

CULTURE IN THE AGE OF THREE WORLDS



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For the organizers of
GESO

INTRODUCTION

As we look back on the last half of the twentieth century, it seems clear that culture moved to the foreground. It is not, to be sure, that there had been no culture before 1950, but it was always in a period's background. Historians dutifully included it in a supplementary chapter on arts and culture as they surveyed the age of Jackson or Victoria. But suddenly, in the age of three worlds, everyone discovered that culture had been mass produced like Ford's cars; the masses had culture and culture had a mass. Culture was everywhere, no longer the property of the cultured or the cultivated. Just as an earlier bourgeois gentleman had been pleasantly surprised to discover that he had been speaking prose all along, so now even Americans found that their barbaric yawp was culture. And what's more, culture mattered – this was not your grandparents' culture, the quaint customs and artifacts collected by folklorists. Rather, under its various guises – the omnipresent commercial signscape, the unending stream of mass entertainments, the regular consumption patterns of a world of shoppers, the millions of adolescents migrating to high schools and universities, and, eventually, as a common denominator, the uncounted gigabytes of digitized information – this mass culture was part of the wealth of nations, an engine of what those intoxicated by the new discovery called a "postindustrial" society.

With the discovery that culture was everywhere, the study of culture

and the critique of culture became an increasingly central part of political and intellectual life. In recent years, this has come to be called "the cultural turn" in the humanities and social sciences, and is often associated with the rise of "cultural studies." This book is a product of, and reflection on, that cultural turn, which, I will argue, was a fundamental aspect of the age of three worlds, that short half-century (1945–1989) when we imagined that the world was divided into three – the capitalist First World, the Communist Second World, and the decolonizing Third World – as if each were a separate planet involved in an elaborate and dangerous orbit around the others.

In a sense, this book is about the emergence of "cultural studies." But it takes its distance from most contemporary celebrants and critics of cultural studies in two ways, seeing it at once more widely and more narrowly. I view cultural studies more widely, because I take the cultural turn in political and intellectual life in the age of three worlds to be a much broader phenomenon than the specific "cultural studies movement" which spread unevenly across the universities of North America, Northern Europe, Australia, and Taiwan from its quasi-academic roots in Labourist Britain (where it had developed out of the intertwining of adult education initiatives in the Workers' Educational Association and the Open University with the redbrick and polytechnic tradition of "Birmingham cultural studies"). In contrast to this "diffusionist" understanding of cultural studies, I will suggest that the cultural turn erupted around the world, though its idioms were not always mutually comprehensible. This global cultural turn was a consequence of the uneven development of a global culture out of the cultural and ideological struggles between the three worlds. Thus, even some of those who ignore or refuse the word "culture" – either for ideological reasons or because of its different connotations in different languages – are nonetheless part of this cultural turn: the choice of "sign," "ideology," "discourse," "communication," "consumption," "everyday life," or "habitus" as one's name for the region others called "culture" is itself part of the debate that constitutes the cultural turn. Moreover, despite my own use of the term "culture" and my biographical affiliation with the Birmingham-derived "cultural studies," I am not interested in asserting any particular privilege for the term "culture" or "cultural studies" over these

competing accounts; rather, I seek to translate and mediate between them. It will then not be surprising that I see many of the critics of the methods and ideologies of the Birmingham-derived "cultural studies" as themselves part of the larger turn to the cultural.

On the other hand, I view cultural studies more narrowly, because I will argue for the historical specificity of the cultural turn in the age of three worlds. Unlike the recent lively accounts by Francis Mulhern and Terry Eagleton, which highlight the concept of culture to assert substantial continuities between earlier forms of *Kulturkritik* and postmodern cultural studies, I will argue – most explicitly in chapter four – that the concept of culture undergoes a sea-change at mid-century: this is one reason why many of the cultural studies of the age drop the word "culture" for a variety of alternatives and neologisms.¹ [The great modernist notions of culture – the literary sense of culture as arts and letters and the anthropological sense of culture as habits and customs – were entirely inadequate to understand the culture industries and ideological state apparatuses that dominated the age of three worlds.] So new concepts, new frameworks were forged. Thus this is not a book on the idea of culture generally, but on culture and its synonyms in a specific moment, the age of three worlds. This historical specificity also suggests that the moment of cultural studies is a moment which has in some sense passed. Indeed I would suggest that the academic triumph of cultural studies in the 1990s came as the age that generated it was disappearing. So this book is an attempt to reckon with that break, that line between our own moment – the moment of "globalization" – and the period that now appears to have ended, the age of three worlds.

The cultural turn, the rise of cultural studies in this wider sense, was a fundamental aspect of the age of three worlds for two linked but distinct reasons: first, the study of culture, under several names (perhaps most commonly "communications"), developed into a new social science precisely because of the emergence of a new and relatively autonomous region of social life; and second, the turn to culture marked the distinctive politics of the social movements of a New Left that formed in all three worlds. This double genealogy of cultural studies – at once a reformation of the disciplinary landscape of the modern state and university, and a renovation

and renewal of radical thought – continues to cause confusion and conflation. Just as an earlier social science, sociology, was seen variously as an ally or antidote to socialism, so cultural studies was both an ally and antidote to the cultural radicalisms of the New Left.

In an era when the cinder blocks of the mass university became a characteristic landscape, cultural studies (and its kin: semiotics, American studies, media studies, communications) has tended to see itself as an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary reformer of academic boundaries, often promising to restore the wholeness of knowledge which reigned before the division of the faculties. Thus it was also seen as a secessionist, poacher, or imperialist by the established disciplines – literature and history on the one hand, sociology and anthropology on the other – each with its own notion of culture. However, it is better to see the differentiation of cultural studies in a way not dissimilar to the earlier division of the social sciences, mapped elegantly by Immanuel Wallerstein. The four modern social sciences derived, he suggests,

from the dominant liberal ideology of the nineteenth century which argued that state and market, politics and economics, were analytically separate. . . . Society was adjured to keep them separate, and scholars studied them separately. Since there seemed to be many realities that apparently were neither in the domain of the market [economics] nor in that of the state [political science], these realities were placed in a residual grab-bag which took as compensation the grand name of sociology. . . . Finally, since there were people beyond the realm of the civilized world, . . . the study of such peoples encompasses special rules and special training, which took on the somewhat polemical name of anthropology.²

The differentiation of cultural studies in the age of three worlds was, I will suggest, the result of the emergence of yet another aspect of social reality – the culture industries, the mass media, mass communications – which seemed to have its own autonomy, its own logic, and its own power. Though intertwined with state, market, and civil society, the “media,” as it is called in daily life, seemed to occupy an imaginative space equal to the state and the market. Thus the study of the logic of this new world, the logic of mass communication, the logic of culture in a new sense, became

the fifth social science, a postmodern social science, linked, as we shall see, to that other reorganization of the social sciences in the age of three worlds: area studies.³

But the cultural turn was never simply this academic tropism toward the light and heat of the mass media. From the start, it was also a moment of renewal and renovation in radical and socialist thought, generated from the crisis of Stalinism, from the contradictions of what was seen as a new form of capitalist society, and from the victories of decolonization. In 1959, a somewhat hostile observer, Daniel Bell, looked at the recently launched journals of the New Left and noted that their

pages . . . are full of attacks against advertising, the debaucheries of mass culture, and the like. And often, phrasing these criticisms in the language of the early Marx, particularly in terms of alienation, gives these attacks a seeming political content. But the point is that these problems are essentially cultural and not political, and the problem of radical thought today is to reconsider the relationship of culture to society.⁴

A central ideologue of the era he dubbed the “end of ideology,” Bell was skeptical of this new “cultural radicalism” (and we shall later consider the long line of variations on his complaint that its political content is seeming); but regardless of the justice of his judgment, his observation was accurate. In the decades that followed, one of the basic problems of radical thought *was* to reconsider the relationship of culture to society (hence the great influence and totemic status of Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society*), to grapple with the foregrounding of culture in the age of three worlds.

Though the New Left cultural turn eyed the mass media (Bell was not wrong about those “attacks against advertising [and] the debaucheries of mass culture”), its forms of thought rarely limited themselves to the technologies or to a media studies. For a generation of New Left thinkers around the globe, the issue of culture was not simply the fact of the existence of the new technologies of mass information and communication, but the reshaping of the everyday lives and struggles of subaltern classes and peoples by those new forms. If the modernist notions of culture named those social sites where the commodity form and its law of value did not yet rule – the high arts, on the one hand, and the lifeways of “primitive”

peoples, on the other – the new postmodern concept of culture was premised on the generalization of the commodity form, not only in symbolic production (the industries of culture, entertainment, and advertising), but throughout daily life. This new notion of culture encompassed the means of consumption and subsistence of workers, what Marx had obliquely called “the pleasures of the laborer.” But if Marx had famously bracketed the analysis of workers’ consumption – noting of “the maintenance and reproduction of the working class” that “the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker’s drives for self-preservation and propagation” – the New Left thinkers made culture and its cognates the vehicle for a reconsideration of the very processes of social maintenance and reproduction under capitalism.

As a result, the cultural turn raised the specter of a cultural politics, a cultural radicalism, a cultural revolution, a specter that haunts the age of three worlds. The idea was contested from the beginning: in the very first issue of the British *New Left Review* in 1960, E.P. Thompson was already responding to the skeptics: “The danger is,” writes our colleague Alasdair MacIntyre, in a reproof to the New Left in the current *Labour Review*, “that one will fight a series of guerilla engagements on cultural questions which will dissipate socialist energy and lead nowhere.” In reply, Thompson insisted that “any serious engagement in cultural or political life should not dissipate, but generate, socialist energy.”⁵ If culture had come to the foreground throughout society, how could politics not be cultural? The debate over the status and efficacy of culture as a site and form of political resistance, of the relation between culture and social movements, echoed across the age of three worlds and beyond; it will run throughout this book.

Finally, the cultural turn marked New Lefts in all three worlds. This was rarely noticed at the time, because the dramatic differences in form and strategy between the social movements of the First, Second, and Third Worlds overshadowed common concerns. And most contemporary accounts of cultural studies still miss the global aspects, and see its spread at the end of the century as an example of the globalization of North Atlantic academic trends. For example, the cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo notes that “in Argentina we do not call it ‘cultural studies’ . . . which is a term that

has been put into mass circulation by the US academy.”⁶ I don’t dispute this; in many cases the slogan of cultural studies has simply meant the marketing of US academic discourses, and the erasure of distinctive regional intellectual traditions of cultural analysis and criticism. But a closer look at the various New Left intellectual formations in each of the three worlds suggests that they underwent parallel or analogous cultural turns. In part, this was due to the common, if uneven, experience of mass commodity culture (film, radio and television broadcasting, recorded music, mass spectator sports) which took hold across the world’s exploding plebeian metropolises: from Sarlo’s own Buenos Aires where a mestizo migration from the countryside created the populist city of tango, football, and Peronism (Sarlo notes that Argentina’s first televised image was that of Eva Peron) to the Calcutta in which Dipesh Chakrabarty grew up, a postcolonial city where a new culture industry of Bengali comedians, singers, and soccer teams on film and radio was created by the “culture war” between *bangals*, the post-Partition refugees from the villages of East Bengal, and *ghotis*, the established residents of Calcutta.⁷ But the cultural turn was also due to the globalizing effect of the Communist experience: the post-1917 generation steeped in the cauldron of Leninist militancy, Popular Front anti-fascism, and a revolutionary anticolonialism. If the genuinely internationalist ideology of the Communist movement nurtured the remarkable spread of anti-imperialist solidarities, its equally vigorous Soviet loyalism reproduced the rigidities of Comintern Marxism on every continent. One of the central rigidities was the economism of Communist Marxism, its discounting of culture – merely a superstructure – and of national and regional particularities.

Thus a common aspect of the New Lefts of the age of three worlds was the turn to the superstructures, the reconsideration of culture: it is as evident in the founding of the Brazilian Centro Popular de Cultura (CPC) as in the founding of the British *New Left Review*; in Frantz Fanon’s address on “Racism and Culture” at the 1956 *Présence Africaine* congress as in Roland Barthes’s celebrated analysis of the photograph of the Negro soldier in his 1957 *Mythologies*; in Antonio Candido’s 1959 *Formation of Brazilian Literature* as in Raymond Williams’s 1958 *Culture and Society*.⁸ It is not that these figures influenced each other; in fact, precisely because the cultural

turn was usually a turn to what Gramsci had called the "national-popular" – the regional and national particularities often ignored by the abstract internationalism of Comintern Marxism – explicit cross-national theories and debates about culture did not develop (witness the "exceptionalism" of even the radical American studies movement, which I discuss in part two). But parallel developments can be seen throughout the era.

In retrospect, the New Left flowering after 1955–56 – from the Khrushchev revelations to the uprising in Budapest, from the battle of Dien Bien Phu to that of Algiers, from the Suez crisis to the Bandung conference, from the Montgomery bus boycott to the Sharpeville massacre, from the CND marches to the Anpo protests, from the independence of Ghana to the charismatic guerilla revolution in Cuba – stands out as the first of three moments. If this first moment saw the resurrection of the "humanist" young Marx and a variety of existential and phenomenological radicalisms, the second moment, that of the global wave of uprisings and insurgencies in 1968, saw the popularization of the cultural turn in the form both of denunciations of the dominant culture, as ideological state apparatus, cultural imperialism, consciousness industry, or society of the spectacle, and of theorizations of cultural revolution. Triggered by the utopian demands unleashed in the vast and violent upheavals against forms of Soviet-style modernization in Maoist China as well as in the guerilla ideologies of Che Guevara and Amílcar Cabral, notions of a cultural revolution became the vulgate of Naxalites in Bengal and Situationists in Paris, of Black Panthers in Oakland and liberation theologians in Bogotá, and energized the emerging movement for women's liberation.

The third moment – the defeat and repression of the New Left social movements marked by the end of the "thaw" and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, by the coups and military dictatorships in Indonesia, Africa, and Latin America's Southern Cone, and by the authoritarian populism and free-market fundamentalism of the Reagan and Thatcher regimes – continued the cultural turn of New Left thought, though its visionary and utopian modality, imagining a cultural revolution, gave way to reflections on the failures of popular nationalisms and the contradictions of popular culture. This is the moment of several relatively independent Gramsci revivals: at the same time that the radical intellectuals of the

Birmingham Centre were reappropriating Gramsci's work on popular culture to make sense of the new Thatcher regime's "great moving right show" and the changes in British working-class subcultures (evident in Stuart Hall's influential essays on Thatcherism and in Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour*, as well as in the early work of Hazel Carby and Paul Gilroy in *The Empire Strikes Back*), a young Argentinean intellectual exiled in Mexico, Néstor García Canclini, was wrestling with the Latin American revival of Gramscian notions of popular culture to understand the effects of urban markets on the crafts of Mexican artisans (*Culturas populares en el capitalismo*), and a group of young South Asian intellectuals took up Gramsci's notion of the "subaltern" to criticize nationalist histories and initiate a "subaltern studies."

At the time, hardly anyone connected these projects. The New Left intellectual tradition that most vigorously tried to think the world as one – the dependency and world-systems theorists – were rarely concerned with culture (as one Brazilian intellectual told me, for dependency theorists, culture was merely perfume). The sense of the discontinuities between the three worlds – and thus between the philosophically oriented "critical theory" of the First World, the dissident formations of the Second World, and the peasant and guerilla Marxisms of the Third World – meant that the project of a transnational cultural critique never surfaced. It was not until the three worlds dissolved into one, and radical critics of globalization called for a cultural studies that would cross borders and attend not only to the popular and the subaltern but to the hybrid and the creole, that one can not only see the beginnings of a transnational cross-fertilization but also re-imagine the elective affinities between the earlier projects.

It is perhaps not surprising that many of the central figures of this contemporary transnational cultural controversy over alternative modernities – a name in part for the age of three worlds, now seen as the era of nation-focused modernization and development from whose success or failure one is now escaping – and their hybrid subjects were formed intellectually in the earlier moment's reckoning with the crisis of the popular in particular national situations. Paul Gilroy's account of the antinomies of modernity's racial practices in *Between Camps* has its roots in *The Empire Strikes Back*, the pioneering Birmingham study of the place of

race and migration in the crisis of popular Labourism; García Canclini's mapping of the hybrid cultures of Mexico City's modernity is explicitly a rethinking of the "crisis of the popular" outlined in his early study of Mexican artisans; Aihwa Ong's powerful outline of the alternative modernities of East Asia's "repressive developmentalist states" and the emergence of a "flexible" pan-Asian culture and subjectivity in the Chinese diaspora grows out of her insistence on the importance of cultural struggle in her pioneering study (conducted in the late 1970s) of the contradictory meanings of cases of spirit possession among young Malaysian women assembling semiconductors in the then-new "export-processing" factories; and Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of historicism and his insistence on the specificity of Bengali modernity in his project of "provincializing Europe" is explicitly a self-critique, a return to the unresolved questions in his early culturalist – "culture," he wrote, was "the 'unthought' of Indian Marxism" – recasting of Bengali working-class culture through a subaltern reading of jute industry archives. It would be absurd to trace these works back to a single source, an ur-cultural studies, and it would be a mistake to ignore the theoretical and political differences among these, and other, figures. But it would be equally misleading not to register the elements of a common situation, a common crisis that they address, both in the work of the late 1970s and in more recent work.

The break between the theme of the national-popular and those of hybridity, flexibility, and the diasporan stands less as a theoretical or political advance or declension (both positions have been argued) than a symptom of a wider historical change. If culture was the unthought of Indian (and other) Marxism in the age of three worlds, it may be that it no longer is. "If the 1930s left had undersold culture," Terry Eagleton quips, "the postmodern left overvalued it." This suggests that a happy medium might exist: a fair price for culture good for any decade. I doubt it. Rather I would argue that the very sense of a radical alteration in the valuing of culture – and of cultural politics – marks a new era, a new political situation. If cultural studies is now in crisis or in question, it is less because it was overvalued than because its moment, the age of three worlds, is over.⁹

This is where this book begins. If this is a work of history – culture in

the age of three worlds – it is also a reflection on the present, on, to borrow a classic title from Perry Anderson, the "origins of the present crisis." For this book tries to understand the emergence of a global culture in a time when few would have imagined that that phrase could be used in the singular. What is the meaning of this shift from the plural (three worlds) to the singular (a global culture)? The first part, "Rethinking the Age of Three Worlds", tries to illuminate the break between our own moment, the moment of "globalization," and the period that now appears to have ended, the age of three worlds, by charting the sources and lineaments of a global culture. Is global culture simply the international marketing of cultural commodities by transnational culture industries which have enclosed and privatized the cultural commons, the public domain? Is it simply those deterritorialized spaces and experiences – shopping malls, airports, tourist hotels, and the hardware and software of the ubiquitous electronic entertainment machines – that are mass produced to be as identical as possible? Or is the culture of the global city a proletarian culture in some yet unimagined and unfigured sense of that word, the symbolic product of masses of migrants forming social movements and plebeian public spheres of yet untheorized forms? In chapter two, "Globalization and Culture: Process and Epoch," I suggest that behind the powerful accounts of globalization as a process lies a recognition of a historical transition, of globalization as the name of the end, not of history, but of the historical moment of the age of three worlds. The debate over globalization is largely a debate over the meaning and legacy of that short half-century, a period when the question of a global culture takes shape. Chapter three, "A Global Left? Social Movements in the Age of Three Worlds," juxtaposes the anti-globalization movements of our time to the social movements of the age of three worlds, the movements of 1968, both to interrogate our ways of understanding social movements and to argue that the Seattle WTO protest stands in a tradition of IMF riots that mark a break from the politics of 1968. Chapter four, "The Novelists' International," is the book's major experiment in writing a transnational cultural history. Arguing that the effort to create a proletarian culture in the early decades of the century was a fundamental part of the globalization of the novel, it suggests that what we inherit as a global

culture is not simply an emporium of commodities marketed around the world, but a powerful body of narratives that emerged out of the clash of the three worlds.

The book's second part, "Working on Culture," explores the debates about culture and politics that have accompanied the cultural turn in the intellectual life of the last quarter of the twentieth century. There was a dramatic shift in the meaning of the concept of culture at mid-century, as a new generation of radical intellectuals developed a new cultural politics and elaborated a variety of socioanalytic theories of culture. What were the consequences of this cultural turn? Did the new cultural studies neglect class? What kind of politics is cultural politics? Chapter five, "The Socioanalysis of Culture," explores the change in the meaning of culture in the age of three worlds, and outlines the major cultural theories to emerge from the New Left – market-based theories, state-based theories, and recognition-based theories. It then argues that these need to be supplemented with a labor theory of culture.]

Chapters six and seven deal with the moment when cultural studies, under that name, was first imported into the United States, and became part of the Reagan-Bush "culture wars." Chapter six, "The End of Mass Culture," argues that the Reagan years – which marked the definitive end of the political hopes of the New Left – witnessed a dramatic shift in the New Left's theories of popular or mass culture, in part to understand both the defeat of the New Left's countercultures and the continued cultural turn in politics, figured not least by Reagan himself, Hollywood star become president. Chapter seven, "The Academic Left and the Rise of Cultural Studies," attempts to situate the so-called culture wars of the 1980s and the journalistic moral panic over "political correctness" in 1990–91 in the context of the rise of cultural studies. Chapter eight, "What's Wrong with Cultural Studies?," addresses several common objections to contemporary cultural studies, including its apparent retreat from class, and its exaggeration of cultural politics and cultural resistance. In response, chapter eight becomes an opportunity to defend, define, and develop the slogan of cultural studies for our new times of globalization, after the end of the age of three worlds.

Because of the post-World War II emergence of the United States as a

dominant world power, the age of three worlds often seemed to be the "American Century," a phrase coined by Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* and *Life*, in his 1941 manifesto. Throughout the world, global culture came to be seen as American culture, and New Left cultural criticism was often inaugurated by lessons in how to read Donald Duck. A distinctive American ideology emerged in the age of three worlds: "democracy" came to be seen as a peculiarly "American" product, and was wrenched apart from socialism and Marxism, both now counterposed to Americanism. Inside the United States, notions of Americanism, the "American way of life," and American exceptionalism flourished, and "un-American activities" were the subject of Congressional investigations. The final part of this book, "The American Ideology: The Age of Three Worlds as the American Century," explores the Americanisms of the age of three worlds. The intensified intellectual interest in US culture in the decades after World War II found expression in a new academic field, "American studies," whose origins lay in a curious fusion of two Americanisms with contrary political inflections, namely Popular Front Communism and Cold War anti-Communism. Chapter nine, "The Special American Conditions: Marxism and American Studies," examines the relation between Marxism and notions of American exceptionalism in the formation of the "discipline" of American studies, and in its subsequent transformation by a generation of New Left scholars.

This genealogy of American studies is followed by a reading of the figure who so often stood as the canonic authority for notions of American exceptionalism and American democracy: Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America*, written in the 1830s, had an extraordinary revival in the United States during the age of three worlds. Chapter ten, "The Peculiarities of the Americans: Reconsidering *Democracy in America*," argues not only that Tocqueville was ill-served by his revivalists, but that the key antinomies in his work – the unresolved tension in his notion of "civil association" and the rhetorical and theoretical disruption that African enslavement and Indian dispossession work on his account of democracy in America – offer avenues toward a historical materialist understanding of the "exceptionalism" of settler capitalism.

If chapter ten focuses mainly on Tocqueville's text, chapter eleven,

"Neither Capitalist Nor American: The Democracy as Social Movement," returns to Tocqueville's historical moment in an attempt to separate democracy from both American exceptionalism and capitalist triumphalism. In the age of three worlds, anti-democratic interpreters of democracy – from Schumpeter to Huntington – narrowed the definition of democracy and obscured its roots as a social movement: "the democracy." Reconsidering the history of "the democracy," I argue that the battle to establish and defend universal suffrage parliamentary states and to extend democracy into civil society – a social democracy – has been the work of neither bourgeois revolution nor middle-class modernization, but of working-class social movements. The final chapter, "A Cultural Front in the Age of Three Worlds?" grew out of my involvement in the effort, sparked by the "labor teach-ins" of the late 1990s, to create an alliance between the labor movement and writers and artists in the academy. It reconsiders the history of the relations between labor and culture in the decades after World War II, suggesting that the well-rehearsed story of the hostility between labor and the New Left has obscured some remarkable elements of a cultural front in the age of three worlds.

PART ONE

RETHINKING THE AGE OF THREE WORLDS