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## The End of Culture? – Culturalism and Cultural Geography in the Anglo-American “University of Excellence”

There is something deeply ironic in the timing of the “cultural turn” in Anglo-American geography. Long a backwater of anglophonic geography, cultural geography now has a certain caché, a certain trendiness. Cultural questions are now driving research in economic, political, urban, developmental, and even environmental geographies. And cultural geography itself has been wrenched, sometimes kicking and screaming (e.g. Price and Lewis 1993; Foote et al 1994), into the contemporary world, forced to examine its own notions of culture, at long last made to abandon its faith in the superorganic (Rowntree et al 1989), and finally to begin to try to take culture seriously. Two decades ago no one wanted to be a cultural geographer (except those fascinated by those little markers of “Americana” (the gas station) or “England” (the names of pubs), “South Dakota” (the Mitchell Corn Palace) or “Wessex” (Thomas Hardy’s literary geography). Now everyone wants to be a cultural geographer. Cultural geographers get to study music; sex; cultural identity; the mall; tourist attractions; literature; shopping (or rather “consumption”); race, gender and ethnicity (that is, anything but class); spectacle; representation; tropes of mobility; theme restaurants and theme parks; protest and social movements; “nature”; and anything putatively postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, or postpolitical. Not only is cultural geography fun, but doing it makes its practitioners look like they are doing something important, something relevant to the world we live in, for the world we live in seems to be fully, inescapably, irrevocably “cultural”. It is no exaggeration now to say that “culture is everything” – and geographers have been at the forefront of saying just that, as I hope to suggest in this essay (see also Mitchell 1995). Indeed, by finding culture in everything, I will argue that geographers both draw on and reinforce a form of culturalism that is in fact helpful to, rather than a hindrance of, the project of global capitalist expansion (see also Joseph 1998; Forthcoming).

Hence the irony of timing. This “cultural turn”, this explosion of research on the cultural aspects of everything, comes at a historical juncture when, in fact, the *economic* (or really the political-economic) is inserting itself into every pore of social and private

life: music, sex, identity, the mall (obviously), tourist attractions, literature and the rest are more and more determined through the calculus of the market. Little in the world is free from the corrosive effects of commodity capitalism, corrosive effects that work in towards the body (and now even DNA) and out to the scale of globally-organized production, consumption and capital flows. Indeed, the expansive and invasive effects of capitalist commodity production have been so severe – and so remarkable – since at least the recession-induced global restructurings of the early 1970s that it is not uncommon to hear talk of the end (or at least the hollowing out) of the “nation-state”. No longer is the nation-state seen as the repository of politics, the economy, social life, and especially, “culture”.

### **”Post-Culture”**

For example, in his insightful and compelling account of the transformation of the mission of the University in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bill Readings (1996) argues that the nation-state is no longer viable as a political-cultural entity (a fact which has had profound implications for the structure and purpose of the University). The historical rise of the nation-state during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (and its “diffusion” in the 20<sup>th</sup>) created a political “container” not only for national economies, but also national *cultures*. It was the locus of the “imagined community” (as Anderson 1991 so insightfully named it) that wedded people to an idea, or image, of commonality. The current “transcendence” of the nation-state, for Readings, implies an end to (national) “culture”, the destruction of the idea or image, and its replacement with a hollowed out reverence for the empty abstraction of “excellence”, which is the language of leveling and cynical capitalist markets that are perfectly happy to exchange qualities (e.g. “excellence”) as if they were quantities (this product is more excellent than that).

One does not have to accept Readings argument that the nation-state has been transcended (indeed, its very transcendence has been orchestrated by the state itself; the nation-state remains a crucial scale of social, political, legal, and economic organization), to see that he is on to something: We may be witnessing not the end of the nation-state, but the “end of culture”. Readings (1996) argument goes something like this: “national culture” is a historically-specific, socially-produced entity. The development of a national cultural identity is a key project of the modern nation-state. Specific institutions have been crucial in producing national culture, chief among them the university. For Readings (1996), the modern university begins as the Kantian “University of Reason” which was “founded on the autonomy of reason gained by self-criticism” (p. 57), and which served the state by limiting the state’s power through the “unlimited right of reason to intervene” (p. 58) in social affairs. The Kantian university, however, enshrined an express contradiction. As an *institution* it was necessarily governed by *unreason* – by power.

Out of this contradiction a new university arose in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and became enshrined both there and, especially, in the United States as part of the process of nation-state consolidation. Readings calls this new university the Humboldtian “University of Culture”. As the nation-state became the predominant scale at which the (rapidly globalizing) political economy was regulated,<sup>1</sup> the university served to inculcate an *identity* appropriate to that scale – a national identity. As Readings (1996, 64) argues, in that context culture “has a double articulation”. It “names an *identity*” and it “names a *process of development*, the cultivation of character” (see Williams 1976; Eagleton 2000). The dual role of the University of Culture – research and teaching – aligned with these two aspects of culture. Through research and teaching the University of Culture took on the role of naming, defining, and inculcating “culture” – both among students and for the population at large.

That is to say, the modern University of Culture was one of the key institutions that *produced* culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Culture was something developed, something made, something cultivated. The production of culture in these terms, however, has now been superseded. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Readings (1996, 44) argues, the world is less defined by “states striving with each other to best exemplify capitalism” (in their very national cultures) and more by the fact that capitalism has “swallow[ed] up the *idea* of the nation-state” (emphasis added). Obviously the *fact* of the nation-state remains, and it is clear that still capitalism relies on nation-states to advance its expansionary agenda. What Readings is indicating is that the nation-state as both the predominant scale of political economic organization and as the primary locus of identity cultivation is in a process of radical transformation (and transcendence). The defining institutions – both economically and in terms of the production of cultural identity – are more and more trans- and multi-national corporations and the local, regional, national, and global scale bureaucratic institutions that serve them (some of which may in fact still be nation-state institutions).

Under these conditions the “University of Culture” loses its *raison d’etre*, and, it can be argued, we have reached the “end of culture” as an organizing principle of social reproduction. In the place of the University of Culture, which served the nation-state, Readings (1996, Chapter 2) argues a new university is in the making. He calls this the “University of Excellence”. He takes the name from the fatuous and self-serving ideology that contemporary American universities are spinning for themselves that their primary mission is the production of “excellence”. As Readings trenchantly argues, “excellence” is a completely empty signifier, but one that allows the university to evolve from serving the nation-state as a producer and cultivator of “culture” (“the ideological arm of the nation-state”) to a “bureaucratic corporation” that serves “the market” (p. 21). As a completely empty abstraction, “excellence” becomes a term of accounting that “refers to nothing other than the optimal input/output ratio in matters of information” (p. 39). The university now needs to be understood “as a *bureaucratic system* rather than as [an] ideological apparatus” (p. 41).<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, Readings labels the post-Humboldtian “University of Excellence” “post-ideological”. In one sense he is correct (it doesn’t matter whether one at the university researches great literature, DNA, sex toys, or the repressive practices of capitalist corporations, just so long as one does it “excellently”), but in another, crucial sense, the university remains deeply ideological. The difference is that it no longer directly serves the state, but instead serves “the market”. Its job is to inculcate the market ethos, to show just how “there is no alternative” to this best-of-all-possible worlds: globalized liberal capitalism (a globalized liberalism that even tolerates professors who research its own rapacious practices!). Hence, what matters is not whether one studies great literature, DNA, sex toys, or the evils of capitalism, but whether those studies *sell* (to students taking courses, to corporations seeking patents, to publishing conglomerates seeking content, or to social movements seeking guidance). Excellence is that which sells. The university as a bureaucracy exists as an institution to regulate this selling by finding means to produce and account for excellence.

Readings’s telling of the transformation of the university rings true to those of us who work in it. But his analysis has wider salience. It is of a piece, for example, with David Harvey’s broader dissection of *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) a decade ago. As Harvey shows, the restructuring of the global economy in the wake of the oil crisis and recessions of the 1970s instantiated a new “time-space” of social life (including the partial transcendence of the nation-state that Readings describes), and has brought with it, through the rise of “postmodern culture”, the ever deeper penetration of commodity relations – the market – into everyday life. Together, this time-space and this capitalist penetration have reconfigured social life around the globe and radically transformed the roles of key nation-state level institutions from ones that regulate the economy in the interests of the nation-state to ones that *serve* the economy and its local and global markets.

Similarly, Terry Eagleton’s brilliant new study of *The Idea of Culture* (2000) shows how the distinction between high and low (or popular) culture so crucial to the development of national cultures in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (and important even to such cultural relativists as Herder) has been leveled by the contemporary, global market, so that now both Von Williams *and* the Spice Girls can be “excellent” representations of “England”, at least to the degree that they are profitable, both within England and beyond. The argument that Readings makes about the university can be extended to other institutions that produce culture (television and radio, national publishing houses, state opera, schools) and to other markers of identity (national and regional cuisine, folk music, architectural styles). The “great leveler and cynic” that is the capitalist market, as it expands both geographically and into new realms of social life, radically transforms the very ways we can know life and the very means through which identity is produced. New, abstract, universal measures of quality (“excellence”) come to stand in for the peculiar, particular, historically built-up markers of “culture”, as it is traditionally understood. In

this sense we have entered what Joel Kahn (1995) calls a period of “postculture” – a period when market logic is not just the predominant, but quite nearly the only, determinant of taste.

## Cultural Studies, Geography, and Culturalism

Yet my reason for exploring Readings argument here is to raise a slightly different point, one that helps us understand just why anglophonic geography has turned so sharply towards “culture”, right at that moment when “culture” seems to be at an end (and to turn away from economics right at the moment of the capitalist economy’s “triumph”). In positive terms, geographers have understood that “culture” – its ontological meaning, the ways it is produced and lived, its role in adjudicating power, its relationship to the state and the market – is, in both theoretical and empirical terms, very much up for grabs. If we really live in a “postcultural” world, then, ironically, its cultural dimensions are not well understood – by geographers or by others who traditionally (anthropologists) or recently (Cultural Studies practitioners) lay claim to it. This is important, because the “end of culture” does not by any stretch of the imagination mean the end of identity, or (contra Readings in one of his key arguments) the end of ideology (and culture’s role in ideology). Certainly it does not mean the end of cultural *power* – the power to define and determine “ways of life”, “structures of feeling”, or “spheres of meaning” (to use several common definitions of culture). There is an important need, that is to say, for the study of how, after the “end of culture”, culture remains important nonetheless – perhaps even more important, since so much commodity production is now “cultural”, and since meaning itself is more and more patented and copyrighted, that is turned into property, into an alienable commodity.

More negatively, the study of culture in the “University of Excellence” has become a preeminent site for the production of “excellence” itself. This is so because, as Readings (1996, 99) argues, the rise of Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary force has been made possible by the very “dereferentialization” of “culture”. “Culture” has become “the object of the University’s desire for knowledge, rather than [an] object that the University produces.” With Cultural Studies as its storefront, in other words, the bureaucratic university now markets culture as an already-formed, pre-digested commodity to be consumed by students purchasing an education, by book-readers purchasing knowledge, and, often, by corporations seeking their own marketing advantages by discovering just how to fashion certain identities, certain niche markets. “Culture” is thus something like bottled water: the ultimate commodity, in that it takes that which is ubiquitous – “meaning” or water – packages it, and sells it as something special. This is the case, Readings (1996, 99) argues, because “culture ceases to mean anything *as such*” and under such conditions “culture finally becomes an object of study in direct

proportion to the abandonment of the attempt to provide a determining explanation of culture.”

This is the crucial point. The rise of Cultural Studies, and with it the cultural turn in geography, has abandoned the goal of *explaining* culture and has turned instead to its *exemplification*,<sup>3</sup> all the better to put this or that excellent ware (a queer reading of Madonna, a Gramscian analysis of the L.A. riots) on display, available for purchase “off the rack”. More pointedly, and as I have argued elsewhere (Mitchell 1995), the emptying out of the abstraction of culture – the very fact that it *means* nothing – allows for an imperialism of culture: a world in which culture is everything (because it is nothing). In part this is inevitable, as the dereferentialization of culture has meant that it can now only be defined circularly: “Cultural forms of signifying practice proceed from culture, and culture is an ensemble of signifying practices” (Readings 1996, 99). Under such a definition, attention is turned from social explanation to the uncovering of and packaging of *meaning*, even though culture means nothing (because it is everything). This retreat from explanation, of course, is not confined to cultural geography, but is endemic in the whole of contemporary geography (and other social studies and humanities) in the wake of the “crisis of representation” exemplified by the collapse of the “University of Culture” and its replacement by the overwhelming, if still often inchoate ethos of the market.<sup>4</sup>

For Cultural Studies, the abandonment of explanation has been nothing short of liberating. It has allowed Cultural Studies to *become* the whole of the humanities, to become a new institutional site for the production and consumption of knowledge. Even more, Cultural Studies, as the institutional site of the “cultural turn” in the humanities and social sciences, has affected a profound change in what constitutes an appropriate object of study. As Frederick Jameson (1984, 87) noticed more than 15 years ago, intellectual workers have created, under the brand of postmodernism, “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point where everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become ‘cultural’ in some original and as yet untheorized sense.” What is remarkable is that, for the most part, the “cultural” *remains* untheorized these many years later.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, since all is cultural, the cultural need not be theorized. In the place of cultural theory, then, Cultural Studies has helped institute a hegemony of “reading”. Anglo-American Cultural Studies, perhaps because of its roots in English and Literary Studies, assumes that all social life – or for it, all “culture” – is a text to be read, deciphered, or decoded (in geography see Barnes and Duncan 1992; Duncan and Ley 1993). Nothing, therefore, remains outside the purview of Cultural Studies: money can be “read”, for its cultural salience, just as easily as can George W. Bush’s pronouncements on the success of the death penalty in Texas; the policies of the International Monetary Fund, no less than the waist measurement of the Barbie Doll, is fair game for hermeneutic analysis (never mind that the IMF policies often reduce the waists of poor people in the developing world to about the same size as Barbie’s, and not because those policies are

*texts* – that is about the *least* important thing about them). Liberation from the need to *explain* (a form of work which is designed to produce often specific social actions) means that Cultural Studies is free to *interpret* (a form of work that requires no further action at all) – and to interpret everything. To the degree that Anglo-American cultural geography (or geography as a whole) is following down the path paved by Cultural Studies, it gives up all pretence towards developing a *critical* theory of social life, even if it retains a critical *appearance*, an appearance, it should be said, that, in fact, is quite attractive to university administrators who need to be able to show that their employees are doing important – and therefore excellent – work. A critical stance sells (just so long as it remains only a stance).

The abandonment of explanation has thus been bought at a severe cost.<sup>6</sup> But the political cost associated with the loss of a critical edge (and thus the inability to produce a truly oppositional science and to resist, as much as possible, cooptation by the “University of Excellence” and those it serves), is also accompanied by a quite severe theoretical cost. That cost is best described as a remarkable resurgence of *culturalism* in cultural theory, right at the moment when it is least needed. By “culturalism”, I mean the reliance on “culture” to explain culture (or cultural forms). The old style of culturalist argument is familiar: “Barns in this part of Pennsylvania look like they do because the area’s settlers were German.” Geographers such as James Duncan (1980), following the anthropologists and others, worked hard during the 1980s to finally lay to rest the spectre of this sort of “superorganicism” in geography – a superorganicism in which the very “culture” of a people determines their every practice (like the way they build barns) as both fallacious and circular in its reasoning. Such superorganic theories of culture were shown by Duncan (1980) to rely on a high degree of reification. Duncan (1980) argued that cultural geographers were in the habit of assigning to the “phantom” of social relations the status of a “being” (e.g. “German culture”) with intentionality and a will of its own. What Duncan was describing could be called a strong form of culturalism, in which, in a unidirectional manner, culture *determines* – it “goes all the way down” and “seems to play the same role as nature [for environmental determinists] and feels just as natural to us” (Eagleton 2000, 94). As Eagleton (2000, 95) remarks, “to claim that we are entirely cultural creatures absolutizes culture with one hand while relativizing the world with the other... If culture really is wall-to-wall, constitutive of my very selfhood, then it is hard for me to imagine not being the cultural being that I am, which is just what the knowledge of the relativity of my culture invites me to do.” Culturalism, in other words, is founded on a severe contradiction.

In his argument against superorganic theories of culture, Duncan (1980) warned geographers against this contradiction – he called it a fallacy – while at the same time showing just what a reliance on culture as the determinant of social life hides from view (e.g. contentious social relations *within* as well as *between* different cultural groupings). Duncan suggested geographers engage in two projects in the wake of his critique. The first

was to focus on individuals and social relations. The second was to begin the hard work of theorizing the “inner workings of culture”.<sup>7</sup> The rise of “New Cultural Geography” in the 1980s and 1990s began this second project. Deeply influenced by British Cultural Studies, Peter Jackson (1989) published an important “agenda for cultural geography” that sought to establish a new way of looking at the geography of culture. For Jackson, “culture” was a “sphere or realm” of meaning in which different social groups made sense of – e.g. read and interpreted – the raw materials of social life and thereby transformed them into something useful. Culture was also an arena of conflict, a site for the working out of difference. For Duncan (1990), drawing on literary theory, culture was theorized as a “system of signification”, a text to be decoded by people as they engaged in everyday life. There were clear differences between Jackson and Duncan’s positions, but there were common points too, the most important being the focus on interpretation and meaning as primary cultural social practices.

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Jackson and Duncan (along with several others) helped launch a revolution in cultural geography, and by extension throughout geography as a whole. The transformation of “culture” from a superorganic, mysterious thing serving as the prison-house of social life, to culture as a sphere of meaning, an arena of politics, or a set of social products, actually produced and reproduced by living people, enables large areas of social life to be opened up to cultural geographical exploration: styles of consumption, subcultural social practices, musical forms, and the fashioning and refashioning of identity, to name just a few. Culture has been wrenched from its backwater position in geography (where it was possible to say “German culture in Pennsylvania builds barns that look like this”) and became a fierce area of debate and research (in which it was possible to say, “by situating themselves differently in space, gays have carved out new forms of identity based on both transformative sexual practices and struggles for social recognition”). Work on culture – and work specifically calling itself cultural geography – has exploded in the past two decades. Even in the context of a 300 page book (Mitchell 2000), I found it possible to survey and summarize only the smallest fraction of what has been produced.

But what is curious is that the goal Duncan (1980) set for cultural geography has, in fact, been abandoned. While there is much work in geography that goes under the label “cultural theory”, there is precious little interest in understanding and theorizing “the inner workings of culture”. The result is a resurgence of culturalism in cultural geography, a culturalism that once again uses untheorized “culture” to explain culture – though now perhaps in a weaker form than that enshrined in superorganicism. If geographers are too sophisticated now to see culture as superorganic, they nonetheless work from a position that understands that culture *determines*, though not necessarily in a simple or direct way. Arguments about determination are complex (Thrift 1996). Geographers, like many others in the social sciences and humanities, start their work from the (quite laudable) position that the world we are part of is *socially constructed*.<sup>8</sup> The “social”, in turn, is itself

*discursively constructed*. And finally, “discourse” both defines and is defined by the sets of socially-constructed, positions, identities, and categories and structures that people occupy and reproduce. So we come full circle, but the center of that circle, the point that determines, is “discourse” – that is the production of meaning, the way we think and talk and give expression to the worlds we of which we are a part, in short “culture” (as a system of signification or a sphere of meaning). We make the worlds of which we are part. And there is no doubt that the worlds we make are to some large degree the result of how we understand – or give meaning – to the world. But geographers take this a step further. The way we ascribe meaning becomes a – and often *the* – means by which the world is “constituted”, even if that constitution is then mediated by all manner of social practices.

To take a fairly banal example of meaning ascription and the attempt to redefine discourse so that the world itself becomes something new – but an example which I think is quite symptomatic, especially since it comes from one of the very best English-speaking radical geographers – listen to Doreen Massey (1999, 279-280) as she discusses how best to theorize “spaces of politics” after the cultural turn: “I want to imagine space as a product of interrelations ... I want to imagine space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity ... I want to imagine space as disrupted and as a source of disruption ...” Or several pages later (p. 288): “we only get to thinking space as a multiplicity if we imagine it interrelationally ... Thinking space in terms of interrelations, and imagining places/regions as interlockings of those interrelations, clearly reflect a shift of a similar kind to that involved in conceptualizing difference/identity as constituted not through the closure of counterpositional boundedness, but through an understanding of the links and relations by which ‘entities’ more generally are constructed.” Massey is arguing for a dialectical understanding of space and identity (one that is similar to, but more limited than, that developed by Ollman (1990)). But the important point in these passages is the degree to which simply *thinking* calls something into being – *constitutes* it: “thinking space” becomes the means of *producing space*. Besides being remarkably idealist in form if not in intent, Massey here clearly expresses a form of culturalism, one that argues that “entities” while constituted relationally, are more importantly constituted *through meaning*: space exists (as an entity) to the degree that we “think” it. What is remarkable is the degree to which an *empirical* question is transformed into a philosophical one: space either *is* or *is not* a “product of interrelations”, and if it is, the job of the researcher is to determine the precise nature of those relationships, how they work, and to whose benefit – all questions that are foreclosed by a priori “thinking” space into existence *as* “interrelations” in the first place. Now not just the “inner workings” of culture are placed off limits, but so too the inner workings of space itself.

“Culturalism”, as Eagleton (2000, 91) suggests, can be defined as “the doctrine that everything in human affairs is a matter of culture” (since nothing exists outside of cultural meaning). Culturalism is thus the elevation of “thought” (and meaning) to the status of practice. The social constitution of social life is reduced to the play of meaning and the

free range of “thought”. The “inner workings of culture”, and even more importantly the work that the *idea* of culture does in society (as it is operationalized by particular social actors with access to specific means of power and control) (Mitchell 1995, 2000; Eagleton 2000), is ignored. The role of ideas about and productions of “culture” in not only demarcating difference, but even more of controlling it, drops from sight while yet another interpretation, yet another reading, yet another “rethinking” is undertaken.

### **Taking Culture Seriously in the Post-Cultural World**

This is all to the favor of the University of Excellence, which would rather not know what culture *is*, anyway (for culture is surely a product of violence and oppression as much as it is a product of “the best that has been thought and known”), since acknowledging what culture really *is* would expose the University’s complicity in constructing and marketing that “culture” around the world – an acknowledgement that would lay bare the violent core at the heart of both culture and excellence.

Yet describing and explaining what culture *is*, that is, turning away from culturalism and towards unraveling the inner workings of culture, is exactly what is desperately needed at this juncture. The place to begin such a description and explanation is not with “thinking culture anew” but with a close examination of the workings of power, the forces at work producing “culture”, and groups and classes that stand to benefit from that production. We can take as a rough starting point the argument that the term “culture” designates three primary (and interrelated) things:<sup>9</sup> a total way of life of a people (the anthropological definition); a sphere or system of meaning through which people make sense of that way of life and give value to it (a literary or rhetorical definition); and the set of artistic productions through which that way of life is given form and expression (music, literature, etc.). These definitions in turn lead to specific questions: If culture is the way of life of a people, then just what *constitutes* that way of life, who produces it (and who controls the means of production), how is it structured and to whose benefit? If culture is the sphere of meaning or signification, who controls the means of communication and to what ends, how are some forms of meaning socially selected over others, what forces structure and channel communication in this direction and not that? And if culture is a set of artistic forms, under what conditions are these forms produced (or not produced), how do they circulate, who has access to them? Each of these questions are specific questions about the material construction of society. If culture (and not just superorganic notions of culture) is a *reification* then the question cultural geographers must always ask if they want to avoid the trap of culturalism is: *who reifies?* To what end, to whose benefit, and by what means?

In the contemporary world these are *necessarily* (though perhaps not yet exclusively) questions about the capitalist production of commodities, for it is indisputable that the hegemonic means of production of the things that make a way of life, the ways we are able to communicate, and the forms that artistic productions can take, is capitalism: capitalism

provides the conditions, the social structure, through which life is lived. As Guy Debord (1994 [1967], 29) argued (only somewhat hyperbolically) more than thirty years ago, we live in a world in which the commodity has colonized all of social life, and as such “commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.” As social life – everything from child care to entertainment to the ability to construct discourses – is commodified and caught up in circuits of capital, a focus on the means, forms, and politics of, and resistance to, commodity production must sit at the center of any cultural analysis. In turn this requires that we understand culture – though perhaps beautiful and of great value – as also and necessarily a system of exploitation. Culture is an industry.

“Culturalism” in geography needs to be replaced by a fuller, richer dialectical argument about “culture” as a social product and a social practice, one that is fully implicated in systems of domination, oppression, and exploitation. As Eagleton (2000, 23) argues, “dialectical thought arises because it is less and less possible to ignore the fact that civilization, in the very act of realizing some human potentials, also damagingly suppresses others.” Clive Barnett (1998) is surely right, then, that we need to turn our attention to the institutional analysis of culture as a means of asking how, by whom, and for what purposes it is produced – and to what effects both at the site of production and elsewhere. While the cultural turn in Anglo-American geography may have been salutary in that it has opened up huge new (and important) realms of social life to geographical scrutiny and analysis, it has been damaging to the degree that it fits the model of the pursuit of excellence that the University of Excellence requires, neatly packaging and marketing “identity” or other goods without questioning the very means of production – and hence exploitation – with which we are complicit.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

There is another reason to turn our focus from meaning to the means of production (and their geographies). Our students are already there. For the final irony about the timing of the rise of the cultural turn in geography and the social sciences is that just as we have turned our attention to how best to package and sell identity and discourse, our students have taken to campus quads and city streets (as in Seattle and Washington DC) precisely to draw attention to the exploitative dynamics of (global) commodity production which are now so determinant in every aspect of our lives. Explicit in these protests is a strong critique of the alienation that is endemic to the capitalist fashioning of the world.<sup>11</sup> In other words, our students know – they feel it because they live it – that the way *their* culture is being produced and sold to them is deeply alienating and often enervating, and it will only be by clearly understanding and contesting the dynamics of commodity production that new forms of life, new cultural worlds, can be constructed. Our students know that the market determines – after all they are one of the markets for all the

“excellent” research and teaching we do – and they know that while there may be a lot to celebrate in the explosion of the cultural at the “end of culture”, there is a lot to contest too. The least we can do, as scholars seeking to carve out a workable world in the University of Excellence, is to meet our students where they already are – or so desperately want to be. Along the way perhaps we can help truly put an “end to culture” – at least as it is currently constituted.

## Notes

- 1 For a brief but compelling argument about this see the “Afterword” in Smith (1990).
- 2 It should be noted that “excellence” is not entirely antithetical to (nationalist) “culture.” Indeed, it often draws on it, organizes it, and produces it, both playing into and promoting nationalism among students and the population at large. Instead nationalism becomes one among many, rather than the primary, discourse packaged by the university. Or even more trenchantly, nationalism is often the raw material of “excellence” in that market discourses, including neo-liberalism, often draw on nationalist stereotypes – American ingenuity and entrepreneurialism, Asian Confucianism and cronyism, German discipline and precision – in order to explain competitive advantages and distinctions between still-existing national and regional economies. I am indebted to John Seagroves for this point.
- 3 The trend is perhaps best exemplified in the introductory chapter of the now classic conference collection, *Cultural Studies* (Nelson, et al 1992). In Anglophonic geography, one can turn to the various “progress reports” over the last decade in *Progress in Human Geography*, to textbooks like Crang’s *Cultural Geography* (1999), or to recent collections like Massey et al’s *Human Geography Today*, which takes the “cultural turn” in geography as crucial but which does not adequately theorize it.
- 4 It is no accident, but it is deeply ironic, that just as the logic of the market digs into even the most impenetrable reaches of “culture,” just as more and more of social life is not just determined, but actively disciplined by market forces, geographers and others are warned away from “functionalist” arguments. Beginning perhaps with Giddens’ (1981) development of structuration theory (which he advertized as both non- and anti-functional), fully developed in Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* (1987) and continuing through Gibson-Graham’s (1996) *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, social scientists have been admonished that the *appearance* of systematic order and logic is only that, an *appearance*, and to assume that it has ontological status is an error of the first order – all of which is music to the ears of those who benefit from the *systematic* exploitation of the majority of the world’s population.
- 5 Terry Eagleton’s (2000) new “manifesto” on culture is an important recent exception.
- 6 The pun is fully intended.

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- 7 In a survey of cultural geography published at the beginning of the 1960s and summarizing the impressive work of the so-called Berkeley School gathered around Carl Sauer, Wagner and Mikesell (1962) had asserted that geographers showed little interest in understanding the “inner workings of culture.” Duncan argued that they needed to.
  - 8 The problem with this position is that it often ignores the materiality of the physical world. The advantage is it turns our attention to how that materiality is put to use in human affairs.
  - 9 “Culture” is, of course, an amazingly complex term. Williams’s (1977) excavation of its etymology is invaluable for understanding both its nuances and its social history (see also Williams 1958). Eagleton’s (2000) essay builds on Williams in a number of insightful ways and shows how “culture” remains an important contested terrain in both academic discourse and wider politics. I have explored the relevance of “culture” to geography in an essay (Mitchell 1995) and a book (Mitchell 2000), in both of which, I provide a fuller and more nuanced reading of the meanings of culture than I can here.
  - 10 This is my complaint about Massey’s (1999) essay about “rethinking space:” while she makes much of how space and identity are *relational*, she gives exceptionally short-shrift to how those relations are *produced*, and to whose benefit. Relationality is taken as given rather than understood as itself socially produced in particular ways and to particular ends (even if those ends may be frequently contested or thwarted). Hence, the charge of “culturalism” in this case.
  - 11 This is refreshing. It has brought with it a renewed and keen interest among students in the tradition of Marxist cultural theory (from Lukács to Debord, Williams to Harvey, Adorno to Marcuse, and Benjamin back to *The German Ideology*), and a search therein for means of understanding processes of alienation and their relationship to exploitation and oppression. It has also begun to spark a renewed interest in questions of political economy.

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