



NEWS FROM NOWHERE

New Boots and Contracts

Sitting at the top of the English pop music charts as I write is a song recorded in 1982 by a band which broke up years ago. Its current burst of mass popularity is entirely attributable to the fact that it has been used in a TV commercial for Levis jeans.

This isn't the first time this short circuit of the traditional pop-plugging process has forced or foisted itself onto the pop public. A few years ago the late, great pioneer of sweet soul, Sam Cooke, had a hit 20 years after his death, courtesy of the combined weight of high rotation airplay and advertising jingles feeding promiscuously off each other.

What makes this more recent episode remarkable is that the song is by the greatest punk band of the 70s next to the Sex Pistols. Levis are being crooned to a tune by those likely lads who brought us "White Riot", "I'm so bored with the USA" and other radical punk classics: The Clash. So there is a certain irony in this last great 'sell out'. Former Clash member Mick Jones claims that everyone wears Levis, so where's the harm in it? A line worthy of the late Andy Warhol rather than the last of the late 70s angry young men.

Yet there is a certain logic to it all which escapes some of the critics of this absurd episode. Billy Bragg, who posed as the 80s inheritor of the radical energy of The Clash says he can't stand hearing the Levis ad. But then Bragg always pitches himself as the last sincere holdout against commercialisation. In other words, his record company is happy to market him as an anti-market tunesmith to people who like to pretend they're not actually in the market. In comparison to this, The Clash do indeed look like 'sell-outs'—but at least they didn't pretend otherwise. They accepted the reality of the market relation in music rather than denying it in bad faith. They explored the possibilities for a radical practice within the market relation.

Realising that the street thrash of their youth was doomed once they got new boots and contracts, The Clash opted for a strategy of ironically crafting a pop image of radicalism. For The Clash, it was not enough to denounce the false nature of the pop process from the fringes. It was more important to take radical values out into the carnivorous world of pop. In the end, naturally, it had them for dinner.

The Clash were a classic case of the postmodern problem. The great German critic, Walter Benjamin, summarised this dilemma as one between a politicised aesthetics and an aestheticised politics. Now more than ever it seems that any attempt to politicise a mass art form like popular music will be a risky strategy. The risk is one of turning images and ideas which have a meaning and a history in the community connected to the Left into pure, disembodied, meaningless signs, part of the great rotating catherine wheel of image and style.

The issue is that these days more and more people are more reliant for cultural resources on mass cultural forms, and have less and less access to traditional popular culture, folk art and community knowledge. So perhaps it is necessary to try to inject the raw material for progressive worldviews into the mainstream, and hope that

what remains of community knowledge can provide the resources to interpret and deploy those fragments in a way which affirms progressive values and ideals. The demand this places on the culture of the Left is that it then has to keep offering up new versions, new styles of its core values and images. Postmodern culture demands novelty of form but not of substance. In the battle of ideas, style is what gives the contending parties the edge—as The Clash were very well aware.

While The Clash lasted they turned out a steady stream of radical images and sounds, including records dedicated to the Sandinistas and songs celebrating Spanish Civil War loyalists, as well as others which expressed the experience of life on the dole, police harassment and other everyday stories of the 70s recession years. Cut free from their original social contexts and allowed to float freely in the media stream, these images could be ignored or reinterpreted as pure style. Or they could be seized upon by young people searching for ways of interpreting and relating to the world which suggested the necessity of political critique, a constant suspicion of power and the need to remember past struggles. A pop song can't substitute for political consciousness, but it can affirm it.

The challenge for the Left is to integrate its more traditional forms for reproducing Left culture and resources from generation to generation with the kind of cultural reproduction which takes place at large, through the mass media, to integrate the politics of style with its style of politics. It is possible to construct meanings and make distinctions in the postmodern world of mass-media culture, but it is a two-way street. Mass culture throws up resources to be used as well as crud to criticise. There are possibilities for creating radical mass media images. The Clash are an excellent case study in what is possible and not possible. In what to do and what not to do.

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