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Mass Media: From Collective Experience To The Culture Of Privatization

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I

The project of developing a theory of mass culture and politically effective interpretations of the symbolic forms that organize social life has emerged from the transformations within capitalist society itself. Mass culture confronts us as a primary element of this society. By the same token, mass culture cannot itself be understood or analyzed except in the context of its role in producing and reproducing the social relations of capitalism. It is essential not to fall prey to the false dichotomy of labor and symbolic interaction, or to that between a libidinal politics and a politics oriented toward economic transformations. Capitalism does indeed exploit the body—the desiring body, but also the laboring body. The very possibility and effectiveness of mass culture, I will argue, lie in the way it organizes symbolic mediations and symbolic interactions in relation to the body and subjectivity as they are affected by the capitalist division of labor.

Just as it is false to seek the distinctive reality of advanced capitalism in the autonomy of the psychological or the symbolic from the economic, it is also inadequate, I believe, to frame the distinction between 19th and 20th century capitalism only or predominantly in terms of the changing relation of society and the state. A broader and deeper mutation has occurred. The capitalist mode of production has evolved by transforming, in two phases, the relation between the *economic* and the *symbolic* dimensions of social life. In its first phase, it severed the economic from the symbolic, dissolving earlier social formations and producing the social conditions that Marx analyzed. But this process, which was always incomplete and contradictory, had consequences which have led to the second phase of capitalism. Now the economy, moving for itself, attempts to subsume the symbolic.

Industrial production forcibly removed labor from all symbolic and affective contexts by turning the activity of producing into a quantity whose value could be abstractly designated by money. Wage labor reconstitutes labor as an expenditure of energy productive of exchange value. It separates from this activity all other expenditures of the body's energy, which, having been designated unproductive, manifest themselves in forms of erotic, aesthetic, and religious experience. These then stand in a completely eccentric relation to the dominant structuring force of society, namely, the economy.

This division passes into the subject and bifurcates the producer's relation to the body. In its capacity to materially transform nature, the body becomes a pure instrument. The freedom of wage labor, as opposed to the labor of serf or slave, makes the body one's own only by turning it into one's own property. Just as capital deprived the producers of the

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means of production it reduced their bodies to tools whose productive capacity could be bought and sold in the marketplace. Set against this instrumentalized body is the subject's relation to the erotogenic body with its complex network of ties to the symbolic formations and affective experiences that comprise the whole of social experience. Late capitalism overcomes the sheer separation of the symbolic from the economic, but does so by bringing the symbolic under the dominance of the economic. The processes of this subsumption are precisely designed to block the overcoming of the subjective divisions inaugurated by capital.

The Frankfurt School, especially the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, undertook an analysis of how the instrumentalization of human activity affected bourgeois culture itself, its forms of symbolic expression and its forms of thought. It was the unique historical experience of the Frankfurt School theorists to witness the emergence of the two paths that late capitalism has taken to refurbish and resecure itself: European fascism and American mass culture and the consumer society. Marcuse's invaluable essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture" (1936) exemplifies the dialectical reflection to which this experience gave rise. Aesthetic experience has always been, Marcuse argues, an experience *apart*, where meaning and affectivity could unite, harmonize, and yield an object of contemplation which is independent of the world of material production. In the midst of a social reality where the marketplace and commodification remove meaning from productive activity, art and aesthetic experience come to stand as the reservoir in which all that this reality denies or represses finds sublimated expression. "Affirmative culture was the historical form in which were preserved those human wants which surpassed the material reproduction of existence."[1]

Since the high culture of ruling classes—starting with Socratic philosophy's separation of the soul and the body, the ideal and the material—always constituted a realm of expression that tended to separate itself from material production, reduplicating and legitimating the rulers' separation from labor, bourgeois culture could enter this tradition and declare its universality, which it began to do with the Renaissance humanists, precisely because capitalism universalized the division between meaning and production by extending it to the producing classes themselves. Marcuse could thus show that the bourgeois cultural experience was at once the authentic expression of the desires, fantasies, and hopes that capitalism could not fulfill or accommodate *and* the hegemonic imposition of the very distortions by which cultural experience allowed anything to be expressed so long as nothing could be changed. Marcuse first developed this lucid and two-sided view of bourgeois culture as he witnessed its disintegration, a disintegration that was not the result of a social revolution but part of capitalism's desperate struggle to survive. This painful sense of yet another unconscious historical transformation, another historical upheaval going behind the backs of humanity, inflected all Frankfurt School reflections on contemporary culture, on the dialectic of enlightenment, and on the future of mass society. The central historical problem can be generalized from Marcuse's discussion of the philosophical and aesthetic forms of affirmative culture. Western capitalism, in the absence of revolution, has had to destroy bourgeois society's own optimal cultural forms and

[1] Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Negations,* trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 110.

political institutions—from the aesthetics of affirmative culture to the restricted family, from the autonomous individual to representative democracy. The entire process of social integration, from the production of ideology and culture to the forms of daily life, have been altered differently than they *would have been* by a revolution in the conditions Marx analyzed.

Faced with the historical regressions that have presided over the transformation of society and culture, the Marxist tradition has seen a renewal, sometimes desperate and confused, and a proliferation of theories attempting to demarcate the continuities and discontinuities of the past two centuries. One set of strategies can properly be called post-Marxist, in that they declare that Marx's theory is now dead, inapplicable to contemporary capitalism, however completely it dealt with liberal capitalism. Perhaps the most systematic and compelling attempt to found a post-Marxism today is the research and theory of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas has rejected Marx's distinction between "base" and "superstructure," as it applies to the interrelation of society and the state, in an attempt to show that the fundamental categories of Marxism are irrelevant for an understanding of contemporary capitalism, its crisis tendencies, and the paths to its transformation. While Habermas takes us deep into the problems faced by radical theory and practice, inasmuch as he recognizes that the critique of political economy no longer answers to the objective and subjective conditions of capitalism, his argument also exemplifies the consequences of reading Marx in purely theoretical terms. The following represents the heart of Habermas's basic thesis:

> [Marx] carried out the critique of bourgeois ideology in the form of *political economy*. His labor theory of value destroyed the semblance of freedom, by means of which the legal institution of the free labor contract had made unrecognizable the relationship of social force that underlay the wage-labor relationship. . . . Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century two developmental tendencies have become noticeable in the most advanced capitalist countries: an increase in state intervention in order to secure the system's stability, and a growing interdependence of research and technology, which has turned the sciences into the leading productive force. . . . If society no longer "autonomously" perpetuates itself through self-regulation as a sphere preceding and lying at the basis of the state—and the ability to do so was the really novel feature of the capitalist mode of production—then society and the state are no longer in the relationship that Marxian theory had defined as that of base and superstructure. Then, however, a critical theory of society can no longer be constructed in the exclusive form of a critique of political economy. . . . If . . . the ideology of just exchange disintegrates, then the power structure can no longer be criticized *immediately* at the level of the relations of production.[2]

The very terms in which Habermas affirms the original validity of Marx's theory neglects the *political* genesis of the theory itself. Marx did not *discover*, whether as an act of philosophical or scientific reflection, the illusion of just exchange. Rather, he gave theoretical expression to a collective experience that was already being expressed in the ideology of the militant sections of the working class. Marx's theoretical discourse sprang from the conflict between the scientific discourse of the bourgeois political economists and the ideological discourse in which workers were articulating their own social experience. The texts of political economy were the object of Marx's critique, but the subtexts of this critique lay in an actual and vital proletarian ideology. Jacques Rancière, in a critical reassessment of his own contribution to the Althusserian *Lire le "Capital,"* has made the

[2]Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society,* trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 100-101.

argument that Marx's writings registered the "echo of proletarian experience" as it was voiced in the catchwords and battlecries of the 1830s and 40s. Marx's fundamental concepts, the alienation of labor and the capitalistic extortion of surplus value, were forged as he heard in the discourses of workers what was missing in the discourse of political economy. Rancière cites the call to insurrection of the weaver Jean-Claude Roman at Lyon: "To arms, patriots and you, brave workers, who produce with the sweat of your brow this gleaming cloth whose luster brings out more glaringly the constrast between our rags and the insolent finery of the rich." And the words of a participant in the June Insurrection of 1848: "It is time we saw the products of our labor."[3]

Once Habermas has neutralized the political origins of Marx's theory, this dynamic of proletarian ideology and social theory, he is free to develop a theoretical model of advanced capitalism which expels the question of political organization from the outset and eventually locates political resistance and opposition in the abstract ethical principle of undominated communication. This principle, he argues, *should*, but does not, govern the communications between science and politics in state-regulated capitalism, that is, between technically exploitable knowledge and its implementation in society. The principle's realization is retarded by the effectiveness of the system of rewards and security which Habermas sees as the replacement of classical bourgeois ideology: "the ideology of just exchange is replaced by a substitute program," which "combines the element of the bourgeois ideology of achievement (which, however, displaces the assignment of status according to the standard of individual achievement from the market to the school system) with a guaranteed level of welfare, which offers secure employment and a stable income."[4] As in the description of Marx's theory, Habermas here obscures the fact that the free market produced two opposing life situations, that of the wage laborer and that of the entrepreneur, and thus generated the opposing ideologies of capitalists and workers. Certainly the practical possibility of free enterprise, and with it the model of the individual entrepreneur's existence, have collapsed in contemporary society. The promise of social security and reward for performance best describes the life conditions of the middle strata, for whom the transmutation of *bourgeois* ideology, as it is transmitted through the education system and its organization of the learning process, holds sway precisely insofar as it dresses up laboring for a wage in the guise of nonproletarian images and values. Since the opposition between this transmuted form of bougeois ideology and the principle of undominated communication lacks the real force of a contradiction, Habermas cannot point to the conditions for social transformation except in an externally produced crisis, which itself can take but one form: "The amount of social wealth produced by industrially advanced capitalism and the technical and organizational conditions under which this wealth is produced make it ever more difficult to link status assignment in an even subjectively convincing manner to the mechanism for the evaluation of individual achievement."[5] To get beyond this vision of a politics constructed on the static opposition of an ideology and a principle which awaits a crisis of legitimation, it is necessary to understand the actual dynamics of late capitalism's achievement ideology. The reward that the middle strata seek

[3]Cf., Jacques Rancière, "Mode d'emploi pour une réédition de *Lire le 'Capital,'*" *Les Temps Modernes* no. 328 (Nov. 1973), pp. 788-807.

[4]Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

[5]Ibid., p. 122.

integrates a new symbolic dimension into the wage system. The wage (called a salary) is connected to the symbolic elements of status and hierarchical power, to the extent that the individual's rise to a position of supervision or management has but one unique feature: the freedom to administer power—which is not even one's own—over others. This new configuration is, then, a fundamental example of capital's subsumption of the symbolic. It is essential to recognize that this process is possible because the truly novel feature of the capitalist mode of production, the freedom or autonomy of capital, has survived the free market.

Marx did not reflect explicitly on theory's link to proletarian experience and ideology, but he clearly did formulate the relevant terms. Capital, he argued, had two polar effects on the new class of producers: it alienated them from the products of their labor, and it brought them into association with one another. For Marx, it was from this association that a communist consciousness could develop, because association ties the worker's individual fate to a collective condition. It also, therefore, provided the conditions for an oppositional discourse, a counterideology, expressing a social experience and the desire to transform it.

If critical theory is to reconceptualize the dynamics of contemporary society, it has to rediscover its relation to the counterideologies that can only arise from the fabric of society itself. Here, however, we encounter the unique power of late capitalism. Through its dominant *cultural* forms and practices, late capitalism strives to sever social experience from the formation of counterideologies, to break collective experience into the monadic isolation of the private experience of individuals, and to pre-empt the effects of association by subsuming the discourses and images that regulate social life. Our work in theory, teaching, and propaganda must recognize that these very processes develop from what Marx showed to be the fundamental category of the capitalist mode of production: wage labor, and its total set of effects.

II

The polarity of alienation/association could shape proletarian experience and proletarian ideology in the 19th century because this polarity was the direct result of the contradiction that gives capitalist society its objective form—that between wage labor (collective production) and capital (private appropriation). However this contradiction takes on a subjective, or cultural, form as well as an objective, or social, form. For it not only determines the economic struggle between labor and capital but at the same time forms and rends the practical activity and experience of the producing class itself.

Wage labor is a contradictory entity. It sets participation in *collective* production (labor) against the *private* appropriation of value (the wage) and so recapitulates, in the very subjectivity of the producers, the division that afflicts the objective social relations. The commodification of labor embodies an ethical function: it organizes interactions and regulates violence by giving enslavement (forced labor) the appearance of an economic transaction between consenting parties, worker and capitalist, who are designated as legally equal subjects. The proletarian—in contrast to slave, serf, or artisan—acts as a separated individual who enters into a purely *dual* transaction by laboring for the wage to be received from the capitalist. The free market *ideology*, in which capitalist exploitation is encoded as the free interaction of free and equal individuals, rests upon the *practice* of this transaction

between *just two* subjects. The practice of wage labor restructures social experience as such. In any human society producing, exchanging, consuming are in truth social activities, collective and multiform; the wage transforms collective exchanging into a series of discrete dual exchanges of equivalents as the laborer converts the wage into food, clothing, shelter, and the objects of everyday life.

Exchange value thereby reroutes exchanging by breaking it up and making it pass back through the separated, individualized subject. My participation in production is transformed, or transcoded, into an expenditure of energy for myself not for others. The truth of social activity, its multiform reciprocality, is hidden behind the historically produced (and encoded) experience of separation, private appropriation, and dual exchange.

In other words, even as the conditions of capitalist *production* brought the producers into association, the commodification of labor isolates these same producers from one another in the moments of *exchange* and *consumption*. The producers' separation from each other in the object consumed is thus the other side of their alienation from themselves in the object produced.

In Marx's time, this other aspect of wage labor had political effects only insofar as it silently impeded the revolutionary impulse fostered by association. In advanced capitalism, however, the separation in consumption has become the core of social integration. From this perspective it is necessary to reject and drastically recast the terms in which Habermas describes the historical fate of Marx's critique of bourgeois society:

> The permanent regulation of the economic process by means of state intervention arose as a defense mechanism against the dysfunctional tendencies, which threaten the system, that capitalism generates when left to itself. Capitalism's actual development manifestly contradicted the capitalist idea of a bourgeois society, emancipated from domination, in which power is neutralized. The root ideology of just exchange, which Marx unmasked in theory, collapsed in practice.[6]

To the contrary, the ideology of just exchange, by which the bourgeoisie masked the domination inherent in the free market, gave way precisely because it could not serve as the effective core of social integration for the proletariat. The transformations of the state's relation to the economy did not arise simply to counter the "dysfunctional tendencies" of the economy; they constitute a reaction against the political challenge of the producers. Marx could unmask just exchange in theory only because it was already being unmasked in the practice of the workers' movement—a practice generated out of association. Capitalism, inherently unable to reverse its tendency to bring the producers into association, had to take up the new task of restructuring the forms of association and exercising control over the discourses which support and develop association. The bourgeoisie, with unforeseen consequences, launched its cultural counterrevolution.

We are heirs to the culture that the assault of association spawned. Mass culture, advertising, mass education, forms of political representation from bureaucratic workers' organizations to media politics—these fields of symbolic activity aim at replacing the discourses through which the producers develop their association with forms of communication that disperse them. Mass communication addresses the separated subject as constituted by the exchange and consumption of commodities. It produces a relation between the subject and the collective akin to what Sartre calls seriality—the series being a

[6]Ibid., p. 101.

grouping in which the members are connected with one another only insofar as they are isolated from one another. Television is but the most vivid example, in that millions of people watch the same program alone.

Guy Debord has called late capitalism the *society of the spectacle* in order to point to the new role of the commodity in determining culture. In the affluent, or abundant, society the commodity is no longer simply an object that comes into the sphere of experience as something answering a desire or need. The commodity, separated from the activity by which it is produced, becomes the world of experience itself. As representation, image, spectacle, the commodity is pregnant with significance, not a significance located in its intrinsic qualities as an object nor in the connections between the object and the need or desire it answers, but a significance constructed out of the commodity's separation from human activity:

> The worker does not produce himself (sic); he produces an independent power. The *success* of this production, its abundance, returns over the producer as an *abundance of dispossession.* All the time and space of his world becomes *strange* to him with the accumulation of his alienated products. The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which covers precisely its territory. The very powers which escape us *show themselves* to us in all their force.
>
> The spectacle within society corresponds to a concrete manufacture of alienation. Economic expansion is mainly the expansion of just this industrial production. That which grows with the economy moving for itself can only be the alienation which was precisely at its origin.
>
> The man separated from his product himself produces all the details of his world with ever increasing power, and thus finds himself ever more separated from his life.
>
> The spectacle is *capital* [accumulated to such a degree] that it becomes an image.[7]

To put this last thesis in the terms I am using here, capital has the power to restructure the forms of discourse and the situations in which communication takes place. Whereas it originally pulled material production away from those spheres in which meanings are produced, it has returned to reorganize the very production of meanings according to its own logic, that is, according to the logic of the commodity.

As association is broken into seriality, the discourses which emerge from the experience of alienation are reworked into a discourse that confirms separation. A new polarity comes to inflect social experience: separation/seriality. This does not mean that the polarity alienation/association disappears. Nor does the economy cease to set the terms of social integration. The preconditions of mass-mediated experience were established from the moment that labor became a commodity, in that commodification transforms the reciprocality of exchanging into the seriality of the exchange of equivalents. In late capitalism the commodity, as it appears in exchange and consumption, fuses with forms of communication to make separation the basis of the social bond. As the serializing discourse disconnects the producers in communication, their separation changes from a mere brake on the power of association to the power that breaks association. In mass-mediated experience, the polarity alienation/association is folded behind the polarity separation/seriality. Separation completes alienation, and seriality seeks to destroy association. This is the double tendency of late capitalism and its culture—to make the subject's separation in the

[7]Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970), paragraphs 31-34.

object consumed the core of social experience, and to destroy the space in which proletarian counterideologies can form.

Habermas acknowledges the second of these tendencies in his account of the bourgeois "public sphere" (*Oeffentlichkeit*); however, he does not, I want to suggest, carry through the theoretical and political consequences of his historical account because he fails to sustain an analysis of the role that commodification plays in the constitution of the bourgeois public sphere and its transformation. The concept of *Oeffentlichkeit* defines the position and function of the discourse by which the bourgeoisie could give public expression to private interest and so affect public policy. "The public sphere as a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere—that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities."[8] As the bourgeoisie waged its struggle against the surviving aristocracy and the forms of state that still encumbered free economic development, it carved out this sphere of public discussion and debate which was independent of the state and which allowed for the public articulation of opinion based on private interests—that is, the individual economic interests of the rising entrepreneurs. However, this public sphere, like all the institutions and ideologies of the bourgeoisie in the 19th century, underwent extreme contortions as soon as its repressive functions showed through its initial transforming effects. The ethical-political principle of the public sphere—freedom of discussion, the sovereignty of the public will, etc.—proved to be a mask for its economic-political reality, namely, that the private interest of the capitalist class determine all social and institutional authority. For this very reason Habermas can date the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, leading down to our own time, from 1848, when the European bourgeoisie, still fighting to secure its triumph over aristocracy and monarchy, suddenly faced the counterrevolutionary task of suppressing the workers and preventing them from openly articulating *their* interests:

> The very forms in which the public sphere manifested itself, to which supporters of the liberal model could appeal for evidence, began to change with the Chartist movement in England and the February revolution in France. Because of the diffusion of press and propaganda, the public body began to expand beyond the bounds of the bourgeoisie. The social body lost not only its social exclusivity; it lost in addition the coherence created by bourgeois social institutions and a relatively high standard of education. Conflicts hitherto restricted to the private sphere now intrude into the public sphere. Group needs which can expect no satisfaction from a self-regulating market now tend towards a regulation by the state. The public sphere, which must now mediate these demands, becomes a field for the competition of interests, competitions which assume the form of violent conflict. Laws which obviously have come about under the "pressure of the street" can scarcely still be understood as arising from the consensus of private individuals engaged in public discussion.[9]

The theoretical and political conclusion that Habermas draws from this history is that the principle of the bourgeois public sphere has a validity over and above the realities of its

[8]Habermas, "The Public Sphere," *New German Critique* no. 3 (Fall 1974), p. 50.
[9]Ibid., p. 54.

liberal form and can still serve to organize politically effective social change.[10] Such an assertion passes over several problems. First of all, if the classical bourgeois *Oeffentlichkeit* constituted itself "as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body," it was founded on the assumption that the participants' needs and interests, as they are formed privately, separately, individually, were the legitimate basis for publicly articulated opinion. Now, this condition holds only so long as private interest is determined as individual economic interest, that is, the freedom to accumulate and utilize capital. The coherence of this public sphere depended upon its capacity to admit to articulation but one form of interest: an interest defined by capital, the interests of capital. This is the truth of the public sphere in the bourgeois era and is indissociable from this public sphere's *principle*.

The workers' participation in the February revolution and their struggle within the Provisional Government up to the June insurrection amounted to a challenge to the bourgeois determination of the "private" and of "interest." While the bourgeoisie understood the "private sphere" to mean not only the economy as opposed to the state but also the rights of the individual (capital) as against the collective (labor), the workers' demands, in making economic interest a collective or social interest, violated the very principle that established the public sphere as a form of open discussion founded upon legitimated private interests. The workers' demand to participate in the public sphere was intrinsically a challenge to its coherence, its logic, and its principle. The struggle of bourgeoisie and proletariat over the public sphere in the February period was a struggle over the meaning of "public" and "private" and the mediations between them.

The outcome of these struggles, as Habermas shows, was the monopolistic concentration of the mass media and the various processes whereby "political authorities assume certain functions in the sphere of commodity exchange and social labor, while [conversely] social powers now assume political functions."[11] However, to understand these developments, it is necessary to return to two theses: first, that the counterrevolutionary thrust of the public sphere's transformation attempted to restructure the forms of association that spontaneously arose among the producers and thus thwart the formation of counterideologies, and secondly, that this tendency in turn cannot be fully comprehended unless linked to the effects, subjective and objective, of the commodification of labor power.

The terms for making this link are suggested in the seminal work of Jean Baudrillard, especially *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* and *le Système des objets*, which also have the advantage of reframing these issues in terms of culture in general rather than the public sphere in the strict sense. Moreover, Baudrillard opens a perspective which will allow us to connect the dynamics of consumer society to the historical dilemmas of the 19th century bourgeoisie. He argues that a necessary item on the bourgeoisie's agenda was the "control over the processes of signification" not just the ownership of the means of production:

[10] Cp. Peter Hohendahl's explanatory note to the passage quoted above: "The principle of the public sphere could still be distinguished from an institution which is demonstrable in social history. Habermas thus would mean a model of norms and modes of behavior by means of which the very functioning of public opinion can be guaranteed for the first time. These norms and modes of behavior include: a) general accessibility, b) elimination of all privileges and c) discovery of general norms and rational legitimations."

[11] Ibid., p. 54.

> What is essential in the economic order is the mastery of *accumulation*, of the appropriation of surplus value. In the order of signs (culture), what is decisive is the mastery of *expenditure*, that is, the transubstantiation of economic exchange value into sign-exchange value, starting with the monopoly of the code. Dominant classes have always either assured their domination from the beginning by means of sign-values, as in archaic and traditional societies, or, in the case of the bourgeois capitalist order, tried to go beyond their economic privilege by confirming it as a privilege of signs, since this last stage represents the completed stage of domination.[12]

Consumption, in Baudrillard's phrase, is "the other slope of political economy." Consumption can no longer be understood simply as the conversion of exchange value into use value once it has become the process whereby spending converts exchange value into the sign-values that designate social standing. The act of consuming is now connected with codes which, elaborated through the monopoly of the culture industry, anchor the individual's social identity and regulate intersubjectivity in general.

Baudrillard's formulation, however, tends to collapse the historical contradictions that prompted the second stage of capitalist domination and those which it has brought about. He treats the movement from the simple "mastery of accumulation" (economic domination) to the "mastery of expenditure" (cultural domination) as a unified, unilinear process, an implacable movement toward total domination. Such a view disregards, first, that this process was set in motion as a reactive response to the threat of the workers' movement, and, secondly, that it undermined the conditions of the cultural experience endemic to classical bourgeois society and the political experience promised by the liberal public sphere. Faced with the political opposition of the producers, capitalism could not effectively secure the production and reproduction of its social relations by means of the cultural and political norms of bourgeois society. Mass culture and the mass-mediated public sphere have evolved, reactively, to take up this task. Moreover, these forms of symbolic expression and communication derive their possibility and their effectiveness from the commodification of labor. Late capitalism has restructured the relation between the commodity and culture. Whereas the classical bourgeois aesthetics of Goethe or Kant (and indeed of Marcuse himself in his recent *The Aesthetic Dimension*) could understand culture as the realm of meanings held apart from ("above") material production, today the production of meaning is thoroughly bound up with commodity consumption. This is not to say that what was separated has been rejoined or united. The production of socially binding meanings can reside in consumption only because the commodity has the power, as we have seen, to separate consumption from the activity of production and so separate the producers from one another. In consumer society, spending and consumption—the "transubstantiation of economic exchange value into sign-exchange value"—complete the separation of the producers by making this separation the very foundation of the social bond, of culture.

In this way, both Baudrillard's analysis of consumption and culture and the historical analysis initiated by Habermas have to be regrounded in the commodification of labor. It is now possible to clarify the connections, historical and logical, between the commodity culture of consumer society and the twisted political strategies that the 19th century bourgeoisie undertook as it tried to negotiate its double mission of revolution and

[12] Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 132-133.

counterrevolution. Marx's political writings on France, especially *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, unravel the process by which the bourgeoisie began, in the middle of the last century, to sacrifice its own institutions and practices in order to secure the supremacy of capital. It gave up the apparent freedom at the heart of its public sphere in order to guarantee the true principle of that public sphere, namely, that political discourse and public discussion fall under the aegis of the right to accumulate and utilize capital. Capital dictated the transformation just as much as the constitution of the bourgeois public sphere. Having resorted to the bald, repressive exclusion of the proletariat from the public sphere and from political participation, the bourgeoisie found this untenable as a permanent strategy. However, since it lacked any means of legitimizing its rule through the effective elaboration of socially integrative codes, the bourgeoisie responded to the crises of 1848–51 by yielding political power to Louis Bonaparte in order to safeguard its economic power.

The bourgeoisie, Marx wrote, "proved that the struggle to maintain its *public* interests, its *class interests,* its *political power*, only troubled and upset it, as it was a disturbance of private business":

> While the *parliamentary party of Order*, by its clamour for tranquillity, as I have shown, committed itself to quiescence, while it declared the political rule of the bourgeoisie to be incompatible with the safety and existence of the bourgeoisie, by destroying with its own hands in the struggle against the other classes of society all the conditions for its own regime, the parliamentary regime, the *extra-parliamentary mass of the bourgeoisie*, on the other hand, by its servility towards the President, by its vilification of parliament, by its brutal maltreatment of its own press, invited Bonaparte to suppress and annihilate its speaking and writing section, its politicians and its *literati,* its platform and its press, in order that it might then be able to pursue its private affairs with full confidence in the protection of a strong and unrestricted government. It declared unequivocally that it longed to get rid of its own political rule in order to get rid of the troubles and dangers of ruling.[13]

The bourgeoisie thus discredited, in 1851, its own public sphere, whether as principle or as an actuality. The contradiction that Marx here delineates between the bourgeoisie's economic power and its political power also lets us glimpse the future course of bourgeois culture. The freedom of capital, just as it had commanded the bourgeoisie to violent revolution and counterrevolution, now dictated a restraint on bourgeois freedom itself. The bourgeoisie, before it could set about dismantling the forms of proletarian association, had to exclude *itself* from the public sphere and from political participation. This self-exclusion surely set in motion the slower development by which "control of the processes of signification" required the bourgeoisie to let go of its own culture as a realm of expression separated from material production. The *universal culture* that the triumphant bourgeoisie originally announced became, instead, an ongoing process of *cultural homogenization*—a process so extensive that it forcibly enters the domains of intimate life whose very privacy once fostered and secured bourgeois values as such, and at the same time so fragile that it must renew itself daily in every social group and every corner of existence. With late capitalism even the economic freedom of the individual (the entrepreneur) has given way to the sheer freedom of the economy. After the liberal bourgeoisie continually sacrificed its

[13]Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), pp. 104-105, and p. 106.

optimal ideologies, institutions, and expressive forms for the sake of capital, capital has finally sacrificed the bourgeoisie as a culturally coherent social class.

III

Mass culture and the mass-mediated public sphere derive their function from the double condition that late capitalism faces: it must continually thwart counterideologies—which can only arise from the discourses that groups articulate out of their concrete social experience—, and it can no longer depend on even the illusory wholeness of the bourgeois individual's life to generate or anchor a dominant ideology. As a result, the cultural forms of late capitalism must seize upon discourses that are connected to social experience and rework them into a discourse that disperses the subjects it addresses just as it homogenizes the diverse collective articulations that those subject produce. Forms of mass communication, which emerged historically as the reactive mechanisms by which capitalism sought to retard or immobilize opposition, are thus reactive in their inner workings as well. The mass-mediated discourse respeaks and so silences its socially rooted subtexts; it robs us of the speech without which it could not live in order to make us hear something we would not speak. This circuit, or loop, whereby expropriated speech comes back to its producers as the alienated representation of their existence and their desires, follows the logic of the spectacular commodity. "The spectacle is *capital* [accumulated to such a degree] that it becomes an image." Capital cannot speak, but it can accumulate and concentrate itself in communications media, events, and objects which are imbued with this power to turn the discourses of collective experience into a discourse that reconstitutes intersubjectivity as seriality.

The serializing discourse connects needs to objects, subjects to one another, and groups to society. It operates according to its own logic of mediation. This discourse, however, is neither one-dimensional nor "totally administered," because it does not generate or perpetuate itself. It is formed only as it continually appropriates, dismantles, and reassembles the signifying practices of social groups. Nor is it a purely one-way communication. Mass communication is multidirectional but nonreciprocal. The subjects it addresses are atomized as they receive *back* a message that has been constructed from their own signifying activities as groups. The mass communication effaces its own genesis, by displacing the subject from his or her position as a participant in a collective expression to the serial position of an isolated receiver of a pre-packaged message. On the one hand, the mass communication is effective only insofar as we hear in it some echo of our actual or virtual collective speaking—which is why even the most manipulative examples of mass culture contain a residual utopian or critical dimension. On the other hand, the mass-mediated public sphere establishes a schism between what I hear and what I speak, such that I receive a message I would not speak and am forced to read in it the figure of my needs, my desires, and my identity—which is why effective resistance does not emerge from the reception situation itself.

Language is an essential dimension of social life as such, in that a subject's relation to others or to any object must pass through language. Individuals confront language as, in Marx's phrase, "the *Dasein* of the community" itself. Language is not an abstract entity

(system, *langue*, paradigm, code) independent of *language practices*—each of which is concretely situated within the totality of social relations. Just as the general constellation of group needs and interests is materially determined by the historical level of the society's development, so the subject's needs and desires are the effect of the history of his or her interactions with the community and its discourses. By the same token, the satisfaction of any need or desire requires that a request or demand be articulated. A desire does not find an object independent of the subject's relation to others. There is in human life no pre- or nonsocial moment in which the individual organism fulfills its needs without the mediations of the community. It is precisely the organization and logic of these mediations which are at stake in the struggles over culture, the practices of everyday life, and the forms of political experience and expression.

The symbolic forms which structure intersubjectivity are themselves determined by the mode of production as it establishes a specific interplay of needs and objects. Capitalism has accomplished this in two phases. Classical bourgeois society originally sought to support the relation of the "public" and the "private" by relegating the discourses that mediate needs and objects to the intimate sphere, that is, essentially to the separated space of the household and the family. In late capitalism, the mass-mediated public sphere—especially in the form of advertising and the encoded objects of consumption themselves—has increasingly taken over the power to articulate requests and interests. A critique of this expropriation will falter if it merely sounds the theme of the erosion of private life. Nor can the tendencies of contemporary capitalism be resisted by trying to restore the private right of individuals or the protective enclave of family life. First of all, the "private" sphere has always been *socially* determined, just as childrearing is a social activity encoded in such a way that it is experienced as a private activity, a sheltered domain of private right and responsibility. Secondly, as I have already argued, the very coherence of private right, private interest, and private experience is inseparable from the bourgeois right to accumulate capital. And, most importantly, late capitalism has restructured the relation between the private and the public not in order to destroy the private sphere but to preempt the development of collective experiences—in everyday life, in culture, in politics. The transfomation of the private sphere, like that of the public sphere, has served to complete the capitalist mode of production and extend the assault on association. Indeed, the very possiblity of a mass-mediated public sphere with the power to provide the symbolic mediations between needs and objects lies in the technological organization of capitalist production itself. Baudrillard has broached the question as follows:

> At the stage of artisanal production, objects reflect needs in their contingency and singularity. These two systems, objects and needs, are adapted to one another, but the whole remains only slightly coherent, having but the relative coherence of needs. Needs are moving and contingent: there is no objective technical progress. With the industrial age, manufactured objects start acquiring a coherence which comes to them from the technical order and from economic structures. The systems of needs now becomes less coherent than the system of objects. . . . If the artisanal object is at the level of speech [*parole*], industrial technology institutes a language system [*langue*]. But a language system is not language [*langage*]: the concrete structure of the automobile is not spoken, but rather the form, the color, the lines, the accessories, the "standing" of the object. It's the tower of Babel: everyone speaks their own idiom. Even so, serial production, through its calculated differences and combinatory variants, cuts up significations, establishes a catalogue, and creates a lexicon of forms and colors where some recurrent

> modalities of "speaking" can be inscribed. But does all this constitute language? This immense paradigm is lacking a true syntax. It has neither the rigorous syntax of the technological level nor the very loose one of needs. It floats from the one to the other . . . and tends to be used up in an immense combinatory grid of types and models where needs, in their incoherence, come to air themselves without there being any reciprocal structuring.[14]

The system of encoded commodities operates according to the polarity separation/seriality. It suspends the individual's social experience between the purely idiomatic discourse of private consumption and a public sphere governed by the abstract paradigm of technologically differentiated objects. The technically produced "grid of types and models" becomes a language system (*langue*) which reduces speaking (*parole*) to the concatenation of variants, an act whose social validity is limited to the subject's identification with the sign-exchange values that he or she supposes to be the insignia of personal worth in the eyes of others.

"Since products now have the greater coherence, needs have to flow back across them and must, by breaking themselves up, insert themselves, with difficulty and arbitrarily, into the grid of objects." This interplay of needs and objects is mediated by publicity and advertising, discourses which eclipse the subject's request and replace it with an alienated request articulated according to the system of objects itself. The mass-mediated public sphere *deconstructs* language. It prevents individuals from experiencing, in the social actuality of their own language practices, the dynamic contradiction between their needs and desires and their socially produced object world. Baudrillard:

> If language, because it cannot as such be consumed or possessed by those who speak it, always preserves the possibility of the "essential" and of a syntax of exchange (a structuring of communication), the publicity/objects system, which is inundated with the inessential, with a destructured world of needs, contents itself with satisfying these needs in detail—without ever instituting new structures of collective exchange.[15]

In our society, human beings cannot confront the social totality except as they experience the struggle to reclaim the articulation of their own demands and requests. Such experiences, which provide the only viable core for the processes of political organization, are intrinsically oppositional. They turn the subject toward another horizon of social existence, where people's vital and libidinal needs, collectively recognized and collectively expressed, could confront and be confronted by the world these very people produce.

This experience of the community is today evolving from the diverse oppositional movements, among women, minorities, gays, and workers groups, which come into conflict with the very cultural forms that secure the economic relations of advanced capitalism. These movements take part in the process of building the several, still fragmented aspects of what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge call "the proletarian public sphere," a term which signals the deep continuity between contemporary political opposition and the aims of a workers' movement whose demands far exceeded the narrow confines of economism. The experience of community—which became objectively possible from the moment that capitalism engendered the association of the producers, their counterideologies, and their forms of organization—is at once *utopian* and *real*. Utopian, in that it can be objectively realized only in the transformation of capitalist production. Real, in that capital itself exists

[14] Baudrillard, *Le système des objects: La consommation des signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp. 222-223.
[15] Ibid., p. 223.

today only as it daily deconstructs and reassembles every emergent form of collective political and cultural activity. "The bourgeoisie came to power," Debord writes, "because it is the class of the developing economy. The proletariat can be power only by becoming the *class of consciousness.*" We live in the society whose main source of stability and power is its capacity to continually obstruct this consciousness.

No automatic process, least of all economic crisis, will reverse this tendency toward obstruction. The sheer historical fact of fascism and holocaust in the 20th century has made it brutally clear that capitalism has means of maintaining itself in the face of overwhelming economic crisis. On the other hand, effective opposition and social transformation cannot depend on, in the Habermasian thesis, the positive ethical principle of undominated symbolic interaction derived from the juridical and political norms of classical bourgeois society. This principle is indissociable from its actual and practical function of securing the private accumulation of capital.

The alternative lies in the proletarian public sphere, by which Negt and Kluge mean neither a reflex class consciousness nor an ideal principle, but rather a *concrete virtuality* which capitalism produces and must thwart. It is the counterorganization of social experience and cultural practices, they argue, which has to orient political opposition in late capitalism. The reality of this process they locate in the actual needs and interests which commodity production brings into being but does not satisfy. These immediate needs and interests have to enter a process in which they are the basis of political organization at the same time that they are themselves politicized. This two-sided process responds to the very ambivalence of immediate needs:

> If [workers' needs and interests] are directly suppressed, that is, if they are not utilized in society's profit-maximizing process, they maintain themselves as living labor power, as raw material. In this quality as extra-economic interests, they exist in the forbidden zone of fantasy, beneath taboos, as prototypes of the rudimentary organization of the basic conditions of proletarian life. As such they cannot be further suppressed. They also cannot be assimilated. In this respect they possess two characteristics. In their defensive stance over against society, in their conservatism, and in their subcultural character, they are mere objects. But at the same time they comprise a block of real life which opposes the profit-maximizing interest.[16]

This ambivalence can be put in another way: the capitalist order's fragility, the structural weakness of its modes of social integration, are experienced as the individual's fragility, as a psychological instability, so long as individuals do not discover and disclose their unmet needs within the context of a community which pre-forms and points toward the experience of socialism. For the very reason that vital and libidinal needs push the subject into a symbolically mediated relation to others, into speech, the issue here cannot be reduced to the raw relation of needs and satisfactions, nor can it be cast as a question of true versus false needs. The constructing of a proletarian public sphere thus requires a persistent struggle against the symbolic forms by which the mass-mediated public sphere constitutes subjectivity and puts it under the dominance of the commodity. Such a struggle indeed passes through the subject; it is the very dynamic of the opposing ways in which the subject

[16]Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Oeffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Oeffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 107. As quoted in Eberhard Knödler-Bunte, "The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization: An Analysis of Negt and Kluge's *The Public Sphere and Experience," New German Critique* no. 4 (Winter 1975), p. 67.

is situated in relation to his or her desires, to others, to objects, and to discourse. In this sense, the oppositional public sphere is not a separate and coherent space or an already established condition of consciousness. It is the open, contradictory process of developing an alternative logic of mediation, an alternative horizon of social experience. Two opposing logics of mediation, the collective and the serial, contend within every human being in our society.

The reality of this struggle makes the need to develop a Marxist cultural hermenutics urgent. Its project is twofold. Interpretations which read cultural texts in relation to their historical situations and effects must conserve or subvert meanings according to their validity not for an already constituted tradition but for a community in process. And, secondly, interpretation must be connected to the project of reclaiming language practices that unfold the horizon of this community. Such a hermeneutics becomes valid only as it serves to construct oppositional cultural experiences, an oppositional public sphere. It has a political task. The dominant tendency of our cultural insitutions and practices—from the organization of the learning process in the schools and the academic modes of knowledge which support them to the mass-mediated forms of communication which pre-empt speaking itself—is to undermine the very possibility for human beings to interpret the discourses that found their identities, shape their interactions, and regulate their activities. Only a process of interpretation which counters this tendency, actively and practically, can preserve the possibilities of a historical consciousness founded on collective experience.