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EXERCISING THE GHOSTS OF LOCALITY: A FEW NOTES

1.

Recent times have seen a marked development in terms of the abundance of theorising about the social construction of space and the emphasis placed on spatial differentiation – what has been described as a geographical turn against practices of teleological historicising. Within that turn, however, it has been possible to observe a considerable degree of division between writers working primarily in the context of French post-structuralist thought and those more influenced by aspects of Western European Marxism, notably the work of Gramsci and writers associated with the Frankfurt School. In recent years, though, it might be claimed that there has been an increasing tendency to reconcile these apparently divided modes of thinking or at least to bring them into a milieu of thought which allows a more productive dialogue between them.

Perhaps one of the most obvious immediate legacies of post-structuralist thinking has been its apparent success in thoroughly challenging what it seeks to expose as the dangerously totalising characteristics of the discourses of what has come to be known as modernity. Thus, to return to the notion of a turn from teleologising histories to differentiating geographies, Deleuze and Guattari can claim that

Geography wrests history from the cult of necessity in order to stress the irreducibility of contingency (Deleuze 1994:96).

It is, however, precisely from a geographer that the most notorious objection to the fragmenting excesses of post-structuralist thinking has come. In **The Condition of Postmodernity**, David Harvey writes of what he terms 'postmodern philosophers', that

Obsessed with deconstructing and delegitimizing every form of argument they encounter they can end only in condemning their own valid-

ity claims to the point where nothing remains of any basis for reasoned action. Postmodernism has us accepting the reifications and partitionings, actually celebrating the activity of masking and cover up, all the fetishisms of locality, place or social grouping, while denying that kind of meta-theory which can grasp the political-economic processes (money flows, international divisions of labour, financial markets and the like) that are becoming ever more universalizing in their depth, intensity, reach and power over daily life. (Harvey 1989:116–17).

In a recent publication, entitled **Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis**, Arran E. Gare, the Australian cultural philosopher provides an attempt to reconcile and transcend such divisions as those between Harvey and post-modern philosophy as he characterises it in the passage I've just quoted. He does this by stressing the positive achievements of both of what he sees as the Hegelian and Nietzschean strands of a Vicovian tradition of thought which has provided an alternative to the destructive quest for certainty and technological mastery of the world that has been one legacy of Cartesian thinking. At the same time, like Harvey, he condemns what he sees as a dangerous tendency to a nihilistic failure of resistance to developments in global capitalism in aspects of post-structuralist thinking. His main allies are significant aspects of Heidegger's thinking, particularly in relation to the environment, but more specifically and wholeheartedly, developments in the philosophy of process initiated by Bergson and taken much further, if often in rather dauntingly complex and obscure forms, by Whitehead in the early part of the century.

In the concluding stages of his book Gare emphasizes the need for a new, postmodern metaphysics and a new, postmodern form of nationalism in order to combat the depredations of global capitalism and the significant failure, in certain respects, of post-structuralist thinking to combat such tendencies. He first outlines what he considers to be particularly important aspects of Whitehead's thinking which have subsequently been productively developed by philosopher-scientists such as Ivor Leclerc, David Bohm or Ilya Prigogine. He then summarises the potentially helpful nature of such thinking by way of a musical metaphor

Once the world is conceived of as a creative process of becoming, the notion that the meaning of anything is given by the end which it helps to realize ... can be abandoned. Each individual process or sub-process within the universe is like a melody singing itself within a symphony. While it must be evaluated in terms of its contribution to the whole symphony (which in the case of the cosmos is never complete), a symphony cannot be evaluated in terms of its final outcome, its end. The whole duration of a symphony matters, and each melody within the symphony, each note within the melody are significant in themselves as parts of this duration. (Gare 1996:142)

This sense of related particularity is then extended to the sphere of regional and world politics.

By providing a way of thinking about one's place in the world which neither atomizes the world nor dissolves each part into the totality, the new cosmology makes it possible to formulate a multi-levelled nationalism, to acknowledge the significance and partial autonomy of the community of one's local region while seeing this as participating in a broader regional community with some partial autonomy (such as South America or Western Europe) which again is participating in a world community which is more than the sum of all the particular communities which compose it. Individuals can then be simultaneously nationalistic in relation to their local region, to their country and to a major region of the world, while at the same time being committed to international justice and to the subordination of national interests to the interests of humanity and to non-human life where appropriate. The question then is one of justice, of appropriately acknowledging the uniqueness and significance of each level of communities of which people are a part. (Gare 1996: 153).

Gare's vision of interlocking, though partially independent regions may sound somewhat headily harmonious but is clearly only a skeleton framework which needs some fleshing out with the almost inevitable complications that such fleshing is heir to. The kinds of complication I have in mind concern the relationship between dominant social constructions of space and the nature of particular, local interests. Harvey and others have laid great weight on the work of Henri Lefebvre in this respect, particularly his tripartite distinction between spatial practices (experience), representations of space (perception) and spaces of representation (imagination). At a more practical, local, empirical level, Doreen Massey, has done much to indicate the significance of the complex and shifting nature of uneven development and spatial differentiation in Britain's socio-economic geography during the last thirty years. Her work has paid increasing attention, sometimes in a critical fashion, to the related notions of articulation and dislocation in the political philosophy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Again, like both Gare, and Massey in her later work, Laclau and Mouffe subscribe to the emancipatory heuristic of Marxist thinking while including significant aspects of post-structuralist approaches in order to reject the deterministic universalism of hitherto dominant trends in Marxist thinking. None of this work has much to say about either culture or aesthetics. Gare makes a brief but, I think, relevant reference to Jim Collins' **Uncommon Cultures** (Collins 1989), a useful attempt to come to terms with and positively evaluate the disparate nature of contemporary cultural production. A similarly sympathetic approach, from a sociological but considerably socio-anthropological perspective in Michel Maffesoli's recently translated **The Time of the Tribes**. For the moment, though, I want to look here at a sociological

approach to cultural production and consumption which seems to be helpfully relatable to the broader tendencies I've identified in the writers hitherto mentioned.

2.

Scott Lash and John Urry in their collaborative work, notably **The End of Organised Capitalism** and, more recently, **Economies of Signs and Space**, have provided one of the most comprehensive and detailed alternatives to David Harvey's approach to the relationship between relations of production and cultural economies in post-industrial societies. Lash and Urry have tended to lend a more optimistic emphasis than Harvey to the possibilities for opposition inherent in the disintegrative tendencies of what they, in their earlier volume describe as 'disorganised capitalism', as opposed to Harvey's term of 'flexible accumulative capitalism'. While Urry's work tends to focus more on the relationship between the social and the geographic, Lash focuses more often and more directly on relations between the cultural and the socio-economic and much of his work represents an attempt to integrate aspects of post-structuralist and Frankfurt school thinking in relation to such issues.

In the opening chapter of his **Sociology of Postmodernism**, Lash sketches out an approach to a conceptualisation of postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon, to be seen as a 'regime of signification' embedded in the broader socio-economic processes and relations of a 'regime of accumulation'. He begins by characterising postmodernism as a regime of signification whose 'fundamental structuring trait is de-differentiation' (Lash 1990:5), a concept he limits to the realm of culture and derives from Weber's work on the sociology of religion and Habermas's **Theory of Communicative Action**, where the notion of cultural differentiation or *Ausdifferenzierung* is employed in relation to processes of modernization.

In broad outline, according to this approach primitive societies do not differentiate between the cultural and the social; religion is part of the social, nature and the spiritual remain undifferentiated in animism and totemism. Modernisation brings about the differentiation of the cultural from the social and notably

... in the Renaissance autonomization of secular culture from religious culture, and in the eighteenth century tripartite and Kantian differentiation of theoretical, ethical and aesthetic realms. (Lash 1990:6)

If cultural modernization is a process of differentiation, postmodernization is one of de-differentiation. And, just as Lash sees Weber as the paradigmatic theorist of modernization so he sees Walter Benjamin as the paradigmatic theorist of postmodernization. In relation to these distinctions he offers us four main components for a cultural paradigm.

- (1) the relationship among types of cultural object produced – i.e. ethical, theoretical, aesthetic etc.
- (2) the relationship between the cultural as a whole and the social
- (3) its ‘cultural economy’ whose elements in turn are conditions of production and consumption, the institutions of culture, mode of circulation and the cultural product or good itself: and
- (4) the mode of signification: i.e. relations among signifier, signified and referent. If modernization presupposed differentiation on all of these counts, then postmodernization witnesses de-differentiation on each of these four components. (Lash 1990:11)

Possibly the most significant of these components or the one to which Lash devotes most initial attention is the mode of signification, or mode of representation, as he later terms it. Modernisation clearly differentiates and autonomizes the roles of signifier, signified and referent. Postmodernism problematises these distinctions. Modernization’s differentiation enabled the emergence of realism, which takes neither representation nor reality as problematic, ‘modernism’, that is the late nineteenth century form of ‘aesthetic’ modernism then problematises representation, while postmodernism problematizes ‘reality’.

If there is a tendency here to present these tendencies as stages, Lash does not deny the possibility of their being present simultaneously. What he appears to be principally interested in, though, is the possible social implications and effects of these differing modes of representation. Realism, as he points out, reinforced in the nineteenth century

... a set of beliefs fundamental to the identity and developing habitus of the new bourgeois grouping (Lash 1990: 16)

As such it produced a mode of representation and related discourses which the emergent working-classes were able to modify to their own ends of collective action in the name of social emancipation and in opposition to aspects of bourgeois individualism. Developments in aesthetic modernism occurring at about the same time tended to problematize the representation of the real, thus further autonomising the cultural sphere. The attendant concerns with formalist investigations into the nature of the cultural representation of reality as well as the emergence of political as well as cultural avant-garde movements in an anti-bourgeois alliance are representative of this process and perhaps most memorably registered in Benjamin’s remarks on the aestheticisation of the political by fascism and the politicisation of the aesthetic by socialism in the conclusion to **The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction**. Lash sees such a development as standing in a

... sort of elective affinity, sometimes of compatibility, sometimes incompatibility – with organised capital structures. (Lash 1990:18)

and postmodernism as standing in a similar relationship with **disorganized** capitalism. With regard to aesthetic modernism and its destabilization of the bourgeois world-view, he points out that it

. . . creates a situation in which (at least) two solutions are possible: the reconstruction of identity around fascist political culture or a receptivity to aesthetic modernism. (Lash 1990:17)

With regard to postmodernism, with its rejection of avant-gardes and the aura of culture, again at least two possibilities open up. In what he describes as a grossly simplified schematization, which I'm going to grossly simplify even further, Lash sees one kind of postmodernism, 'PM 1' as typified in the rise of the new 'yuppie' social grouping. Using Bourdieu's notion of the use of cultural objects for creating 'invidious' social distinctions, Lash suggests that PM 1, or 'mainstream' form of postmodernism, privileges the implosion of the cultural and the commercial, re-stabilizes the social identity of the bourgeoisie and

. . . fosters social hierarchies based on cultural objects functioning as status symbols and the principles of 'distinction'. (Lash 1990:37)

thus, for instance, promoting the values of consumer capitalism inside the working-class and fostering an individualist, ornamentalist architecture in line with its re-stabilisation of bourgeois identity in the urban context.

Another kind of postmodernism, 'PM 2' or 'oppositional postmodernism', tries to use cultural objects not to create invidious distinctions but in order to foster an open subject-positioning and thus to move away from fixed forms of hierarchisation, tolerating a variety of subject positions, fostering radical-democratic and de-centralized worker resistance and favouring, in the context of the urban, an architecture which privileges gothic notions of community, street and labyrinth.

Lash points out that PM1 and PM2 are intimately connected in terms of their being

. . . opposite sides of a 'regime of signification' which articulate with a regime of accumulation (Lash 1990:37)

This intimate connection, I want to suggest, might be pursued further, along the lines indicated by Lash, though in the form of a series of productive and not ultimate oppositions, rather than in that of the sustained dualism that critics such as Hans Bertens have seen in his approach.

Lash himself, in connection with other sociologists, notably Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, has moved on to a notion of 'reflexive modernity' but his earlier thesis, however exploratory and transitional, bears a potentially productive resemblance to the strategies of at least some aspects of late twentieth century British fictional writing, as does his inability to completely discard the con-

cept of 'realism', which re-emerges in his later work, if mainly in connection with forms of popular culture. This perhaps suggests an affinity with the notion of 'troubled realism' which Steven Connor uses to characterise significant aspects of British fiction in the last part of the twentieth century (Connor 1996:Ch.1). I want, finally, to look at some aspects of such troubled realisms in relation to the fictional writing of Raymond Williams and Iain Sinclair in my third and last section.

3.

As Raymond Williams points out in his essay on **Realism and the Contemporary Novel**, published as part of **The Long Revolution** in 1961,

The centenary of 'realism' as an English critical term occurred but was not celebrated in 1956. (Williams 1961:274)

Perhaps, forty years on, in 1956, the term stands in need not so much of celebration as of reconsideration.

In the closing stages of his essay Williams suggests that

Reality is continually established, by common effort, and art is one of the highest forms of this process. Yet the tension can be great, in the necessarily difficult struggle to establish reality . . . realism is precisely this living tension, achieved in a communicable form. (Williams 1961: 288–9)

It is with this kind of conception of realism in mind that I now want to briefly draw attention to some aspects of rural and urban studies and to bring them into closer proximity to the concerns of fictional representations of the tensions and intensities of locality and socio-spatial relations.

Williams' notion of 'structure of feeling', closely related in **The Long Revolution** to his thoughts on the nature of realism, has been revived and more specifically located in at least two recent works of social geography. In his essay **Inhuman Geographies: Landscapes of Speed, Light and Power**, Nigel Thrift connects Williams' concept to the writing of Deleuze and Guattari among others in an analysis of the way in which technologies developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have combined to produce an emergent structure of feeling which he terms 'mobility'.

The emphasis here is on the ways in which such an emergence challenges traditional notions of the individual, the landscape and their interrelation and one which can be usefully related to much contemporary and particularly urban fiction. In **Manchester and Sheffield: A Tale of Two Cities**, Ian Taylor, Karen Evans and Penny Fraser provide a full length sociological survey of the 'local structure of feeling' in two northern, provincial metropolitan cities, with a great

emphasis on popular perceptions of place which is presented in the recorded voices of local inhabitants.

Such work can be connected with that of Doreen Massey on uneven development and its effect on shaping regions, defined not only in the sense of physical geography. What one geographer has described as her 'infectious metaphor' of 'layers of investment' and her refusal to undervalue the significance of gender, race, and locality is one which has set her at odds, to some extent, with what she sees as the over-prioritisation of the relationship between flows of capital and organised labour processes in the work of writers like Harvey.

At a slightly less obviously scientific level, the work of ethnologists or social anthropologists has produced some interesting investigations into the way individuals and communities relate to their locality in the context of broader regional developments. Two recent examples of such work would be Michael Meyerfield Bell's study of the relationship between perceptions of social class and conceptualisations of nature in a south-eastern ex-urb (Bell 1995) and Nigel Rapport's **Diverse World-Views in an English Village** (Rapport 1994) in which he painstakingly assembles the range of personae which, in his view, two inhabitants of a north-western English village exhibit in conversation in their varying relations with a wider world.

Approaches like these can in turn be related to less self-consciously methodical but no less self-consciously reflective studies of a more personal and literary nature such as those of Richard Hoggart's wryly northern monitoring of life in the south-eastern town of Farnham, a focal point for the great Tory-voting silent majority of that region, in his view.

My suggestion here is not that works of fiction should be read off against the conclusions reached by such studies but that these various kinds of representation should be read in closer proximity to one another, particularly as their approaches often bear marked aspects of resemblance.

Developments in London during the 1980s have produced a flood of fictional, as well as many other forms of, representation. The most successful fiction has, in my view, attempted to apprehend some form of totality or gestalt, to register an exhilarating though often equally daunting sense of diversity though in relation to a strong sense of disintegration and disorientation, with a resulting intensity of creative tension.

Here, I want to focus briefly on the founding figure of such recent approaches, Iain Sinclair, and what is perhaps his most successful and ambitious novel, **Downriver**. **Downriver** is a complex cocktail of literary allusion and caustically articulate social and cultural satire. It is also a work of relentless parody and absurdism whose 'baroque realism' constantly borders on surrealism. Among other things, the book is a travelogue and guide-book leading us, in a spirit of desperately unserious cultural anthropology to a series of localities and their grotesque inhabitants which are safely unknown to the average heritage-grazer. The book is mock-epic in mode, combining Conrad with Kerouac in a voyage of discovery to find the last, unclaimed open spaces of deep London's darkest heart. The post-imperial world city is here presented as a ne-

ropolitan rubbish-heap of cultural implosion, a decaying grand hotel peopled by a wide-ranging assortment of the living dead, most of whom are employed by the media. The novel treats itself and any other form of cultural production or analysis with a high degree of scepticism, though it still allows for a mystical element in its explorations of the history of events which have contributed to the, constantly contested, 'nature' of a given place. Consequently, like many recent works in urban sociology and human geography relating to the British context, the book functions both as a wide-ranging critique of existing social, cultural and political practices and as an investigation of the relations between social space and the body in a specific cultural environment.

The following passage, ultimately not one of the more interesting in the book, nevertheless provides a useful introduction to its approach to the business of re-creating place in an economy of signs and space.

Fredrik had done me a number in the **London Review of Books** on a novel I had recently published; which would otherwise, despite the gallantly double-glazed 'doorstepping' of my publisher, have sunk into necessary and well-deserved obscurity. Fredrik suggested that Spitalfields was, currently, a battleground of some interest; a zone of 'disappearances', mysteries, conflicts, and 'baroque realism'. Nominated champions of good and evil were locking horns in a picturesque contest to nail the ultimate definition of 'the deal'. We had to get it on. There were not going to be any winners. If we didn't move fast, any half-way sharp surrealist could blunder in and pick up the whole pot. 'Spitalfields': the consiglieri liked the sound of it, the authentic whiff of heritage, drifting like cordite from the razed ghetto. But, please, do not call it 'Whitechapel' or whisper the dreaded 'Tower Hamlets'. Spitalfields meant Architecture, the Prince, Development Schemes: it meant gay vicars swishing incense, and charity-ward crusaders finding the peons to refill the poor benches, and submit to total-immersion baptism. It meant Property Sharks, and New Georgians promoting wallpaper catalogues. It meant video cams tracking remorselessly over interior **detail**, and out, over lampholders, finials, doorcases, motifs, cast-iron balconies; fruity post-synch, lashings of Purcell. And bulldozers, noise, dust; **Sold!** There's nothing the cutting-room boys like as much as a good ball-and-chain: especially with some hair-gelled nobby in a pin-stripe suit at the controls. Skin-deep Aztec fantasies of glass and steel lifting in a self-reflecting glitter of irony from the ruins. Spitalfields was this week's buzz-word. And Spitalfields meant lunches (Sinclair 1992:93)

Raymond Williams' fictional writing displays an attention to the production and contestation of social space which is comparable to that of Sinclair, though the focus and mode of his work differs considerably. The language is terse and methodical, producing a series of tense, antagonistic dialogues between a range

of conflicting perspectives, both in time, between generations, and in space, between the metropolitan centre, represented by London or Cambridge, and the peripheral regions, represented by Williams' home country, Wales (which is, incidentally, also that of Sinclair). The tensions between conflicting positions are often most intensely concentrated in a leading male protagonist who having left his peripheral home for the outside world of the inside world of the centre, then returns, trying to contain within his perspective a volatile mixture of loyalties.

The tendency of Williams' fiction is towards a form of tragic realism, in contrast to the more satirical and parodic approach of Sinclair. His novels have often been criticised for being overly-programmatic, a clumsily inadequate dramatisation of the concerns of his better-known critical and theoretical writing. Tony Pinkney, in his monograph on Williams' fiction does much to question the adequacy and accuracy of such judgments, exploring both the detail of Williams' sensitivity to issues of space and place and the significance of the gothic and grotesque aspects of his fictional writing, aspects which might be seen as a significant point of comparative contact with those of Sinclair. Williams' use, in his novel *Loyalties*, of the painting of Bert, produced by his wife and shown by his wife, after his death, to her son is a notably powerful example of the use, or eruption, of gothic-grotesque elements in his work. Here, though, I want to represent his writing by means of a passage which has a more immediate and transparent relation, both to sociological and geographical approaches to the notion of contested social space and to the passage quoted from Sinclair's *Downriver*. The passage is from a slightly earlier novel, *The Fight for Manod*, Robert Lane is talking to Matthew Price.

On the hill beyond the terminus there was now only the network of lights. Far away to the horizon, only the lines of the streets were visible, past the high lighted towers. Lane turned and looked where Matthew was looking.

'You're seeing Manod, perhaps?'

'I was wondering, yes.'

... They got up and went across to the facing wall. Lane lighted the map on the high glass screen. 'Begin at each end of the valley. Nantlais and Pontefren would expand to their limits: say twenty thousand in each. Then along the Afren, in a linked development would be seven other centres. Manod's in the middle, that's how it gave its name. And because the Afren floods, and because in any case we don't want a ribbon along the banks of the river, the centres are set back on the higher ground: hill-towns really, except St Dyfrog, which has a different role. Each of the centres would go up to ten thousand. Between each, as you see, at least four or five miles of quite open country, which would go on being farmed. So what you get as a whole, is a city of a hundred, a hundred and twenty thousand people, but a city of small towns, a city of villages almost. A city settling into its country.'

'The descriptions are difficult.'

'Yes, of course, because it's so new. There isn't, anywhere, a city like this. But there could be, that's clear. All the detailed work has been done and costed, and there's no real doubt that it's viable.'

'Work, communications, roads, schools?'

Lane moved away from the map.

'If you go on with this, Matthew, you'll have more than enough of the details. It's about ten feet thick, just the technical studies. But they'll impress you, I guarantee that. Some very able people came in to work on it. The transport and communication technology is right at the frontier. The work-housing relation is also very advanced. If it ever gets built, and who knows about that, it will be one of the first human settlements, anywhere in the world, to have been conceived, from the beginning, in post-industrial terms and with a post-electronic technology. And then, just think of it Matthew: a working city, an advanced working city, in that kind of country. With the river, the mountains, it would be a marvellous place.'

'But then the politics start.'

'You're right. The politics start.' (Williams 1988:12-13)

Again what we're presented with is a projected social space and the novel concerns itself, though in a considerably different way from Sinclair's approach, with the tensions and conflicts of its actualisation in an existing place. Such passages, though, are only introductions.

Of more vital concern is the effect of such processes on living, human bodies and, just as much human geography and urban sociology has increasingly concerned itself with the relationship between socially produced urban space and the human body, so both of the novels briefly introduced here focus and intensify their representation of that relation as it and they unfold.

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