

The Cultural Turn versus Economic Returns: The Production of Culture in an Information Age

PASCHAL PRESTON

Whereas the central preoccupation of critical social analysis has traditionally been the way in which economic rationality dominates culture, contemporary social theory has been increasingly concerned with the central role of cultural processes and institutions in organising and controlling the economic

Don Slater and Fran Tonkiss¹

The cultural turn in recent criticism and social thought

THERE HAS been a remarkable rise in the attention paid to culture within recent social thought and critical theory. The 'cultural turn' is manifest across a very wide spectrum of academic disciplines and fields of inquiry. These range from international relations and development studies to various analyses of a new information society or economy in the advanced capitalist world, and from the sociology of gender and ethnic inequalities to studies of consumerism and the role of the media and new communication technologies. This turn to culture has also been very prominent in the expanding field of globalisation studies and across various related debates in cultural and political studies, including debates around the issues of citizenship, identity and multiculturalism. The cultural turn is now manifest and expressed in a massive literature. For its proponents at least, there are a number of specific and significant aspects of recent socio-cultural change that justify and underpin the recent cultural turn.

One key strand of this discourse is centred on the idea that culture and the symbolic have now expanded their role and influence in economic processes and that they have become relatively autonomous, even tending to dominate over economic processes and rationalities. This is allied to the claim that the economy itself and the commodities that flow through it are now largely constituted through informational and symbolic processes.

Many such contemporary theorists draw selectively on concepts borrowed from post-industrial theory, postmodern analyses of consumer culture, and specific versions of post-Fordism*. These are mobilised to indicate and emphasise that market economies increasingly comprise ‘cultural goods and cultural logics’.² One influential source of this argument has been the work of the postmodernist theorist Jean Baudrillard, who emphasises the simulation effects of the explosion of media images and the increasingly symbolic character of all types of commodities. In essence, Baudrillard suggests that these developments imply nothing less than a reversal of the base-superstructure model that framed so much debate around cultural themes in previous periods of modernity.³ Some proponents of the cultural turn suggest an implosion of the economic and the cultural spheres, suggesting that any clear distinction between the two is no longer meaningful.

Secondly, the cultural turn emphasises the amplification of globalisation processes, a key theme shared with many socio-economic, cultural and political discourses. As their role increases, the weightless and diverse informational services, including cultural commodities, are viewed as key drivers of the increasing internationalisation of economic and cultural relations. For many proponents of the cultural turn, globalisation contributes to the erosion of the relatively fixed forms of social solidarities and cohesive identities framed around the nation state and nationalism that characterised earlier stages of modernity. Such trends are deemed likely to become even more important with the development and use of technological innovations in the form of faster and cheaper communication networks, including the internet. Thirdly, we may note that, since the 1990s especially, these cultural discourses tend to emphasise specific impacts or implications of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). These are taken to further amplify the trends towards the dematerialisation and globalisation—and, indeed, towards the implosion—of economic and cultural processes. The multiplication of electronic media formats and channels are viewed as additional factors leading to the erosion of existing forms of social solidarities and national or other cultural identities.

Fourthly, the cultural turn is marked by increasing attention to consumption processes and leisure activities, as these are assumed to play

* Fordism refers to the large-scale mass-production methods pioneered by Henry Ford. Post-Fordism is based on the idea that new electronic and information technologies have made work more flexible and given workers more scope: it is linked to decentralisation in the workplace, social and political fragmentation, and a greater emphasis on choice and individuality.

a much more significant role in social and economic relations than in previous periods of modernity. Consumption is now taken as the crucial sphere where individual members of late modern society actively or reflexively express and construct ever more diverse, fluid, fragmented and hybrid identities. If earlier critics viewed the increasing commodification of cultural production and consumption as a source of potential cultural decay, their contemporary counterparts adopt a much more relaxed, if not quite celebratory, perspective. Consumerism, especially that related to cultural and media products, is now highlighted as a key site for active, playful, or pleasurable appropriation and the creative, even subversive, construction of diverse identities. Fifthly, the cultural turn literature asserts that in today's materially abundant and multicultural societies economic or material dimensions of inequality matter much less relative to the past or compared to those inequalities centred around cultural and political resources and status markers. This theme is manifest in recent discourses that highlight the politics of representation over the politics of distribution.

A sixth and final theme centres round an emphasis on the increasing role of signification, self-reflexive subjectivities, and extended individualisation. The presumed consequences include a diminution or dissolving of the relatively fixed, socially-framed identities (national, ethnic, class-based, political, etc.) that characterised earlier stages of capitalist modernity. This suggests that the social containers which framed relatively fixed and robust national identities (or other cultural and political identities) are now deemed to be redundant or eroded. One popular implication of this position suggests that both the production and consumption of culture have become highly individualised and have broken free of their moorings in social, cultural and political collectivities, including the nation.

In this paper, I will interrogate the core claim that the cultural and symbolic realms can be understood as autonomous and even tending to dominate over economic processes and logics. I will start with a historical approach that seeks to address the differentiations and relations between the cultural and the economic spheres in modern society. This approach will also lead me to question whether or how the production and consumption of culture can be best understood as autonomous (or, indeed, as individualised and fragmented) on the one hand, and closely shaped and bounded by the evolution of a complex of economic, administrative, infrastructural and social conditioning factors on the other. I will move on to criticise core aspects of the cultural turn's discourse related to more contemporary developments. These include a critical

interrogation of its understanding of the dematerialisation of contemporary social and economic processes and the changing role of cultural functions and the cultural industries in the economy.

Modernity and the formation of economy and culture

In the middle of the awful realm of powers and of the sacred realm of laws, the aesthetic creative impulse is building unawares a third joyous realm of play and of appearance, in which it releases man from all the shackles of circumstances and frees him from everything that may be called constraint, whether physical or moral.

Schiller⁴

As with postmodernist thought, to which it is closely bound, the cultural turn discourse is marked by a certain historical amnesia or, at best, a jaundiced, reductionist understanding of the early modern period and of the subsequent evolution of ‘the unfinished project of modernity’.⁵ For example, there is a frequent tendency to rely on a nerdish, technology-centred understanding of the historical role of print media in the rise and decline of the nation-state system, nationalism and national culture. Whilst this technological determinism clearly follows the path pioneered by McLuhan in his later and popular writings, it is also in keeping with the techno-fetishism favoured by influential industrial and political elites in the 1990s.

Here, I will borrow and adjust one of McLuhan’s favourite tools, the ‘rear-view mirror’, in order to take a backward glance at the processes of structural change in the early modern era that directly impinge on current concerns and emerging developments. I will focus on the constitution and separation of the realms of culture and economy. This will provide a basic conceptual and historical platform from which to explore the salience of the key tenets of the cultural turn and the stakes involved in the extended commercialisation, regulation and mediation of culture over time. The historical treatment here will be necessarily brief and schematic, addressing the general trends across western Europe, as space will only permit occasional reflections on the specific situation of nations and cultures under colonial domination.

In this approach, the rise of the modern nation-state system, nationalism and national culture cannot be viewed as an effect of print (or other) technology, nor of any other single cause. Rather, they are aspects or components of that multi-dimensional set of changes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe that are now usually embraced in the umbrella concept of modernity. Like the growth of capitalist industrialism, urbanisation, the increasing spatial scale of economic exchange and

mobility of labour, secularisation, or liberal democracy and the ‘dialectics of enlightenment’, they are best understood as aspects of ‘the Great Transformation’, as Polanyi so aptly defined it.⁶

Even the emergence and variable meanings of the category of culture itself can only be understood in the historical context of this great transformation—the multi-dimensional set of differentiations or disembedding processes associated with the rise of modernity in Europe. For, this transformation involved much more than the deepening social and technical divisions of labour that classical theorists (notably Adam Smith) viewed as key to the growing ‘wealth of nations’. More fundamentally, it involved the structural separation of activities and spheres that were previously embedded or interwoven. In Polanyi’s account, a core concern and key element of this transformation is centred round the separation of the economic from the social and cultural systems. For Runciman and others, the key dimensions of modernity’s structural differentiation centre on the separation of the modes of production, persuasion and coercion. Whatever the preferred typology of categories, modernity’s differentiation processes involved a crucial reframing of the meaning, role and character of the sphere of cultural production and its relation to other social spheres.

Karl Polanyi’s analysis draws on economic history and anthropological literature to emphasise that prior to the eighteenth century ‘the economic system was absorbed in the social system’.⁷ For him, regulation and markets had grown up together and the self-regulating market was unknown before this time. Thus, for Polanyi, the emergence of the very idea of self-regulation represented ‘a complete reversal of the trend of development’. In this particular transformation, nothing must be allowed to inhibit the formation of markets, nor must incomes be permitted to be formed other than through sales. The only legitimate policies and measures now became those which help to ensure the self-regulation of the market, not least by creating conditions that make the market the only organising power in the economic sphere. By the nineteenth century, economic activity had been isolated and imputed to a distinctive economic motive. According to Polanyi, such an institutional pattern could not function unless society was somehow subordinated to its requirements. To include labour and land in ‘the market mechanism’ means to ‘subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market’. This economic logic and its characteristics had profound implications for culture and for the relations between the two realms, as I will indicate below.

Central to the concerns of the present paper is the manner in which

modernity's great transformation also inaugurated significant new differentiations and separations *within* the domain of knowledge. One involves the separation of the three faculties of practical reason, judgement, and theoretical reason, a distinction first proposed by Kant. By the end of the eighteenth century, these spheres of knowledge were being differentiated from one another institutionally as the 'spheres of science, morality, and art'. In each, the questions of truth, of justice, and of good taste 'were discussed under differing aspects of validity', if still under the same discursive conditions of criticism. One implication was that any conflicts between these value spheres could no longer be resolved rationally from the higher standpoint of a religious or cosmological worldview.⁸ Thus, artistic and related cultural knowledge domains became separated from the scientific and legal knowledge domains and, by extension, from economic and other instrumental forms. In one of his more nuanced passages, McLuhan recognises how Polanyi's analysis of the embedded nature of economic and social processes prior to the great transformation 'is exactly parallel to the situation of literature and the arts up till that time'. Indeed, he suggests that this remained 'true till the time of Dryden, Pope and Swift, who lived to detect the great transformation'.⁹

Secondly, this transformation implied that the domain of culture and art acquired a new role and character, quite distinct from its prior religious associations and ritual roles. Its realm and remit focused on the aesthetic, transcendent and sublime, and it increasingly embraced secular characteristics and concerns, even if retaining some of the aura of its prior spiritual role. These, too, were distinct from the ever-expanding modes of instrumental rationality which increasingly framed and shaped knowledge related to the economy and other institutional realms.

Thirdly, the realm of culture and art embraced an important new social and political role in relation to the formation of the early modern public sphere—a role which preceded the political dimension of the public sphere in most countries, according to Habermas' seminal account. This literary or cultural dimension of the public sphere provided a domain that expressed and corresponded to the increasing sense of individualised identity, subjectivity, and interiority. It addressed the quest for new modes of socially- and spatially-extended expression and exchange of largely non-instrumental ideas, thoughts, and feelings, inaugurated or amplified by other aspects of modernity's 'great transformation', not least its new modes of subjectivity and self-consciousness and its 'self-referentiality of a knowing subject'.¹⁰ This cultural dimension of the public sphere simultaneously connected with and stretched beyond the individual's

private realms of home, family and everyday life. In many respects, it complemented and reinforced the importance of modernity's political public sphere, especially in the challenge of constructing viable modern communities comprising large groups of rational, reflexive human subjects. This role embraced the production, consumption and critical discussion of diverse cultural forms, which, in turn, functioned as supports for the formation and renewal of spatially-extended forms of national collective identities and civic solidarity, linked to the democratising potential of modernity (however incomplete or unfinished that might be). In this light, the sphere of culture and its symbolic forms represent important sites of moral education, and the specifically modern character of art and the role of aesthetic pleasure cannot be reduced to the purely ideological.¹¹

Fourthly, new tensions appear relating to the structural separations constructed between the culture and art knowledge-domain and those domains pertaining to economic and administrative rationality and instrumental knowledge. As Polanyi noted, the institutional separation of the economy and the idea of self-regulation represented 'a complete reversal of the trend of development' hitherto. The legitimate policies and measures now became those which ensured the self-regulation of the market, not least by creating conditions that tended to position the market as the sole or dominant organising power in the economic sphere. The concomitant utilitarian principles are precisely those that Pope had mocked with the quip 'whatever is is right' and Swift ridiculed as 'the mechanical operation of the Spirit'. Here, too, the principle of non-interference in the natural order 'becomes the paradoxical conclusion of applied knowledge'. Over the eighteenth century, the process of applied knowledge had reached such a momentum that it became accepted as 'a natural process which must not be impeded save at the peril of greater evil'.¹²

Yet, such principles directly clash with the particular set of social roles, functions, responsibilities, and value orientations allocated to the realm of cultural knowledge in modernity's structural separations (described above). Henceforth, there will be many sources of tension and conflict between the cultural realm, on the one hand, and instrumental forms of knowledge and 'mechanical' value orientations associated with the competitive market and the self-regulating economic system, on the other. Such tensions are not lessened by the subsequent tendency for cultural production to depend increasingly on this same economic realm and market as a source of revenue.

Markets, state and national cultural production

Writers in England no longer depend on the Great for subsistence [rather, they depend on] the public ... a good and generous master.

Oliver Goldsmith¹³

This takes us to a further crucial feature of the cultural and artistic knowledge realm inaugurated by modernity's diverse structural differentiations: the shift from patronage to the market as the increasingly important sponsor of certain (media-based) forms of cultural production. This particular shift was entirely natural, given the other structural separations of modernity's great transformation. For Adam Smith, it was self-evident that the mechanical laws of the economy and the efficiencies of the division of labour should apply equally to the things of the mind as to the products of modern industry: 'to think or to reason comes to be, like every other employment, a particular business'.

This shift from patronage to the market was especially manifest in the case of print-based cultural objects following Europe's appropriation of movable printing techniques from Asia, two centuries after they were first developed in Korea in 1234. The subsequent growth of print-based cultural forms, especially the novel, poetry, newspapers and other periodicals, had significant economic impacts as well as cultural implications. Indeed, it provided one of the first instances of the mass-production of standardised products and constituted one of the earliest economic success stories of a still nascent capitalist modernity.

But, as the capitalist market society began to define itself and the market-based public became the patron, many writers, artists, and critics became increasingly wary of the commodification process. They were critical of the particular forms of restraint and regulation that it imposed on artistic and literary expression. Thus, as literature and other cultural forms moved into the role of consumer commodity, there emerged a tradition of concern that 'art had reversed its role from guide for perception into convenient amenity'. Many cultural voices and movements expressed a wariness of the peculiar forms of constraint and incentive that were imposed by this dimension of capitalist commodification: 'henceforth, literature will be at war with ... the social mechanics of conscious goals and motivations' associated with ever-expanding capitalist production relations.¹⁴

As novels, poetry, and other forms of literature increasingly became an industry or trade alongside newspapers, many cultural producers tended to question or reject the legitimacy of market-based definitions of the public or popularity, refusing these as measures of the standards of value, worth or

truth. Pope and other writers worried that language and the arts ‘would cease to be prime agents of critical perception and become mere packaging devices for releasing a spate of verbal commodities’.¹⁵

As indicated above, the emergence of a capitalist market as a new source of income for the production of culture (and a concomitant decline in direct dependency on wealthy patrons or the church) was closely bound up with other changes unfolding in the early modern era. These included the emergence of specifically modern concepts and self-understandings or sensibilities concerning the autonomy or freedom of individual expression within the fields of artistic and cultural production. In many senses, these had their parallels in the notion of consumer sovereignty with respect to markets and notions of citizenship rights in the political realm of the public sphere. At the same time, the rise of capitalist industrialism, new ideas about the self-regulating market, and specialised production (via the division of labour) also prompted new kinds of relations between authors, artists, critics, and other producers of cultural forms and functions, on the one hand, and their audiences, readers, and public, on the other. This involved ‘a new system of thinking’ about the arts and culture more generally, whereby artistic production became a special (if not superior) means of access to imaginative truth and the writer or artist became defined as a special kind of person in many respects. In some senses, this amounted to a representative or brokerage role that was somewhat analogous to the representative role played by politicians in the political public sphere.

In important respects, the shift from patronage to the market also had a distinctly socialising effect with respect to the production and consumption of cultural expression and communication. The author or other cultural producer must now imagine, consciously address, and engage with, even attempt to woo, a certain collective audience, especially in the case of mediated culture. The dependency on market logics served to forge closer (conscious) connections between writers, artists, and other cultural producers and their audiences. Even if the social communication process was indirect, spatially extended, and mediated via money and the market, it produced a community-building effect irrespective of content, genre, and the intentions of individual authors and cultural producers or of those in gatekeepers roles.

This is partly manifest in the manner in which cultural producers introduced aesthetic and stylistic innovations and cultural forms that addressed their audiences in new ways, and, in some respects, these had a socialising, if not democratising, effect. This was evident in the case of the new eighteenth-century form of the novel, where, as Dr. Johnston suggests, ‘an adventurer is levelled with the rest of the world and acts in such scenes of the universal drama, as may be the lot of any other man’.¹⁶ It was also manifest in the work

of Goldsmith, who innovated by incorporating the (anticipated) experience of the reader into his criticism, thereby changing the concept of the critic into a two-way function of reviewing the merits of the cultural work in question and interpreting the public back to the writer.¹⁷

Of course, the market-based print media also included newspapers and periodicals whose content was generally more directly focused on the political, as opposed to the cultural, dimensions of the modern public sphere. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, access to all forms of market-based media was, like access to citizenship status and membership of the public sphere, largely confined to the upper and middle classes endowed with certain levels of material means, status, education, literacy, and leisure time. The elitist character of the free market itself, no doubt, provided a certain structural preselection or censoring effect on the content, in keeping with the prevailing political values and cultural sensibilities of what Goldsmith and his contemporaries called polite society. But, where individual writers and artists transgressed the ruling norms guiding the operations of the free press and other media, the state administration was very inclined to manifest its visible hand in multiple ways, ranging from licensing, taxation, and selective bribery to the cruder forms of censorship. In this context, the 'Castle press' was but one localised form in the Irish colonial context.

Successive political and social forces, rather than any technological logic, ensured that the precise configurations of the legitimate political coverage and content of the new media of social communication were adjusted over time, with significant variations from country to country. The major shifts in these boundaries, like those governing access to the public sphere, were largely shaped by the trajectory of political conflict, not least the impact of labour, nationalist, and other social movements seeking to construct more universal forms of electoral democracy and conceptions of citizenship rights. Indeed, this brief historical summary must also note the frequent emergence of periodicals and other printed media produced by, or orientated towards, such radical political and social movements rather than for reasons of profit. Once again, however, the availability of print media did not singularly determine the existence or concerns of such political movements. Rather, it is a case of social rather than technological determination, as the flow of causation may have been the other way round. Indeed, we may note that at times of heightened political activity there were notable surges in the circulation and readership of the radical newspaper media (as at the time of the Chartist movement in 1840s England or of the United Irishmen in 1790s Ireland).

Yet, we must emphasise that it was only towards the turn of the twentieth century that we find the emergence of national newspapers and magazines as a truly mass medium, even in the advanced industrial societies. This was

largely due to rising disposable incomes and educational and literacy standards amongst the working class and especially to the growing impact of advertising. The expanding role of this large and lumpy customer (or privileged patron) had a significant impact on the editorial content and orientations of the legitimate media over the past century. It also had a foreclosing effect, by raising the economic barriers to market entry and survival faced by new entrants, especially for media orientated to a radical politics, like those that flourished at various times in the nineteenth century.

Modern social formations and cultural space

Over time, the increasing role of market-based print literature and periodicals had the important social effect of developing and spatially-extending the use of standardised (vernacular) languages in many European countries—Switzerland being an obvious, if rare, exception to this general case.

Here, again, I am dealing with the typical or schematic history of these developments in the European context. Yet, it may be noted briefly that in the case of colonised or stateless nations matters were very different indeed. For example, the absence of an autonomous, self-determining political and economic capital slowed and distorted not only the accumulation of material wealth and the incomes required to support market-sponsored cultural production: imperial domination also operated to hinder the development of the modern conceptions of self-determining, reflexive selfhood and citizenship, as well as the construction of relatively open political and cultural public spheres. Imperialism required the more brutal devaluation and marginalisation (if not annihilation) of the traditional layers of the local culture (not merely the language) of colonised peoples, which, in other parts of Europe, served as important resources in the construction of modern social communication systems, national political identities, and meaningful public spheres. Beyond the usual qualification thresholds of material status and cultural capital required for access to and participation in the early public sphere (what Goldsmith used to term polite society), imperialism also meant the privileging of specific forms of cultural identity and the exclusion of others by additional barriers. In Anglophone Europe, for example, this is well borne out by the subtle dances around the prevailing assumptions of polite society concerning the legitimacy of Irish identity or cultural traditions—or even Catholicism—framing the writings and shaping the career strategies of both Oliver Goldsmith and Edmund Burke.

In combination, the structural separation of the cultural spheres together with the shift towards market-based funding of cultural production, the diffusion of print-based and other cultural industries, and innovations in

expressive forms and styles, all contributed to the formation and maintenance of viable large-scale modern social formations. Cultural production became more spatially disembedded and social in scope. In turn, the social was increasingly or primarily framed around national-level political communities and cultural identities (the modern nation-state system) and materially underpinned by an increasingly marketised economy and money system. In effect, if not always by intention, cultural production has operated to support, express, and construct new kinds of disembedded and reflexive forms of social solidarity that hold complex modern societies together. This is one of the more sustainable and insightful truths lurking within McLuhan's best known slogan, 'the medium is the message'. Of the three major forces that hold society together—solidarity, money and administrative power¹⁸—the contribution and role of cultural production has had most pronounced, but not exclusive, relevance to the first.

But, to speak of contribution means that the role of cultural production and the media of public communication must be understood in the context of its articulation alongside a set of other equally important factors. The former cannot be defined as the sole carriers or primary drivers of the emergence of the modern national social formations and the other new forms of cultural and social space that frame individual and collective identities within the modern nation-state system in Europe. Rather, these must be understood as the outcome of successive over-layerings of a complex set of determinations that were unfolding before and during modernity's great transformation from the eighteenth century onwards.

For one, the construction of a modern social space in Europe can only be understood in the light of successive waves of bloody wars and extensive violence.¹⁹ For another, the structural separation of the economy and the growing autonomy of the economic sphere and of the market as primary steering mechanism—alongside the increased mobility of labour, the deepening social and technical divisions of labour, and other institutional reforms—also played a major role in this regard. These and other aspects of the great transformation in the economic realm served not only to expand the role of the market and intensify the population's dependence on traded goods and services and money-based exchanges: their operations also prompted significant extensions in the spatial scale of trade and of other socio-economic relations, from the local and regional levels to the national and beyond, the latter being especially evident in the case of the colonial powers. The upward shift in the level and intensity of the spatially-extended mobility of marketised commodities released an intensifying trend towards the 'annihilation of space by time', as Marx put it, in an age of railways and telegraphy. Together with competitive pressures, these provided incentives to improve the technical

means of transportation, which further reduced the cost and time taken to move goods, information, and people across space.

The structural separation of the modern state administration and political system from the economic sphere did not mean that the 'hidden hand' of the market achieved the position of monopoly steering mechanism, whether in the sphere of cultural production or elsewhere. If the state became ultimately dependent on the market economy for its revenues (via taxation, etc.), it continued to possess many autonomous capacities and unique sources of power, not only in relation to the economic sphere but even more so in the realm of cultural production. Thus, the state administrative system must also be included as an important force with respect to the social character of cultural production, for it too played a key part in the genesis and shaping of the large-scale modern social formations framed around national political and cultural identities.

The more visible hand of the state administration and elites controlling the political system are manifest in, for example, the regulation and funding of the modern cultural institutions of mass education, museums, libraries, and the like, which expanded significantly from the early nineteenth century. Indeed, many of the media-centric treatments of cultural production reveal a certain amnesia when it comes to the crucial role of education as a force for socialisation and an aspect of cultural production. Even if we recognise that the education sector is not solely orientated to the cultural forms of knowledge, this largely non-media based institution remains, by most measures, the single most important cultural sector and means for the socialisation of individuals in modern large-scale societies.

Here, then, even this brief glance in the rear-view mirror reveals that the state has played a major role in the realm of culture through its funding measures and its rationalisation processes, as well as through a variety of formal and informal regulatory mechanisms. Despite modernity's structural separation of the economy from other social spheres and the expanding role and freedoms of the market with respect to cultural production (alongside the spatially disembedding effects of modern communication systems), the influence of state administration cannot be regarded as marginal. Rather, it has played a very significant role in the complex of factors shaping the predominantly national character of socialisation and cultural identity formation since the early modern period (e.g. via the direct provision, funding and regulation of cultural production, including education).

Cultural production and the post-industrial or information society

I have borrowed McLuhan's device of the rear-view mirror to sketch the evolution of the modern realm of culture as a structurally distinct sphere,

but one that is integrally connected to, and dependent on, the great transformations across other social and economic realms. The very genesis, character, and role of culture, no less than the expressive possibilities of cultural production, are intimately bound up with the evolution of modernity's foundational social and economic processes. The production and consumption of culture combine modernity's typical processes of disembedding, individualisation, fragmented privacy, and competitiveness, on the one hand, and the simultaneous multiplication of reconnections, increasing interdependencies, functional and affective social solidarities, and even novel modes of intertextuality (within and across media forms), on the other.

Today, the late-modern cultural production system consists of a vast social studio, comprising an increasingly technological, spatially-extended, organisational complex (predominantly market and state funded) that links together the cultural producers and their audiences, who are citizens as well as consumers. To an increasing extent, art and culture in the age of late-modernity are produced, distributed, and consumed via a complex technological, social, and economic infrastructure. It is produced by a growing number and range of actors—individual authors, artists, directors, and designers—and their gatekeepers—managers, agents, publishers, editors, distributors, censors, and (increasingly) publicists—using ever more diverse networks, such as the media of money, print and paper, electronic hardware, software, and networks and electronic pulses, etc.

This major cultural production-consumption complex is only rendered possible by modernity's deepening social divisions of labour, technological infrastructures, and other differentiation processes. These, in turn, structurally frame the lived experience and expressive opportunities, as well as the material incentives, confronting individual authors and artists and even serve to channel important aspects of their conscious and imaginative sensibilities.

The specific organisational setting for cultural production may well vary from individual desk space or workshop to high-tech studio or multinational corporation—or some combination of them, as even the creative stages of the cultural artefacts distributed by transnational multi-media conglomerates often retain an artisanal character. Certainly, this vast cultural production-consumption complex also provides scope for, indeed requires, some degree of individual imagination, creativity, and autonomous initiative, as is the case in other knowledge-intensive occupational groups. But, such artistic autonomy is always relative and the cultural worker's freedom is double sided. The production and communication of culture is generally preconfigured by the institutional structures and incentive systems and by the evolving grammars, codes, and conventions, as well as technical modes and

resources, that are socially available and shared between the creative originators, gatekeepers, intermediaries, and intended audience. For actors in the cultural realm, as elsewhere, ‘the higher levels of system differentiation bring the advantage of a higher level of freedom’, but this always goes hand in hand with ‘a new sort of compulsion imposed on actors’ arising from systemic constraints. Examples of the latter include dependency on market rationality, the discipline imposed on artists by the labour market and unemployment, bureaucratic regulation, and the contingencies imposed by economic cycles.²⁰

To speak of a large cultural production-consumption complex in this way is not only a matter of pointing to the socially structured character of such activities in late modernity: it is also to acknowledge that, in absolute and relative terms, cultural production accounts for a larger share of the social division of labour in this so-called information age compared to earlier stages of modernity. This, in turn, directly engages us with a key foundational idea underpinning the contemporary cultural turn in the social sciences and humanities fields—one that I wish to critically interrogate, as promised at the outset.

Let us start this discussion by referring to some relevant empirical measurements, even if this particular methodological recourse offends the sensibilities of so many advocates of the cultural turn. In terms of the changing industrial division of labour, the media and cultural industries (excluding education) accounted for 3.3 per cent of total employment in the USA in the year 2000, compared to 2.56 per cent in 1980. But, of course, we might expect that many creative workers and cultural specialists are self-employed or employed in non-media industries and, similarly, that not all of those employed in the media and cultural industries are engaged in cultural or creative functions. Thus, it is equally necessary to examine the changing role of cultural production in terms of the changing occupational division of labour. Here, we find that cultural occupations accounted for 2.11 per cent of the total for all occupations in 2000, again in the case of the USA, which is usually deemed the most advanced information economy.²¹

These and similar empirical findings serve to deflate some of the foundational claims of the cultural turn theorists. For one thing, they suggest that the role of cultural occupations and industries in the contemporary economy has been expanding in recent decades at a much slower rate than the advocates of the cultural turn imagine and imply. For another, they indicate that the absolute levels and rates of growth of other information-intensive occupations and industries have been much more significant. Indeed, the small expansion in the numbers of cultural specialists has been dwarfed by those occupations involved in the production of technical, managerial, bureaucratic,

and other forms of instrumental knowledge. Besides, a large portion of the most rapidly growing occupations deemed to have a bearing on contemporary cultural production are particularly tied to specific economic rationalities, such as those engaged in advertising and public relations. In addition, sociological research indicates that the organisational settings within which cultural and other knowledge production takes place have increasingly been subject to bureaucratic logics and market-based rationality in recent decades. This development applies with particular force to universities, the very location of so many advocates of the cultural turn. Yet, we may note, there is a significant silence surrounding such matters, despite all the genuflections towards reflexivity that pervade the cultural turn literature.

But such empirical evidence may not dent the post-representational teflon surrounding the postmodern theorists on their home turf, where everything is a matter of interpretation or signification. However large or small the (measured or imagined) growth of specifically cultural functions and industries, I want to argue that the contemporary world is clearly marked by the extended hegemony of a specific economic logic rather than any hint of a cultural turn. It is utter dreaming to suggest that cultural production has somehow assumed a new autonomy or hegemonic role vis-à-vis capitalist economic rationality or, indeed, that the contemporary era is marked by some fundamental shift towards a post-industrial or post-capitalist logic of development.

Far from cultural processes or institutions (or, for that matter, any other knowledge functions) asserting control over economic or bureaucratic rationality, we are confronting a mere shift in the division of labour, and such shifts have been a central feature of the self-expansive dynamic of capitalist industrialism from the outset. That much is clear from even a cursory glance at the work of the classical social theorists of modernity, including Smith, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, and even the later Polanyi. More than two centuries ago, Adam Smith suggested that in 'commercial societies to think or to reason', by which he meant the production of creative, technical, and other forms of knowledge, would become 'like every other employment, a particular business', in line with the dictates of the deepening division of labour unleashed by the market economy. Of course, as the anointed founding father of the hegemonic strand of modern economic thought and rationality, Smith was not merely engaged in descriptive analysis. He was both describing and prescribing that the function and orientation of the artist, no less than that of the intellectual, is to 'prepare for the market' his or her own particular 'species of goods', which will then be 'purchased, in the same manner as shoes or stockings'.²² Marx, Weber, and Polanyi may have pointed to many of the same developmental tendencies, including the deepening divisions of

labour, but, like many of modernity's classical artists and writers, they were much less inclined to celebrate the benefits or universalising sway of the naked cash nexus within the cultural and other realms.

Even if, as indicated above, Adam Smith could lay claim to a pioneering prognosis of the knowledge economy, US sociologist Daniel Bell is usually designated as the founding father of post-industrial or information society theory. Certainly, most of the sociological ideas underpinning contemporary postmodern and cultural turn discourses comprise unsubstantiated assertions borrowed from the portfolio of post-industrial theory. These ideas were successfully translated into the cultural studies field in the 1980s by the influential postmodernist writings of Lyotard, even if they had been almost universally rejected by the previous generation of critical social and cultural theorists, not least because of their conservative political and ideological freighting. These borrowings are not only highly selective—ironically, they also frequently and directly echo the selective borrowings to be found in the information society discourses of the high-tech industrial and policy elites. One important example is the determinist view that changes in the technological infrastructure or division of labour are inherently liberating and presumed to lead to a significant reduction in scarcity of material needs. Another is the assertion that material issues (such as those pertaining to wealth and income) and the politics of distribution are now much less salient compared to the politics of representation or, in extreme cases, compared to the 'end of politics'.²³ Besides, the obsession with individual or small group identities and culture, together with assumptions about the decline, if not death, of larger-scale social solidarities and integration mechanisms, provides some striking complementarities between the core tenets of the cultural turn and those of neo-liberalism, the now dominant political-economic theory.

A more rounded engagement with Bell's post-industrial thesis, however, would reveal that, notwithstanding its analytical flaws and conservative ideological leanings, it was certainly not singing along to the 'there is no such thing as society' hymn sheet, which has become the increasingly dominant anthem of our own times. Its core analysis, concerning post-industrial society as a just or progressive society, was not solely predicated on changes in the technological infrastructure and division of labour or the newly influential role of intellectual knowledge. Rather, it placed an equal emphasis on the growing role of the Keynesian welfare state and the concomitant decline in the sway of market relations and unregulated economic rationality. Bell's 'venture in social forecasting' was also predicated on a trend towards reducing economic inequalities within an increasingly meritocratic order. It was only in such a social and political context that Bell envisaged the new role (or new social character) of knowledge and planning as a direct counter to the economic

rationality of the market and competitive capitalism.

Of course, much has changed since Bell first advanced his thesis in the early 1970s, not least the increasing sway of economic rationality and market forces over all forms of knowledge and information production. Hence, the selective contemporary borrowings from the post-industrial society thesis, as manifest in the cultural turn literature and in elite information society discourses, are highly partial. Indeed, as socially situated cultural productions of a sort themselves, these borrowings cannot be understood as innocently accidental or neutral but are closely attuned to the political and economic currents of these new times.

Cultural turns versus economic returns

Overall, then, I suggest that the cultural turn literature provides an impoverished frame for a nuanced understanding of the key cultural, socio-economic, and political aspects of contemporary society, at least compared to that provided by classical theorists and also, in certain respects, to the original post-industrialist analysis provided by Bell.²⁴ On the one hand, the cultural turn's preoccupation with discourse and the incestuous circularity of its obsession with texts minimise direct engagement with social developments or sustained sociological argument. On the other hand, its justification for such shifts in agenda and concerns usually rests on certain foundational claims that have an essentially social or sociological tenor. But, in most cases these are merely asserted or presumed to be self-evidently true. Despite all the privileged attention the cultural turn gives to consumption over production, it remains the case that one's relationships to and differential position in the production sphere still serve as the key conduit and determinant of performance in the carnival of consumption. This aspect of the cultural turn's thesis is marked by a further failure to address the socially-determined character of basic needs or material standards of living, such as one finds in the works of the discarded classical sociological theorists of modernity. We may also note a frequent amnesia concerning the non-utilitarian character of many production and consumption processes in earlier modern, as well as pre-modern, societies. There is ample historical and anthropological evidence that indicates that the symbolic or cultural freighting of major portions of total production and consumption may be the rule rather than the exception.

Related assertions about the end of scarcity or the declining importance of the distribution of material resources ring hollow in a social world in which access to the ever increasing array of socially necessary services and functions is governed by the naked cash nexus. There is ample evidence from

empirically grounded ethnographic studies of shopping and shoppers to indicate that much of this activity is routine, mundane, and centred around boring old value-for-money considerations. Such studies suggest that the much-celebrated shift towards pleasure-seeking, playful games, and identity formation via consumption are processes largely confined to specific categories of goods and relatively privileged consumers.²⁵

The continuing importance of material matters applies also to the arena of mediated culture and systems of public communication, where, despite the peculiar patronage and far-from-neutral subsidy bestowed by advertising and despite the rhetoric concerning the boundless benefits of new technology, the pay-per-view mode increasingly dominates over public service. This has become even more the case as material inequalities have vastly widened over the past twenty years, directly in line with the born-again zeal of political elites to expand the sway of economic rationality and intellectual property rights, including those which directly impinge on the sphere of cultural production, distribution, and consumption.

As noted, the cultural turn is now manifest and expressed in a massive literature. The literature emphasising an epochal shift towards a symbolic, information, or knowledge society, centred around a new self-reflexive subjectivity and the manipulation of signs or free-floating symbols, now comprises a mini-cultural industry of its own. The sheer scale and weight of the literature within these particular fields of academic cultural production and consumption have been enormously productive, at least if judged by its own discursive and textual criteria of validity. Indeed, it has created, and continues to reproduce, its own peculiar object of study, a virtual world based on an apparently endless circularity of symbolic referents in the form of books and journal articles.

But, when judged by more modern and conventional criteria of validity, all we find is a socially situated shift in emphasis and approach within a particular academic domain of cultural production, whose content and concerns have little real bearing on the contemporary socio-economic or cultural domains it presumes to describe and understand. By such criteria, it amounts to a rather unproductive expenditure or waste of still scarce human time and energy resources, not to mention paper. It also imposes opportunity costs, including diversions from more fruitful approaches to understanding production and consumption in other, more socially important, cultural domains.

Notes

¹ Don Slater & Fran Tonkiss, *Market Society: markets and modern social theory* (Cambridge: Polity 2001), p. 175.

² P. du Gay and M. Pryke (eds.), *Cultural Economy: cultural analysis and commercial life* (London: Sage 2002), p. 3.

³ For a more detailed treatment, see P. Preston, *Reshaping Communications: Technology, Information and Social Change* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications 2001).

⁴ Schiller, cited in Nicholas Garnham, *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity: arguments about the media and social theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), p. 157.

⁵ J. Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2001).

⁶ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrer Strauss 1944).

⁷ *Ibid.* The rest of this paragraph also draws on Polanyi.

⁸ These differentiations were identified by Kant and taken up by many subsequent theorists, including the young Hegel and Weber. Habermas suggests that Hegel later revised his position on the grounds that ‘what appeared as differentiations on the discursive level’ were experienced on the horizon of ethically integrated lifeworlds as ‘just so many “diremptions” of an intuitive whole’. See J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, pp. 134–138.

⁹ M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1962).

¹⁰ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

¹¹ N. Garnham, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

¹² McLuhan, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

¹³ Oliver Goldsmith, ‘Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe’ (1759), cited in P. Preston, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

¹⁴ McLuhan, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

¹⁹ This point is convincingly emphasised by, amongst others, H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell 1974).

²⁰ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

²¹ A more detailed presentation of this empirical research can be found in P. Preston, *op. cit.*

²² Adam Smith, cited in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (London: Chatto & Windus 1958), p.35.

²³ Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

²⁴ See P. Preston, *op. cit.*

²⁵ See Daniel Miller’s work, for example.