nor to continue to shake one's head conservatively about what is being done to culture in the age of integral organisation.' (1991: 94)

Adorno's optimism stems from the fact that administrative rationality necessarily establishes its own limits in order to secure the conditions of action. These limits, while not exterior to the exercise of administrative rule, provide opportunities for action which are not immediately subsumed by administration and which serve to advance the interest of culture in its own autonomy. Although the Weberian destiny of bureaucratic expansion entailed that administration had become an autonomous end in itself, the growth of specialists in administration required that administrative domination was exercised over substantive areas in which administration possessed no particular knowledge or competence. Not only does this involve the disruption of an objective link between means and ends that administration seeks to implement, but also the emergence of a bureaucratic nightmare in the form of a conflict between 'the sacrosanct irrationality of culture' and its conditions. For Adorno the situation is encapsulated in the following antinomian structure:

'The demand made by administration on culture is essentially heteronomous: culture - no matter what form it takes - is to be measured by norms not inherent to it and which have nothing to do with the quality of the object, but rather with

some types of abstract standards imposed from without, while at the same time the administrative instance - according to its own prescriptions and nature - must for the most part refuse to become involved in questions of immanent quality with regard to the truth of the thing itself or its objective bases in general.' (1991: 98)

Instead of trying to resolve this antinomy through an antagonism which would affirm the autonomy of culture against administrative domination, and in which, it must be said, culture would be beaten easily, Adorno suggests that culture should become enlightened and self-consciously grasp the antinomy as a basis for action. Doing so entails rejecting the desire for emancipation from material conditions as this only leads to disavowal and neutralisation, and rejecting the belief that artistic content, especially when it means the denunciation of everything institutional and official, constitutes a vanguard movement against administration from a position radically exterior to it. Such 'manifestations of extreme artistry' are easily tolerated. Instead, Adorno suggests that administration is not necessarily bad, and that any bad can be weighed against the good through which administration provides the conditions for culture as a collective endeavour. This is regulated by bureaucratic principles of equity preventing arbitrariness, nepotism, blind control, favouritism and other forms of corruption. On this basis the antinomy of culture and administration could be mediated by cultural experts who would decide on the conflicting requirements of the system and the object under a duty to 'uphold the interests of the public against the public itself'. By creating 'centres of freedom' in this way a non-reified 'spontaneous consciousness' can intervene and alter the function of administration and encourage a difference and divergence from the requirements of the system. Adorno condensed this position in the slogan, 'the planning of the non-planned'.

For Adorno, culture is subsumed under the logic of strategic-relational political action; a concept derived by combining Gramsci's distinction between 'war of position' and 'war of movement' in order to establish an underlying common

element (Jessop 1982). That is to say, some elements of a given situation may be considered structural insofar as they cannot be changed by the action of an agent, and may well constrain the actions that can be taken, or even determine them. Similarly, some elements of a given situation may be conjunctural, and thus enable opportunities for relatively autonomous action, that in consequence alter what is to count as structural and may transform it into something conjunctural. What Adorno did not realise was that the real 'vocation' of administration is to act in this way, and not under the authority of some regulative 'code of conduct'. What he also did not anticipate was that such a mode of action would become commonplace, and that this would happen as a consequence of the triumph of culture over administration. The notion of culture has become generalised such that administration is subsumed within it. Administration has become the site of emergence for contingent acts of 'cultural entrepreneurship' because culture is no longer a sphere external to administration. Administration has not eliminated culture. Rather, administration has become culture. Organisation is no longer the structure defined by procedures and grounded in reason. Rather, organisation has become an anthropology striving to represent itself as such. By the same token, culture in Adorno's specific sense of 'aesthetic value' has become reduced to the general level of anthropological phenomena associated with the bourgeoisie of advanced capitalist societies, and which has no privileged relation to the equally anthropological culture of the 'culture industries'.

How have these dialectical twists come about? In their bestseller *Empire* (2001) Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe the dynamic of the contemporary world in terms of the convergence of two distinct processes. On the one hand a constant de-structuring of existing organisational forms, and on the other a constant production of difference at the cultural level. It would be a mistake to explain either of these forces by means of the other. Of course investment in organisational structures is unwise under circumstances where Capital creates the conditions of its own economic uncertainty. Yet equally those who inhabit such structures, from corporate offices to social housing schemes, resist, subvert and disengage from the disciplines they impose and that create costs Capital can

only seek to displace. Through such means the conventional distinction between the sphere of organisation and administration, and the sphere of culture as both 'everyday life' and aesthetic experience, has become harder to maintain and the resulting fluidity and indeterminacy becomes a resource for the production and maintenance of Empire itself. As evidence of this phenomena the authors point to the self-help literary genre of airport, or perhaps 'airhead', management books with titles like *Thriving on Chaos* and *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. They also point to government announcements to 'reinvent' itself by accepting its contingency through the introduction of pseudo-markets in its machinery and that of the services it provides, such as health, law, education and combat. Within popular culture one could also refer to the thematics of 'the crisis of organisational certainty and its subjective effects' in such hit TV shows as HBO's melodrama *The Sopranos* and BBC's comedy *The Office*. Recall too the explanation of 'the legendary pirate's code' in *Pirates of the Caribbean* as 'more what you'd call guidelines than actual rules'.¹ Culture is a resource because everything is made up as it goes along, as if the sociological discoveries of Garfinkelian ethnomethodology - which demonstrated that organisation was not the effect of some anonymous transcendent structure but was made up from the mundane and changing interactions of people - have become the reflexive, but not *reflective*, common sense of everyday life (Garfinkel 1967; Lash 2002).

Whereas moderns had put all their energy in trying to create a hierarchical world modelled on the pre-modern order of being, in either its Greek or Christian versions - and which had been destroyed by the modern realisation that 'we can do this ourselves, only better, and without God's say so or metaphysical guarantees' - people today do not wait around for a picture that would represent to them how the world is, they just get on with it. What they do is network in the sense of making and unmaking contingent relationships between others and between material and immaterial things, in order to pursue 'goals' that change according to the last move in the relationship. The required tactic is to avoid getting locked into relationships and to avoid 'path dependency' at all costs. Conflict is something to be avoided too, because it is better to go around an obstacle rather

than to confront it head on - not necessarily because of cowardice, but because of the opportunity-cost of getting bogged down in an argument which might never be resolved. Life is too short to worry about being right.

Following Althusser we might say that whereas the ideological form of address that kept people in their place under modern capitalism was modelled on the police 'hey, you', today's typical form of address is the ambivalent 'is there a problem?' of the customer service or human resources manager (Althusser 1971). This ensures people are kept out of any place, at least if they are sensible. Getting trapped in that sort of 'dialogue' might mean doing or, worse, buying something you didn't want. Whereas for Althusser the paradigmatic scenes in which individuals got themselves caught up in ideology were the rituals of kneeling and praying perfected by the Christians, then today it is the 'team meeting' where 'everyone makes a valuable contribution', or better, the seminar on 'neuro-linguistic programming' or 'transactional analysis'. In fact, it is probably no longer realistic to talk about ideology at all if this means a systematically distorted view of the world produced by capital in order that people misunderstand their place in it. For example, Slavoj Žižek has recently drawn attention to the significance of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex and thus of the prohibitions and taboos that it anchored. In the light of Althusser's adoption of Lacan's interpretation of Freud, this functions as an explanatory ground of ideology, as it provides a theory of the formation of subjectivity out of a simultaneous moment of insertion into a subordinate position in a relation of subjection (Žižek 2000). This development does not mean that people suddenly acquire a transparent epistemological relation to the truth. Rather, 'any symbolic point of reference that would serve as a safe and unproblematic moral anchor' disappears (2000: 332). Action is no longer orientated to the true/false, right/wrong distinction. Žižek's diagnosis is ambivalent. On the one hand this situation explains the proliferation of rules and committees to decide on trivial matters such as sexual etiquette in order, precisely, to minimise risk. Yet on the other hand, nowhere does Žižek show how any of this adds up to a unified symbolic whole precisely because the mechanism that would make that possible, the Oedipus complex, no longer exists. Which

is why - despite the revisionist claim that all psychoanalysis has ever done is describe an anthropology of 'the unexpected consequences of the disintegration of traditional structures that regulated libidinal life' (2000: 341) - Žižek bemoans the narcissism and immaturity of 'young people'. He does this to establish the moral desirability of 'traditional structures' if only as something to be against, and despite the fact that they have never existed outside the dreams of Victorian amateur anthropologists.

All of this is bad news for Critical Theory and its take on Culture and culture. To see just how bad we can turn to the punk-rock scholasticism of the contemporary followers of Spinoza, and in particular Virno's recent attempt to elaborate the subjectivity of the multitude, a category also deployed by Hardt and Negri, amongst others, to designate the being and acting of post-fordist network culture (Virno, 2004).³ For Virno, the traditional distinction between work, action and thought has dissolved. Labour is no longer productive, barely distinguishable from unemployment, insofar as its outcome is service which creates relations of 'personal dependence'. Idleness has become 'the pivot of contemporary production' (2004:89) insofar as practices of communication have been reduced to a purely phatic function. Yet despite the fact that making and unmaking relationships has become the source of surplus value sufficient to keep the need for the old economies ticking along, none of this is visible from within the traditional concepts of political economy and its critique. Hence the growth of contingent organisational practices and their technologies which supplement existing financial accountancy and managerial practices in order to try and represent these phenomena. Being as immaterial and service-based as the values they seek to understand, they stimulate their own growth and expansion by deepening the lack of objectivity in the old economy by revealing its dependence on relationships it did not know it had and which it might now lose; for example, with an identity, and above all with culture. Auditing is perhaps one of the most well-known names for such practices which both invents new needs for organisations and invents measures to represent their absence in order to verify their claims (Kimbell 2002: parallax 2004; Power 1997) .

Of particular importance for Virno's thesis is the suggestion that whereas the culture industries were formerly considered economically marginal, they have now become central. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the culture industries create values that have no relation to the costs of production. Secondly, the culture industries provide a training in working with immaterial values and establishing and destroying networks of personal dependence. In the absence of quantitative measuring sticks, work becomes a Machiavellian politics of impression management in order to invent and maintain power (Wernick 1991). Culture, especially through its subversion of communication as a practice of achieving rational agreement for collective actions, has become 'the industry of the means of production'. In the absence of routines tied down to the certainty of long-run production cycles, the culture industries provide a 'training in precariousness and variability' (Virno 2004: 85). Indeed, much of this training goes on outside the formal spaces of production in the haphazard realm of private and social experiences and draws on the types of subjectivity that these require. Here Virno emphasises a combination of opportunism and cynicism. The first celebrates the qualities of those 'who confront a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities, making themselves available to the greater number of these, yielding to the nearest one, and then quickly swerving from one to another' (2004: 86). The second combines this practical promiscuity with a calculated detachment that recognises the conventional and groundless nature of the structures of action simply used as occasions for 'brutal and arrogant' self-affirmation (2004: 88).

Left-wing and liberal reactions to the descriptions of Virno, Hardt and Negri generally follow the predictable cycle of denial, anger and revenge. In doing so, they converge with the right-wing and conservative reaction to the loss of its own certainties, issuing in a sort of 'left-wing fogleyism'. Particularly provocative is the argument that the multitude arises from below as a problem for order and the forms which it takes: bureaucratic discipline, the social contract between state and civil society, and obligations to moral conscience. The multitude is not concerned to oppose these phenomena, nor is it concerned to demonstrate

obedience to subjection. Neither is the multitude equivalent to some benign notion of the subordinate people opposed to the dominant 'power-bloc'. Instead the action of the multitude is described as evasion and 'exit.'

Of course, no one would dispute the proposition that the forms in which the multitude exists derive from the developments of Capital. Yet both Virno, and Hardt and Negri, explain that it is the multitude's desire for the products of Capital, the aristocratic virtues of leisure and enjoyment over the slave vices of work and misery, that serves to undermine Capital precisely because it cannot satisfy the demand it stimulates. Hence social struggles increasingly revolve around the question of who is to pay for this. It is worth remembering that the acceleration of debt that sustains Capital will never be paid off, especially as national economic systems have come to rely on it. Neither will the financial responsibility for theft as a strategy of consumption be accepted by the perpetrators, whether this concerns white trash chancers who swipe a laptop from Starbucks or 'soccer moms' who switch the price labels in designer shops. And although much has been made of the invention of self-responsibility as a strategy of corporate and public government, no one should expect any of it to work. Its purpose is simply to provide employment for experts in symbolic communication.

With these points in mind perhaps we should recall Virno's account of the origins of post-fordism in the spontaneous outbreaks of 'refusal' which occurred in Italy in 1977. Although this phenomenon made an important contribution it should not downplay the significance of the destructive and antagonistic noise that erupted in the suburbs of Britain in the same year. By honouring the year zero of punk we can perhaps comprehend how 'Nihilism (the practice of not having established practices, etc.) has entered into production, has become a professional qualification, and has been *put to work*.' (2004: 85; original emphasis). After all, to be a slave to a god which does not exist is against our rights and dignity.

NOTES:

1. The words of Captain Barbossa (played by Geoffrey Rush) in *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (USA, 2003).

2. For more information, see <<http://www.generation-online.org>>.

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