

Only Connect: making use of culture in the mediation of social relations

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A dull thing, considered by some hardly worthy of their attention, therefore acknowledged briefly as a given then afterwards ignored. Or, a superficially sparkling thing, but dull underneath, taken to occupy too much of the attention of the (too) many, and therefore should be ignored even when unfortunately it is not.

Such is the bad lot of the commodity today: either passed over because it is as mundane and banal as the economic statistics which demonstrate its ubiquity; or abhorred because of the fascination it exercises over those judged gullible and ignorant. Disdain for the commodity is frequently echoed in the bracketing of all-things-economic as ‘neo-liberal’, where to bracket is to take as read; and, often simultaneously, in the ostentatious rejection of those branded commodities thought to have taken hold of the sub-conscious masses.

This paper seeks to show that the commodity is neither dull nor its brightness an illusion; rather, following Marx (1983), it is the cell-form of historically specific social relations and as such contains in microcosm both the transformative dynamic inherent in such relations and their cyclical self-limitation. At one and the same time, the commodity is the darkness in the tunnel and the light at the end of it.

A Circuit of Transformations

The commodity is a series of transformations, which with the addition of yet another kind of transformation, becomes a circuit. As materials, machinery and human, social labour are embedded in it, so are they transformed in the making of something new – the commodity – for the satisfaction of human wants. The commodity is the outcome of this first phase of transformations. Moreover, if commodities are the result of a transformative process, once brought into being they are transformed again, one into another, by means of their universal equivalent, money. These two, transformative sequences are more commonly known as ‘production’ and ‘the market’; and the mode of commodity production occurs when across society goods are typically produced (transformation 1) for exchange on the market (transformation 2). Thus ‘all that is solid melts into air’ – and this continuously, not only once and for all time as in the break-up of the sociologists’ community; and all that is sold is bordering on the miraculous.

There are more miracles to come. If social production is the coming together of human beings in order to make goods, by the time such goods come to market, they will have become private property. Where there was social labour, now there is anti-social appropriation: another miraculous transformation. Furthermore, in that the world we jointly inhabit is largely produced by reference to the market and its transformation of one privately owned commodity into another, so across society as a whole the direct, inter-personal relations of those engaged in the production of a particular good are generally supplanted by miraculous relations between commodities, one for another, while those involved in producing the universe of

commodities typically do not relate directly one with another but only indirectly and as a consequence of interactions (exchanges) between commodities on the market. Thus the third transformation, of social labour into private property, also de-centres the interaction of those involved in production, and, *mirabile dictu*, posits the interaction of commodities as the central, organising relationship – relations between things, not people – in the continuous reproduction of the historically specific society which we ourselves have made.

This is a society of social relations rendered indirect, where the relations of individuals organised collectively in the production of any single commodity, are miraculously transformed via the market into direct relations between things and only indirect relations between people. Indirect social relations are thus characterised by the absence of direct relations between producers. Seen from the plane of society as a whole, at this end-point in production relations, producers stand disconnected from each other except via the commodities they have already produced.

This also means that the unavoidable social relation of our times is essentially contradictory. The contradiction between social production and private appropriation thereof, is reproduced in every commodity as the contradiction between the (qualitative) use to which it is put (use-value), i.e. how the commodity satisfies a human want, and how much it can be sold for (loosely equivalent to exchange-value), with a satisfactory quantity of the latter as the precondition for the servicing of any human want addressed in the former. Production for profit, in other words.

As described above, the relations of production will already have reached *impasse*. With the transformation of relations between people into relations between things, we have entered a *cul de sac*. Commodities will have supplanted people as the subject of the process, yet in and of themselves they (commodities) cannot recommence the episode of production, still less make it continuous. However, though the production of commodities is the precondition for the current form of social reproduction, these two – commodity production and social reproduction – are not identical. At present, we cannot live without commodity production but we must also live outwith, i.e. beyond, it. There, in the terrain afforded by commodity production but beyond its internal boundaries, indirect social relations are, however fleetingly, transformed back into direct relations between people. This is to complete what only then becomes a cycle, such that the transformative moments above are not only joined into a single episode but also continually connected so as to comprise the circuit of the social relations of production – a circuit of productive transformations which can only recur insofar as it includes and passes through the non-productive, i.e. that which does not produce commodities.

In other words, production relations are continually mediated: they are transformed into something else in order that the process of transformation may begin anew, which is to say that ‘something else’ is the mid-point between two circuits that only become circuitous by virtue of their mediation, i.e. via the mid-point which is therefore external to production but integral to the reproduction of production relations. Crudely, the circuitry of clocking in to work and producing goods on most days for most of those days, is only possible because we clock off in the evening and at weekends, during which time indirect production relations are superseded by direct interpersonal relations.

This is the moment when mediation occurs. Mediation takes place when human beings relate to each other directly in the context of (but also partly outside) indirect production relations which otherwise prohibit them from doing so.

From the point of view of the human subject, mediation is experienced as its opposite, for this is the moment when our relations are not conducted indirectly *via* commodities acting as mediators between the people who produced them. But the objective characteristic of the mode of commodity production is that commodity supplants humanity as the subject of production relations, and so from the vantage point of the system as a whole, the essentially indirect character of production relations is mediated as and when they are temporarily transformed into direct relations between people, if only as the precondition for the next circuit of transformation and the further instatement of indirect production relations.

I recognise that this characterisation is at odds with the everyday understanding of mediation as the work of mediators, whether things or people, which/who serve as points of connection between us in our inter-personal relations. The two sets of meaning for 'mediation' are not mutually exclusive, however; rather they themselves are open to mediation as follows. 'Mediation' as I have characterised it, is comprised of the platforms – culture, politics, personal relationships – upon which we relate to each other directly; 'mediation' as widely understood, consists of those actors whose role is to support such platforms. The first reading is not identical to the second, but as the second is derived from the first so they are related.

On the other hand, commodity relations – direct relations between commodities – necessarily obstruct relations between people, and would also prohibit the reproduction of the mode of commodity production if not for the moment of mediation, in between episodes of production, in which direct relations between people are temporarily disinhibited.

Thus if production relations are the essence of social reproduction so the mediation of production relations is essential to their own reproduction, and thence to social reproduction itself. It is in this sense that the recurring relations of commodity production also contain the potential for their transcendence. For just as they are reproduced so their reproduction is not wholly contained within themselves. In that the circuit of commodity production relations momentarily goes beyond those relations, insofar as the series of transformations entailed in the production of commodities is itself transformed into something other than commodity production, so the circuit itself produces the possibility of breaking the circle and transforming these relations comprehensively, i.e. social transformation.

Though this potential is objectively given, its realisation depends upon human beings acting as the subject of history i.e. people relating directly to each other and acting collectively towards overthrowing current social relations, and contesting the indirect character of current production relations. In which context, if it is taken far enough, what has been mediation will cease to be such. No longer the mid-point between recurring circuits of transformation in the production of commodities, the indirect consequence of indirect production relations – mediation – can become the vantage point from which social relations may be fully re-directed. In the absence of the

history-making subject, however, no such social transformation occurs. Here mediation remains the moment where production relations and social relations briefly diverge only so that they may converge again and continue largely uncontested.

Contingent Forms of Mediation

Mediation is essential to the reproduction of production relations, while for the reproduction of mediation it is essential that indirect production relations are not substantively contested as such, or else mediation will itself be transformed from the mid-point to the end point of the mode of commodity production. Within the context of these historically relative essentials, however, the forms which mediation takes are contingent and contested.

The precondition for all forms of its mediation is the mode of commodity production, and to this extent they are conditioned by it. Thus all forms of mediation represent – this in a literal sense: they do indeed re-present – the transformative aspects of commodity production and at the same time its cyclical, self-limiting character. Not all forms of mediation represent each of these aspects equally, however. In their representation of the contradictory moments within the circuit described above, some mediating forms seem to emphasise the potential for social transformation – they stress the opening for the open-ended; while others are all but reverting to the closed, cyclical pattern of production relations even as they stand momentarily outside it.

The former are discernible by their direct orientation towards the capacity of human beings for the transformation of internal and external worlds, while the latter are marked by repeated reference to something as if prior to human, social practice – most explicitly, God – which in its own terms represents visions of future (and past) transformation but which is in substantial part the re-presentation of a transformation which has occurred already, namely, the transformation of commodities into subjects in the context of indirect production relations between objectified people. Here the re-presentation of man-made transformation as anything but man-made, tends to mystify and thus ultimately obstruct the transformative capacity of human beings; hence it is also mis-re-presentation. A case in point is religion, or its secular variant, the deification of the State.

However, just as there are differences between mediating forms which exist simultaneously, so at different times but within the same mediating form, there are variations in the extent to which that mediating form comes to re-present transformation, or limitation, or even the contest between them. Again, religion is an example. In London, nineteenth century Methodism and twenty-first century Islam have both played a mediating role; but the historically specific content of these mediations is as significant, if not more so, than the fact that each is a mediating form.

Mediating forms generally co-exist with one another: the tendency towards only one mediating form is ‘totalitarianism’, but this is rare, and expressed only as a tendency. There is nothing intrinsic to production relations which requires a singular form of their mediation, although conjunctural factors may occasion this. Nor are production relations laden with values other than exchange value and use value. Moral values are

aspects not of production relations but of their mediation; and particular moral values may be characteristic of specific mediating forms but not others.

The coexistence of mediating forms is not necessarily peaceful, however: they are either cognate and compatible, competitive and conflicting, according to their facility for transformation or repetition, change and continuity, and the extent to which these facilities meet the demands of present but ever-changing conditions. Religion, in both its co-existence and conflicts with politics, once more comes to mind.

Out of the diverse interactions of complex mediating forms in any given period of time, emerge the key characteristics of mediation for and of that time. This is the axis of mediation, a discernible line formed by recurring instances of specific mediating forms which collectively endow that period with its readily identifiable characteristics. On the other hand, if any historical period were to go without a recognisable axis of mediation, the period itself would be harder to recognise. In such circumstances the process and even the existence of mediation would seem arbitrary. Commodity relations without recurring forms of mediation are experienced as chaos, with destabilising effects not only for mediation but frequently for commodity production also.

Experienced directly as the shape taken by the moment in our lives when commodity production does not dominate, what I have dubbed 'the axis of mediation' is commonly known as the civil society of that period. Yet just as its forms are contingent and contested, so mediation, and by its other name civil society, are essential to the mode of commodity production. For as long as the latter category is pertinent to the conditions of the day, so the existence of the former is non-negotiable, even as its particular forms are continually negotiated and re-negotiated.

Mediation Modified

During the course of my adult life there has been a substantial re-negotiation or major modification of the axis of mediation in the United Kingdom. Since the mid-1970s when I came of an age to intervene, i.e. during the three decades for which my generation must take responsibility for the course of history, there have been two points of closure, which in turn have opened up the possibilities for new or modified forms of mediation.

From the end of the nineteenth century until the final quarter of the twentieth, the axis of mediation in Britain was formed in large but by no means exclusive part by the politics of the labour and trades union movement. The politics of the labour movement jointly comprised the most significant form of mediation, which is to say that the labour movement played a leading role in forging the axis of mediation for that time. Not only did the unions function as a mediating layer between workers and management in factories, in its constitution, specifically in Clause 4, the Labour Party also re-presented the dual capacity of capitalist society for transformation and self-limitation, and succeeded in making this clause a reference point for the whole of British society, thereby re-directing the axis of mediation towards organised labour.

However, around the time that I graduated in 1976, the established axis of mediation came to be disaggregated, first under the aegis of an indecisive Labour government,

then, faster and faster, in the Thatcherite pursuit of ‘the manager’s right to manage’. With the successive defeats of the miners (1985), print workers (1986) and British Telecom engineers (1987: the last and brightest hope – they could have closed the City in minutes), the bracketing of the British labour movement was all but complete. Of course many of its organisations have remained formally intact, but not so the substance of their role as primary mediating form.

In 1989 and thereafter, I witnessed the putting into place of a second set of historical brackets, a second closure, of that which was opened up in and around the French Revolution of 1789. In France towards the end of the eighteenth century, the mode of commodity production and the indirect production relations coterminous with it, were established only by direct action which disestablished the aristocracy and the clergy. In this context, where revolution was the electrician that wired up the new circuitry of historically specific production relations and their mediation, the prospect of social transformation was highly charged, and remained current even when the French revolution had turned to reaction.

The effects of revolution were felt far beyond France. This was the historical predicate for the emergence of modern political subjectivity, which is to say that being political in this historically specific sense was to be individually oriented towards and collectively organised around the possibility of human-centred social transformation, and to be a participant in the continuous contest as to if, when and how social transformation should or should not take place.

In this characterisation, contestation is inherent in politics but it is not the only precondition for the emergence of the political. To transform society or not – a question posed by bourgeois transformation: that is the particular contest upon which the political has been predicated.

That there was no subsequent social revolution in France (except the short-lived Paris Commune) or any other of the most advanced capitalist countries, does not detract from the fact that revolution remained a tangible prospect, and that this prospect was a significant factor in what became the political mode of mediation. *Quantum* politics did not lead to revolution *tantum* the political realm served as the mediation of indirect social relations rather than the terrain on which they were brought to an end. But even as a form of mediation, as the mid-point which reconnects episodes in commodity production, thereby ensuring its continuity, the political realm was socially significant as that territory which holds out the prospect of permanently disrupting the circuit of indirect social relations, of instating direct social relations where currently there are indirect ones, and of achieving this by human hand and human hand alone.

As previously signalled, there are other forms of mediation which also offer to prolong the moment of mediation, e.g. in the religious promise of eternal life, but they make this offer by reference to something prior to human social practice. In that only human social practice can really instate direct social relations and complete the socialisation of production, their promises are an illusion; yet that which takes priority, i.e. the *a priori*, is at the same time an inverted form of the historically situated precedence of commodities over people, and hence derived from conditions which are far from illusory. Neither was the political realm immune from this

tendency: the *a priori* (and everlasting) nation state is a case in point. But insofar as it is indeed political, the political realm has been oriented around the possibility of people enacting the permanent transformation of social relations; while insofar as it steps back from this prospect, it is moving towards the mythical, where, following Barthes, myth is 'depoliticised speech'¹ (1977: 154), and acting once more as the mediating link between episodes of production.

There were always two sides to politics, therefore; and from the point of view of a social revolutionary operating during the era of modern politics, not only the bourgeois workers' party (Labour) but also the terrain of bourgeois politics upon which the Labour Party stood, were to be supported 'as a rope supports a hanging man'.

Yet this terrain has now fallen through. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was also the demolition of modern politics. By dint of the French Revolution, the political was predicated on the bourgeois as the successful alternative to the aristocrat, which meant that the bourgeois, *malgre lui*, could not but point to the possibility of further alternatives who would succeed him and prove even more successful. Even in the Continental reaction there was more than mere acknowledgement of the prospect of revolution, just as in Britain there could have been no reason to form a party of Conservatives unless the political realm in which it operated were predicated on the possibility of a progressive alternative to the new *status quo*.

By the same token, in 1989 as and when the last 'socialist' alternative, already almost unrecognisably deformed, foundered and was seen to be in the throes of abject failure, so this failure became the predicate for the historical materialisation of Thatcher's hitherto rhetorical statement: 'there is no alternative.' As 1789 established not only bourgeois society by force but also forcibly expressed the prospect of a more fully socialised alternative, and *ipso facto* gave social force to politics, so in and around 1989 the prospects for a socialist alternative were dashed, and the purchasing power of politics on society collapsed, along with membership of and identification with political parties.

This was the second of the second pair of historical bookends which I have witnessed. But life goes on. Neither of these closures has unplugged the circuitry of production relations: they remain, and, from the point of view of the mode of commodity production, they still need to be mediated. The mode of commodity production may have outlived the political mode of its mediation; but this does not preclude the development of another mode of mediation; rather, the historical conditions demand such developments.

In that the circuit of production relations cannot form a circuit and therefore could not continue in the absence of mediation, and insofar as the mediation of production relations entails at least a momentary spark beyond their own terms, the possibility of social transformation will remain inherent in any new axis of mediating forms, even when the prospect of social transformation is rendered almost invisible. However, in today's conditions, when the political which is to say that aspect of mediation which

¹ By my definition of politics as concomitant with capitalism, i.e. as the form of its mediation which is predicated on bourgeois revolution and uniquely holds out the prospect of further social transformation, throughout pre-capitalist history, myth was not depoliticised but pre-politicised speech.

clearly represents – even in opposition to it – the potential for comprehensive social transformation, is itself less presentable, such mediating forms as are now emerging will tend to present whatever transformative capacity they lay claim to as if this capacity were entirely discreet from production relations. In the Green response to current conditions, these relations are taken as given, impossible to transform, while production itself – the original presentation of the human capacity to transform the external world and humanity within it – is seen as something to be curtailed.

The period since 1989 is thus characterised by the re-negotiation of mediation, or, the extension of mediation, hence the continuation of production relations, by means other than politics. The re-negotiated mode of mediation is politics-averse, which is to say that the descriptions of social transformation embedded in it are themselves circumscribed so that they do not come even into rhetorical contact with production relations and the possibility of transforming them. The revision of Clause 4 from a collectively enforced statement of intended social transformation, however ambiguous and hence rhetorical, to a personal statement expressing shared values, exemplifies this.

Mediation Mystified

As explained above, it is not that the possibility of transformation is or can be removed outright from mediating forms, for this much is contained within production relations and the circuitry through which they are reproduced; but in the re-negotiation of mediation, transformation is redefined, and in its re-definition, the discernible scope for human-centred, long-lasting transformation is diminished, just as production relations are ever more readily eternalised.

Some of the surging lines within the emerging, modified axis of mediation are unusually straightforward renditions of the cursory appearance of mediation as precursor to the continued performance of indirect production relations. Thus occurs what I shall call ‘sensationalism’ – the cult of novelty, authenticity and superficiality in a combined assault on the senses (just think of sex, drugs and M&S Food advertising) – is a cartoon-like impression of the essential contingency of mediation. Here the sensational offers to transform our lives but only for as long as the sensation lasts. It is the feast that gets you back to work, the fleetingly direct and immediate experience which acknowledges its transitory nature and thus all but advertises itself as the shortest mid-point between successive rounds of alienating production.² Here, as the in-between character of mediation is emphasised, so the transformative aspiration within mediation is minimised: reduced to a temporary blip; transformation traduced.

However, most of the new or modified streams of mediation maintain the tradition of claiming to prolong the moment of transformation inherent in mediation. In their own terms they may even achieve a measure of success, which is to say that those who are more able to sustain themselves by their beliefs in personally eternalised values are indeed likely to lessen their sense of alienation from the here and now. Furthermore,

² We feel habitually alienated from productive activity and for good reason: the private appropriation of social production is also the estrangement of producers from their products.

with the exhaustion of the political and the attenuation of the nation state as its popular *credo*, there is a wider range of acceptable options to believe in, so long as you can sustain your own suspension of disbelief. Such diversity is an historical possibility because production relations are not couched in the terms of any particular form of their mediation, but conducted with the mode of commodity production as their value-neutral subject. Furthermore, insofar as the exhaustion of the political means a reduced salience for some of the values and valued institutions associated with modern politics – class, party, nation, and prompts the development of new mediating forms with duly modified values, diversity is even in demand. At this historical juncture, from the vantage point of the system as a whole, it matters little whether which religion delivers whose Kingdom of God, so long as it produces mediation, i.e. the heavenly excursion which enables the circuit of production relations to continue.

Earlier, I suggested that the subjectivity accorded to commodities in real production relations, is re-presented in the non-political form of their mediation by means of spurious subjects whose existence seemingly precedes that of human social practice; and that for most of modern history, the most influential *a priori* has been God, a human tradition requiring continuous re-invention. In the re-negotiated mode of mediation, however, the gods are many and diffuse (some of them in religious garb, others in the apparel of the secular), a proliferation of the *a priori*, all of which – despite their diverse appearances – share a prospectus in which social transformation is minimised. Even as gods they are far from omnipotent; in mortal terms, they are unusually remote from the scale of human-centred social transformation which in modern times has been concomitant with the political.

Post-Political Policies

Taken together, the characteristics of the emerging, re-negotiated mode of mediation do not suggest politics, where the political is understood to have been predicated on one revolution, and to address and invoke the recurring possibility of another. Policy is a more appropriate term for each of the wide range of current, mediating practices, in that it suggests actions taken in response to what is taken as given. In this historical context, the indirect relations of commodity production are given and it is taken that there is no alternative to them. In the next part of this paper I shall briefly identify some examples from the range of reactive, mediating policies as practised by today's individuals and institutions alike; and I shall consider whether such mediating policies constitute the re-drawing of the axis of mediation, or whether there is not yet a recognisable line of mediation through today's conditions.

The re-branding of Labour as New Labour ratified the end of labour movement politics as the British mode of mediation. Insofar as it signified a major modification of mediation, the emergence of New Labour was not just spin, image and packaging. Neither did it amount to the transformation of social relations; rather at this point the Blairite 'project' (note: not 'programme' or 'manifesto' with their connotations of transformation through politics) was to announce the end of the prospect of social transformation, and to restrict the range of transformations on offer to the most fleeting ('shared national experience' of European Cup football or Princess Diana's funeral) or the highly personalised, e.g. education as lifestyle tactic, where a

promissory note of personal transformation is predicated on an abstract idea of education (lifelong learning, learning about learning) and a social contract (rights and responsibilities) between the individual and the state. Here government is no longer the contested outcome of conflicting interests but the management by the state of limited services and subjectivities, a mediation policy which presages continuity in social relations even as it suggests personal transformation.

But this was a state-of-the-art state, re-written in accordance with and as part of a renegotiated mode of mediation. Creative Britain (approx 1994-2001) did not rule the waves like earlier incarnations of Britannia, so much as design them. Again, the re-designation of Britain as Creative was not entirely specious: commodity production continually creates new use-value for the satisfaction of human wants and exchange value to the satisfaction of capital, and in that Britain is a nation state characterised by commodity production, it is necessarily creative in this dual sense. But taken together with technological progress and the relaxation of some of the rules around 'race', this kernel of truth was spun out to manage the impression that production was becoming qualitatively more creative, which was also to massage the suggestion that there were increasingly direct relations between people involved in production, their tools (particularly digital kit and its propensity for a permanent revolution of bits and bytes), and each other.

In effect, although the supposed transformation was never couched in these terms, indirect social relations were said to have been transformed into direct social relations as a result of the increasing social force of Creativity. But here, alongside Britain which had a prior existence as both historical reality and quasi-myth, Creativity became the new *a priori*, not human social practice in action but a pre-existing icon of it. Human social practice really is the basis for social transformation but when iconicised as in Creative Britain it offered only the aura of transformation and its incorporation into the continuous circuitry of indirect production relations. Hence Creative Britain was an episode in the re-negotiation of the mediation of social relations in Britain, alongside the branding of New Labour. Mediation was the content of the re-formulation of Britain and Labour as Creative and New, an exercise not only comprised of packaging but which also constituted the historic task of the political caste at that time.

This would also suggest that mediation, mediation, mediation was the real content of the infamous formula: education, education, education.

The re-branding of Britain and Labour occurred in the context of the take-up of branding as one of the core activities of corporations, which in turn was the corollary of the marginalisation of unionised labour relations. Where indirect production relations had been partly re-directed by collective organisation in the workplace itself, so branding (recently re-designated as an activity in its own right) came partly to replace collective organisation in the planned construction of new tools for conviviality. Yet whereas collective organisation in the workplace always contained the germ of social transformation³, branding is more like a virus which carries indirect production relations to a higher level.

³ A culture potentially toxic to commodity production but which could not reach epidemic proportions as long as such organisations were confined to one set of workers pitted against others, for this sectionalism ultimately preserved the indirect character of production relations.

As previously shown, a society oriented around commodity production (first order) posits the human beings who produce commodities as its second order. Thus the first order of interaction is between commodities and only secondarily, indirectly, between people. Commodities are in a commanding position over people, and the rendering of commodities into icons – brands – is the further presentation of their superior status over persons. Even if, as their strategists claim, brands represent human values and our capacity for sharing in them, in branding the representation takes precedence over the people supposedly represented. Thus, like the Creative Britain brand, brands are icons of the social; icons of human relations which stand over subscribers and opponents alike in a heightened representation of the precedence of commodities over producers. Not only ephemeral visions of harmonious relations between people, as prefabricated icons standing over and above those who really fabricate the world, they are also the thick description of the circuitry of production in which social relations are rendered indirect. In branding once again, the prospect of social transformation is reduced in that the mediating mechanism – the brand – clearly signals the reinstatement of indirect production relations even as it offers the fleeting prospect of direct relations between producers, and between producers and consumers.

That at this time (and hardly before) brands were themselves transformed from mere labelling to the headline, creative, inclusive process of branding, is itself a further representation of mediation moving away from the political and reaching the perverse point at which the commodity was widely called upon to mediate its own rich contradictions – for such was the poverty of politics. Here too, in the attempted re-configuration of commodities, the corporation and the workforce as brand extensions, mere impressions of icons of conviviality, even transformation was in transition to a lower acceptable level, and, accordingly, mediation increasingly came to adopt forms which more readily confirm continuity rather than the prospect for wholesale social change.

Since the fiasco of the Millennium Dome and the climate of fear ratified by 9/11, there is less said of Creative Britain (though ‘creative industries’ rated two mentions in Tony Blair’s farewell speech to the New Labour conference), or of branding; still less of New Labour. It might be that these key words are no longer pertinent; or perhaps more likely they have fallen into disuse because those developments which they previously picked out in particular have since been generalised: a case of ubiquity almost to the point of invisibility. In other words, there is no reason to promote Labour as New if New Labour as a new mediating mechanism is already more than 10 years old, and the mode of mediation which it flagged is now fully embedded.

Mediation Personified

In the lives of individuals, the modified mode of mediation is made explicit in the widespread ambition to be in the media, either on stage, backstage or front of house; or in the D-I-Y equivalent which is MySpace and YouTube. Whereas it had been the role of the media to report on the real or fictitious behaviour of the chief actors in the ensemble of interpersonal exchanges which jointly comprised the mediation of social relations (politicians primarily, entertainers secondarily, crime as a diverting rendition

of social conflict), with the exhaustion of the political mode of mediation, so the media have come into their own. The places created by and through media are enviously and endlessly monitored as prime sites of the social, the spaces where people can be recognised and interact as human beings would wish to; hence the zealotry with which novices – from UEL journalism students to X-Factor contestants – seek to enter these places.

Thus to get a job on the *Sun* or to be taken on by Simon, Louis or Sharon is interpreted as candidate membership of the global media people club in which celebrities from all over the world relate to each other, and are identified with (related to) by all the non-media people who really do have no recognisable existence beyond their subordinate role in indirect production relations. Similarly, media technology really does wire the world, but here ‘the media’ is also another *a priori*, which can seemingly transform the lives of club members only on condition that the majority is not allowed into the club and their lives remain untransformed by-products of the circuit of commodity production. For celebrity culture to exist as such, this must be the fate of all those of us without the X-Factor.

Here personal transformation is predicated on the absence of social transformation, where becoming a celebrity depends on an audience destined to remain marginal and un-mediated (not part of ‘the media’), which in this context is to say invalid. The only socially validated, active existence of the media audience is as alienated producers and participants in indirect production relations wherein their subjectivity is secondary to the commodity. Just as the lives of the majority are de-centred in the mode of commodity production, the celebrated minority who are apparently allowed to play themselves are really called upon to personify the elevation of commodities over the people who produced them. Hence the coalescence between brands and celebrities: corporations want their branded commodities to be in the media; brands really are celebrated representations of commodities, and celebrities perform as brands also do in representing the ascendancy of human constructs – brands, the media, celebrity, the commodity – over people, mere producers, only indirectly related, who, at the moment when indirect relations briefly become direct, are simultaneously relegated to the role of largely passive audience. Here the secondary status of commodity producers is ratified as it really is. But then another cohort rejects this kind of relegation, tries to get into the media, and so the new mediation cycle begins again.

Yet for every X-Factor contestant who sees a recording contract as the way to the real me, there is someone else who despises everything about the programme and its ilk as inauthentic, superficial and unreal. In that mediation is first a negation of production relations even at the same time as it connects episodes of production and catalyses them into a recurring cycle, criticism – saying ‘no’ – is inherent in mediation and thus also in the historically specific production relations which are dependent on it. That there should be criticism of today’s mediating mechanisms – a negation of negation – should therefore come as no surprise. But in the recent context, such criticism does not often extend to the premise of the mediating mechanism, namely, the idea of the real me which allegedly exists already, i.e. the *a priori* individual, the individual as *a priori*. Instead of removing it from the pedestal, the ‘me’ in question is criticised for not being real enough, and the pedestal itself is heightened accordingly.

This is the dynamic behind the rise and rise of celebrity magazines, where celebrities are branded as authentic bearers of particular values and then berated for not being true to them – a case of unavoidably bad faith in that each and every celebrity is necessarily the result of artifice. Thus among a new generation of magazine publishers, setting ‘em up to knock ‘em down is the prerequisite for ‘growing your readership’ and ‘selling eyeballs to advertisers’; and damaged gods are more of the moment – and their market value more momentous – than pristine ones.

Nor is the raising of statues to the real me confined to X-Factor wannabes: it is the key characteristic of the ‘politics of recognition’ – lobbying for recognition of the real, already existing me – which can be media-friendly or media-averse but which nearly always essentialises something about me and/or people like me which could only ever have been contingent, and thus tends to be predicated on a hoped-for return to an imagined condition. Whether expressed as the real me or as the real community, the desire to be recognised for and realised as what we already were, is thus a policy of reversion to an imagined plane of prior existence. If it is politics at all, this is a politics of regression which once more has the effect of emphasising the cyclical and diminishing the innovative capacity inherent in today’s social relations.

Mediation Culturised

All of the life-policies listed above are characterised by dependence on something other than current human, social practice. In their dependence on that which is not what we do in the here and now, they tend to reduce the opening for social transformation which is inherent in the moment when existing production relations necessarily become something other than indirect. This is to close – never entirely – the gap in the cycle (the gap without which the episode cannot become a recurring cycle).

In that they emphasise the cyclical which is also to under-represent the autonomous human capacity for social transformation, these mediating policies tend towards the organicisation of social relations, i.e. their naturalisation as if they were an organism. This is the first sense in which they are cultural, where culture is a category which separates the organic from disruption. Although many such policies are reliant on the realm of representation which coincides with some definitions of culture, this is a secondary aspect of their cultural quality. Their significance as identifiably **cultural** policies which jointly indicate a modified mode of mediation rests first on their contribution to the organicisation of commodity production relations, i.e. the current acting out of commodity production and its concomitant relations as if they constituted a unified culture or continuous organism rather than an historically specific contradiction which is everywhere at war with itself, and which therefore continually throws up the prospect of its own discontinuity.

Culture and politics as I have characterised them are polarities on an axis of mediation, where the mediation of production relations necessarily contains the moment of their transformation, but this moment may itself tend further towards human-centred, social transformation (the political), or towards continuity which sometimes appears as non-human-centred transformation but which is also tending

towards the reinstatement of production relations and thus their organic existence (culture).

In their role as mediation, culture and politics have hardly ever been of equal social weight. This could only come about if there were equilibrium in mediation, and since mediation is the mediation of transformations, it too is unstable, and equilibrium unlikely. Thus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries culture was marshalled and some would say constructed against politics and the disjuncture thereby represented; or, in the shape of the twentieth century *avant-garde*, it took on the orientation towards transformation which is essential to politics. Now, by contrast, the political has been reshaped by the cyclical character of modified mediation, and its transformations are either temporary (for as long as the performance of a Blair speech) or predicated on one or more of a range of *a priori*, which by dint of not being centred on contemporaneous human social practice, has the effect of accentuating the cyclical, hence cultural. The shift in social weight from politics to culture is what constitutes the recent modification of mediation.

To say that mediation today is largely comprised of cultural policies is not to suggest that such policies are necessarily devised or implemented as part of a coherent strategy. Organicisation is more..... organic than that. Yet there are also many instances of contrived organicisation – a hunger for wholeness and a menu intended to satisfy it – as in the formation of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the adoption of a cultural strategy by each and every local authority, and, locally, the strategic plan for London 2012 to be the site for the construction of direct relations between people in London, across the United Kingdom and throughout the world.

Where, as a tactical response to the seemingly fixed character of commodity production, policy also has this conscious character, and where even the transformations which it offers are similarly characterised by the resort to the cyclical and organic (hence cultural), I would describe the coalescence of such policies as ‘culturalism’. Though East London is still largely lacking in the cultural industries promised during the transitional phase of Creative Britain, it already abounds in what I would further describe as the culturalism industry. This includes us, for UEL and especially the Docklands campus are in the mediation business, to be assessed according to how much mediation we produce, and of what quality.

This last is a vexed question, and not just in respect of this campus or university. While they would not describe it as such, many of those working in culturalism are also working to convince themselves and others that these are early days yet, that the transition phase is incomplete. But as we crawl towards the end of a third term of government by the new mediation generation, this claim becomes uncomfortably reminiscent of the much-vaunted new economy or even of virtual reality, which ever since the early 1990s was always everywhere just about to happen.

It seems more likely that the transition to a new mode of mediation has already happened, but that its effectiveness remains in doubt. For the cultural mode contains a significant weakness not shared by the preceding, political mode of mediation. In that the former stresses the cyclical even in the momentary transformations which it promotes, it also demotes the transformative moment of mediation, which in turn has the effect of demoralising mediation itself.

The extent to which many people see much of their lives as chaotic and arbitrary, except perhaps their working lives which are experienced as predictable and monotonous, is also the extent to which the replacement for Labour is not working in its capacity as the new mode of mediation. In an historical context characterised by the absence of an alternative mode of production, even in prospect, cultural (emphasising continuity) policy (responding to given limitations) is by default the only mode of mediation available; but it is also a weak form of mediation, in that its diminution of the prospect of social transformation comes close to the self-denial of mediation itself.

Although inherently weak, the modified mode of mediation is strengthened by several factors external to it: the deflation of politics (transformative), which makes possible the inflation of culture (cyclical); the absence of conflict predicated on the possibility of social transformation; and, largely conditional upon the unprecedented absence of politics, the equally unprecedented management of the global economy in such a way that competition is temporarily muted and cooperation, e.g. between USA and China over production to finance debt, is the order of the day. On this day, and in these unusual circumstances, the mediation question holds sway.

Andrew Calcutt 22.04.2007

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