Cultural Materialism

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My thanks go to you this evening, for awarding me the Hegel Prize for 2006. It's an honor for me to receive this prize in Germany, where throughout my career have I found attentive, intelligent readers, and a particular honor to receive this prize in Stuttgart, Hegel's native city. I should like to thank Professor Ulrich Beck for his *laudatio*; he has revealed to me themes in my own thinking which I will now to account more self-consciously.

A prize for a life-time's labor could inspire the reflection that one's work is done, but as I enter old-age I do not feel this. I've at most cast some light on the two social issues which have pre-occupied me for the last forty years; these are where people live and how people work. These subjects are not static, for both work and place are changing on a global scale; now, as I enter old age, I am trying to understand how they are connected.

The large subject which has occupied me throughout my life is how men and women might become better, more competent materialists. To my readers, this declaration might seem surprising. Though long interested in technology, I have no training as an engineer; nor am I a social scientist absorbed in the gathering and analysis of statistics. The kind of sociology I practice descends from Dilthey, and draws on the methods of modern anthropology; it focuses on the sense people make of their circumstances. Interpretation is a messy business; the narratives people provide about the work they do or the places in which they live tend to ambiguity rather than to precision -- but this is the point. The interpretations which people make of physical fact and material circumstance are usually complex and often contradictory; "culture" names just that complicated understanding at a collective level.

Perhaps I have been minded to this materialist view of culture because I came to sociology itself from another profession. As a child I began the study of music, principally the cello, and pursued this study in conservatory until a hand injury put an end to my

musical career. The working musician's art is a material practice. Concreteness rules: in preparation and in performance, expression issues from technique, art is the child of craft; interpretation centers on the actual sound one makes rather than the idea of what music might sound like.

At the end of his life, I argued this to Theodor Adorno, the musician/sociologist whose career path most resembles my own; as a composer, he disagreed. He conceived musical composition as an inner struggle; you hear that struggle in his own music, and his writings on music often stress the intentions which a composer fails to achieve; from creative struggle, Adorno believed, the sociologist could learn something about conflict itself. For musicians performing together, a different social lesson emerges. The physical act of playing together requires cooperation; deference and assertion have to be balanced among players whose parts are of unequal value.

This performing experience shaped my social beliefs. Social cohesion, like ensemble playing, should attend to the concrete facts of execution; as on stage, in ordinary life cooperation ought combine with difference. The real social world, of course, does not practice these musician virtues. More, it divides the "is" and the "ought;" failures in practice drive people inside themselves; the refuge of subjectivity sacrifices concreteness. When I entered the realm of social research, I was struck by this flight to a shapeless subjectivity -- which would be fatal in music -- in everyday life. The anthropological study of how people interpret the specific places in which they live and the particular work they do seemed, as a method, a way to cross the divide self and circumstance.

But I realized I would need to practice what I preached; I would need to learn how to write concretely and evocatively. Writing does not come easily to me, nor to most of my fellow sociologists. Most of us write in fact abysmally, so that our readers have to penetrate a fog of jargon to understand what are our real concerns. One way I've tried to solve this problem is by imagining an Ideal Reader who is entirely unlike myself, for instance a female astro-physicist: how could I write to the Ideal Reader in such a way to engage her in what I know? In the course of my life, I've also occasionally written novels as a discipline, in what makes words work well. These forays into fiction have helped me

also appreciate, as an interviewer, the difficulties my subjects find in finding precise words to describe their experience.

I would hardly claim any originality for fastening on the problem of concreteness and material practice. Aversion to materialism is deep rooted in Western civilization. The divide between the is and the ought, the phenomenal and the noumenal, can be traced to ancient philosophers like Aristotle, who scorned mere craftsmen for lacking theory. The aversion has also Christian sources, among those early Church Fathers who taught that material things could not furnish spiritual life; to them, some part of us is reserved, is absent, from all practical activity. Closer to our own time, Hegel himself has been held to account for idealism, notably by Marx; the tragic history of historical materialism has in its turn separated life on the ground, with all its confusions of need and desire, from the higher interests of the Party and the State.

The problem is how to overcome this aversion to the concrete, without succumbing to the opposite evil, a reductionism which, in the name of brute biological or economic fact, denies people any agency in making sense of themselves. Here's how I've explored how I've tried to navigate between these extremes in the course of my research.

My first studies focused literally on the ground; I became interested in people's material consciousness of cities. In the book of mine first translated for German readers, The Fall of Public Man, I explored how the conditions in the city -- the paths of streets, the shapes of buildings, the clothes people wear, their bodily gestures, their habits of speech -- could bind strangers together in a public realm, and what people learn about themselves from encounters with strangers. I might add on a personal note that when I showed the manuscript of this book to my first teacher, Hannah Arendt, she gave it back with the comment, "what a pity. This is merely a record of behavior."

I persisted in compiling that record in other books because it illuminated one difference between theory and practice. On the side of theory, in cities, lie the geographic plans and architectural designs for how a city ought to work; on the side of practice, lie behaviors which often subvert or ignore the planned idea. These behavioral violations seemed to me to constitute a domain of interpretation all their own, interpretations and

practices made by inhabitants and users about what space is for and what it means. The process of dwelling raises a fundamental issue of power; in modern European cities, ordinary people are usually denied the formal authority to design the places in which they live; "interpreting space" names a political practice of resistance.

When I began urban studies in the 1970s, American cities were riven by an obvious division; American racism had produced highly segregated cities in which blacks and whites seldom mixed to much effect in the public realm. When I moved to Britain in the 1990s, I was dismayed to see how much ethnic and religious divisions in London, and in cities on the continent, so closely mirrored the racist American divide; faith and place of birth have simply replaced skin as a source of social division.

A signal mark of segregated environments is that people know likeness and locality well, but understand difference and distance poorly; fantasy about the Other takes the place of experience. This distorts the interpretative work of making sense of where one lives and whom one lives with. We have a material consciousness of people we already know, and that consciousness can be tested and analyzed; we have an immaterial understanding of the stranger -- it is categorical and symbolic, untestable through experience; the stranger becomes a being upon whom we project our own disturbances and anxieties. It's for this reason that in urbanism I've become an advocate for the virtues of public spaces and a critic of localism, small-scale community, and Gemeinschaft. To make a complex society viable, we need less to value community less, the impersonal public realm more.

To do so requires engaging a more elusive problem, that of how people work. In the 1970s, threatened as American cities were by racial strife, their residents had a known, comprehensible, tangible, and seemingly stable structure for their working lives. This began to change with the arrival of a more global investment, new communications technologies, and new ways of structuring the bureaucracies in which people work. These changes took me, as they did most other people, by surprise; it would have been hard in 1975 to predict the troubles in 2000 of a giant corporation like General Motors; moreover, to predict the changes in cities which the great transformation of modern capitalism would

bring.

Since my craft as a sociologist is interviewing other people, I decided early in the 1990s to study the sense people have made of this great transformation, and have since spent a decade talking to people caught up in it. I was interested not in the masters of the new order, rather, in its servants -- the ordinary middle-class people who operated its technologies or staffed its services industries.

Among them, I found that the question of material culture framed in terms of time. The practical skills they require are now in a constant, rapid state of evolution; for instance, the "shelf life" of the engineering skills a young person learns today is estimated to last ten to twelve years, whereas a generation ago the shelf-life of these skills was twenty to twenty-five years. Modern capitalism cannot be separated from physical mobility -- not just the mobility of individual migrants but of whole categories of work; today in London, for example, the work of reading CAT scans and other hospital tests has been largely outsourced via computer to analysts in India. Most of all, I and my researchers have found people struggling with how, if at all, to fashion a career out of shifting, short-term labor in businesses which are themselves constantly re-structuring. Strategic thinking becomes difficult in these circumstances, and more subjectively, people struggle to imagine a life-narrative which can orient their striving.

These dislocations of time at work have affected the sense of place. Notoriously, prejudices against immigrants have strengthened as the global economy becomes more fluid, even though many immigrants to American and European cities do jobs we natives do not want. More subtly, the homogenization of global architecture has made people more nostalgic for the historic, distinctive physical past -- in the recent past perhaps less a problem for you in Germany than for us in the Anglo-Saxon world. More largely, however, the meaning of place has become that of a refuge from the dislocations of time.

Economic innovation and cultural fundamentalism combine in modern capitalism. This cursed combination is what I have sought to understand, in such books as The Corrosion of Character and Respect in an Age of Inequality, as workers in the new economy have expressed it to me: American engineers who seek the consolations of

religion without believing in the Bible; British nurses who idealize the villages they fled at the first opportunity; second-generation Islamic immigrants to London who idealize the life of their grandparents without any intention of returning home. For all of them, there is a divide between the "ought" of culture and the actualities of society.

In sum, my research has sought to show the substance of which culture is made, and the aversion to this material substance which modern society now distinctively inspires. The need to become good interpreters of material reality is certainly evident to you in the environmental catastrophe we are now facing, for this crisis of our own making. But that need appears equally in our experiences of labor and of place. I would emphasize to you the possibilities as well as the difficulties of interpreting fact and circumstance. I believe people can be competent interpreters; I learned this as an artist, I continue to believe it as a sociologist.

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