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The Contradictions of Postmodernism

Terry Eagleton

WHY IS EVERYONE TALKING about culture? Because there are, of course, rather more important topics to talk about. The idea, fashionable now among sectors of the Western left, that everything is cultural belongs to the doctrine known as culturalism, a doctrine quite as reductive in its own way as economism, biologism, essentialism, or any of the other “isms” against which it is a mildly panic-stricken overreaction. Culturalism inflates the importance of what is constructed, coded, conventional about human life, as against what human beings have in common as natural material animals. Historicism, likewise, tends to emphasize what is changeable, relative, and discontinuous about history, rather than what has remained massively, unmovably, and somewhat depressingly consistent about it. Culturalism belongs to a specific historical place and time—in our case, to an advanced capitalist West, but now increasingly, it would seem, about to be imported into China and other “emergent” societies. What are the reasons for this?

Let us be clear first of all that there is nothing inherently radical about seeing things as culturally constructed. In post-Enlightenment Europe, culture as a concept was quite often on the side of political reaction: an appeal, as in the exemplary case of Edmund Burke, to the pieties of custom, traditional privilege, inherited status, and hierarchies, as against the radical Enlightenment’s revolutionary rallying cry of *Nature*. In a curious fit of historical oblivion, today’s Western cultural left appears to have demonized all appeals to the natural as insidiously *naturalizing*, which is quite a different thing. They have conveniently forgotten that Nature for the radical-democratic Enlightenment meant among other things an appeal to what all human beings from cabin to castle share in common, and so was intrinsically levelling and subversive. For Thomas Paine, it is Burke’s recourse to culture, to consecrated historical habit, which is naturalizing, not his own radical deployment of the notion of a common human nature. A venerable Western lineage from George Lukács to Roland Barthes is quite mistaken to believe that ideology is always and everywhere naturalizing. One can be a doughty defender of capitalism or Stalinism without suffering from the delusion that things were always like that, that the collectivization of the peasantry or the

unleashing of market forces reflect an unalterable dimension of human nature. No canny apologist for such regimes would be naive enough to indulge in such an egregious folly. Today, a culturalism or conventionalism such as that of Stanley Fish harnesses a left epistemology to a conservative politics, just as that of Richard Rorty yokes it to a liberal-bourgeois outlook.

Historicizing is by no means inherently radical either, whatever the Western cultural left may on the whole consider. Indeed much historicism in Europe has been firmly in possession of political conservatism. The assumption that historicism is naturally on the side of radicalism implies, quite falsely, that all nonradicals are antihistorical formalists. There is no reason why a liberal or conservative should not appeal to historical context; the quarrel between them and the political left is not in the main over this, but over *which* historical reading is in question. There is nothing automatically radical about either margins or minorities, just as there is nothing spontaneously reactionary about mainstreams and consensuses. Minorities today include neo-Nazis and the international bourgeoisie; racists are marginalized in civilized company, and it's a good thing too. The idea that plurality or otherness or multiplicity is inherently subversive reveals similar left illusions. Some forms of plurality are radical, whereas others are as native to the free market as violence is to the United States. All of these beliefs betray an empty formalism, void of concrete historical content. Culturalism is sometimes on the side of the given system, and sometimes not; and my contention in this essay is that, in its postmodern guise, it is both at once.

Why all this talk about culture? One can think immediately of two reasons, one rather more negative than the other. The bad news first: in the postwar West, culture has become for the first time in the modern epoch a vital force in material reproduction as a whole, firmly locked into the commodity production which, in the era of high modernism, it characteristically disdained. In premodern or traditional societies, culture figured as a significant force in political and ideological reproduction: the various cultural apparatuses were more or less closely integrated into the institutions of clan, court, church, or state, which meant on the one hand that the artist had a public function, on the other hand that his or her art acted among other things as a fairly direct medium of ideological power. With the dawning of modernity, the symbolic realms of religion, art, and sexuality were gradually separated out from political and economic institutions, and art was shifted instead into the market, which meant on the one hand that the artist now worryingly lacked a public function, but on the other hand that his or her art could exploit this distance from the public realm to become, for the first time, a form of critique. The only problem with this was that the very distance which

made for critique also tended to render that criticism fairly impotent. Advanced capitalism witnesses, in a sense, a revival of the premodern integration of the symbolic and the social, but now, more precisely and dispiritingly, in the form of a recoupling of the symbolic and the economic. Cultural production rejoins general production after the fissurings and estrangements of modernity, but now thoroughly under the sway of the commodity form. The work of art is thus a bearer of dominant power less because it is linked in premodern fashion to the official ideological apparatuses, but because it mimes the destiny of the commodity form which is, as Theodor Adorno comments, its own ideology. The art which was once considered, rather desperately, to represent the lonely last-ditch stand of use-value against exchange-value turns out to be just another modality of the latter.

As usual, however, there is a more upbeat story to tell as well. For the other reason why culture has figured so prominently in recent decades is because it has been an inseparable part of the new social and political movements. This has involved a struggle over the meaning of the term "culture" itself, between its more aesthetic and more anthropological senses: culture as art may not have a great deal to do with these new sexual, ethnic, and associated movements, but culture as language, value, custom, life-style, identity, allegiance, clearly has. (One might note here, incidentally, that "culture" is always either too unworkably narrow or too embarrassingly wide a notion: if it is "elitist" to identify it with minority art, as all good postmodernists agree, it is also shoddy, amorphous, and ultimately meaningless to view it as coterminous with the whole of human life, as all good postmodernists by no means agree.) The point, however, is that culture in its broader sense has been utterly integral to the three movements which have headed the political agenda in the West for the past few decades: revolutionary nationalism, sexual politics, and ethnic struggle. In each of these cases, culture is part of the very medium of political conflict, the very idiom in which it is inflected, rather than—as for much classical socialist politics—an optional extra. And what this means is the steady undermining of the traditional liberal-humanist faith in culture as either an alternative to prosaic political conflicts, or as a higher reconciliation of them. That faith is in my view by no means to be sniffed at: historically speaking, it has bred a generously utopian lineage along with a perilously mystifying one, a moving vision of human potential as well as a hopelessly idealist one. But it is clearly much harder to sustain once culture has shifted over from being part of the solution to being part of the problem—once, that is to say, culture becomes part of the very terms in which political interests articulate themselves, rather than the deeper, universal, more perdurable language in which such ephemeral quarrels may be resolved.

What has happened in our own time is that culture, for good and ill, has become once more—and for the first time since the late 1960s—a realm of political struggle in itself, at the very moment, ironically enough, when it is also being voraciously assimilated into a market society. Whether this new concern with cultural struggle is an extraordinary enrichment of a previously rather philistine, antisubjective politics, or a desperate displacement of it in the face of a rolling back of those classical political forces, is a matter for individual judgment; my own view is that it is both of these things simultaneously.

Culture, at least in nineteenth-century Britain, was called upon to fulfill the function of transcendental reconciliation because a considerably more plausible candidate for that role, religion, had dismally failed. It had failed not under the savage assaults of atheistic materialists, but because industrial capitalist society tends itself, in its unavoidable rationalizing and secularizing of social existence, to bring into discredit its own purportedly transcendent values. But it is hard for culture to play this role, since it is, after all, ineluctably local, sensuous, particularized, idiomatic; it will always provide a poor subject for the magnificently effective role which religious discourse previously fulfilled, and, delicate animal that it is, will begin to betray disturbingly neurotic symptoms if too much is ideologically demanded of it. Postmodernism has kissed goodbye, or so it believes, the idea of culture as disinterested reconciliation; but in this, one suspects, it is distinctly premature and theoreticist. For though *it* may have jettisoned ontological foundations, metaphysical grounds, apodictic truths, unimpeachable authorities, and the rest, the advanced capitalist orders to which it belongs certainly have not, and indeed cannot. No capitalist society is more secular than the United States, and none is more virulently metaphysical. This is not a fortuitous conjuncture, though it may be an incongruous one. The more market forces level all distinct value and identity to arbitrary, aleatory, relative, hybrid, interchangeable status, confounding fixed ontologies, mocking high-toned teleologies, and kicking all solid foundations from beneath themselves, the more their ideological superstructures—to adopt a shamefully old-style terminology now once more urgently relevant—will need to insist, more and more stridently, upon absolute values and immutable standards, assured grounds and unimpeachable goals, the eternal givenness of a human nature which is mutating before their very eyes, the universal status of values which are being exposed as historically partial even as we speak.

It is in this sense, surely, that postmodernism is both radical and conservative together, springing as it does from this structural contradiction at the core of advanced capitalism itself. Against the forbidding metaphysical superstructures of such regimes, it boldly pits the provi-

sional, fluid, multiple, relativist, egalitarian; and in doing so it finds itself unavoidably miming the logic of the capitalist marketplace itself, which has now, so to speak, been turned against the logic of the superstructures which hold it in place. The answer to the question of whether postmodernism is radical or conservative can only be a firm yes and no. And of few places in the world today is this perhaps truer than of China, where we are witnessing a spectacular contradiction between a still highly authoritarian political superstructure and a progressively capitalized economic base. At one end of Tiananmen Square, an oversized portrait of Mao Zedong still peers expressionlessly down, while just opposite, the luminous arches of the McDonald's logo scale the evening sky. One can appreciate in this context just what a bold project Chinese postmodernism is, with its resolute determination to deconstruct all hierarchies, elites, and immutable values. One can also recognize how Western postmodern theory has arrived along with the latest shipment of Coca-Cola, as in some sense the intellectual rationale of all that, and how properly suspicious of it must be those Chinese radicals who have still not accepted that the only alternative to Stalinism is 7-Up. Postmodernism, among other things, concerns the cherishing of cultural difference; it is therefore an irony beyond anything flaunted by its own fictions that it is now actively contributing to the remorseless cultural homogenization of the globe, exporting a philosophy of difference as, among other things, a mode of Western cultural integration.

Like most so-called Third-World societies, the problem which confronts China today is less that of postmodernity than of modernity proper. What do you do, in short, if postmodernity arrives on your doorstep before you have fully experienced the delights and disasters of modernity itself? How do you cope with the time warping consequent on having your current history elided between autocratic traditionalism on the one hand and the ambiguous promises of postmodernism on the other? How do you deal with the paradox that your own "modernity" means joining a club which is now at the point of leaving modernity scornfully behind it? Two kinds of solution suggest themselves, neither much more satisfactory than the other. On the one hand, you can advocate a "stageist" theory: China, and societies with roughly its sorts of problems, should not rush to adopt Western styles of postmodernity—indeed how, other than purely cerebrally, could they, since the postmodern is a good deal more than a theory—without first striving to enjoy the benefits of that very form of enlightenment which postmodernism in the West is now so eager to dismantle. On this argument, what China and other "emergent" societies need is less Lyotard than civil liberties, full individual autonomy, material well-being, a democratized public sphere, in short all of the advantages which

European Enlightenment promised to bring the West, however dismally it has failed to deliver. The drawbacks of such a position are obvious: “stageist” theories are always a little suspect, since it is unrealistic to expect that societies will artificially “defer,” in the name of some abstract agenda, what has suddenly become possible for them. And the Eurocentrism of such a case needs little underlining: are we to bequeath such societies our own erstwhile liberal humanism, while hastening in our own case to deconstruct it?

This first “solution” remembers the gains of Enlightenment; the second is more conscious of its losses. This is the case that the so-called Third World should take advantage of the fact that it might be able to undergo *modernization* without the accompanying European ideology of *modernity* by avoiding all the evils of that creed. Perhaps, by being able to leap directly from Mao to the postmodern, one can give the slip to some of the most destructive consequences of European Enlightenment. The problem here, however, is that in giving the slip to the more negative consequences of that current, you may simultaneously be passing up on what is most precious in it. For the typical Western postmodernist, this poses no problem at all, since there is little to be cherished about Enlightenment in the first place. But for those of us with a somewhat more dialectical assessment of the movement, as both magnificent emancipation and unutterable disaster, the problem cannot be dissolved so quickly. There is indeed a “solution” to this dilemma, though at the moment, at least in China, it might seem hardly worth mentioning. The doctrine which has traditionally tried to redeem the positive kernel of Enlightenment while relentlessly criticizing its devastating effects is known as socialism—a doctrine which, as one Chinese participant in the conference at the source of this volume remarked, makes any decent Chinese today shudder. One will not assuage that entirely understandable horror by arguing that Mao was about as far from socialism as Newt Gingrich. Whatever intellectual force such a claim might have, and it seems to me considerable, it is idly academicist in the present situation. All one can perhaps point out is that, whatever the important issues are today between East and West or North and South, they are most certainly not in the first place “cultural,” and that to believe otherwise, as postmodern culturalists tend to, is merely to perpetuate a damaging mystification.

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