THE POPULAR IS PLURAL: Creating a Left Political Culture

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This is not an article about cultural politics. It is, in the first instance, about a more extended concept of culture than the one we are more accustomed to. By implication, the concept of 'the political' which goes with it is also more extended. These 'extensions' — my main argument goes — are increasingly necessary in the consolidation, formation and re-formation of a popular theoretical, intellectual and cultural base for socialism in Australia. If the argument can be said to have one overriding aim then that is for us to develop a confidence and expertise in the procedures of 'agenda-setting' on social, economic and political issues rather than a reliance on the politics of the defensive knee-jerk.

What would it take to define, form or even reform the elements of a left political culture? We need to ask first, perhaps, what exactly is a political culture since the concept, after a period of disuse, seems to be creeping back by stealth or by explicit intervention into the language of left debates. Secondly, we need to ask, does the left have one and what is it like? Thirdly, if we do have one, then what, with 'renewal' and 'prospects' in mind, would be the conditions for its reformation?

The Broad Left Conference had a session entitled 'Political Culture' which was actually about cultural politics, which is something different. If I explain, briefly, how they are different, then perhaps I can mount an argument about why I think that the concept political culture — or at least the areas that it attempts to designate — might be important for debates about the future of socialism in Australia.

Cultural politics is committed to the politicisation of culture; it insists that existing forms of culture — film, the fine arts, television, literature, theatre — do not provide innocent forms of recreation and pleasure. Cultural forms are, however attenuated and mediated they might be, essentially ideological by nature. Representations of, variously, national history, women, Aborigines, human nature in cultural forms are seen as having distinctive ideological effects. The aim of a cultural politics is to intervene in these forms of representation, to refuse them, to provide alternative forms and images and ways of writing. Cultural politics interrupts the dominant ideology at those points — in cultural forms — where they appear to be most natural and spontaneous and therefore most effective as a

Festivals have a surplus of meaning: buying an ice cream at Sydney's Royal Easter Show.
A dialogue between politics and popular pleasures: the film *Kiss of the Spiderwoman.*

sort of unconscious substratum of the dominant culture. This is a necessary and strategic form of intervention but, for reasons that I will argue in more detail below, it is restricted in its aims and, indeed, *pace* the proponents of cultural revolution, only one very small part of what needs to be a much larger and more sophisticated project. Cultural politics, on the whole, tends to work on a fairly restricted definition of culture; that of, as Raymond Williams describes it, 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.'1 Turn to the reviews pages of *Tribune* and you will see what I mean: books, fringe theatre, radical film. Rarely is there anything on, for example, sport, popular television or mainstream entertainment film. OK, so we recognise that we live in a dominant culture and that it is important to bring alternative forms to people's attention but the danger is that in carving out that worthy oppositional niche we might also be confining ourselves to it, that the 'fringe' might stay precisely that. Cultural politics, as currently practised, is always in danger of becoming a rather sterile avant-guardism or at best a politics of pure interruption. More of this argument later.

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Let me explore now the concept of 'political culture' and suggest why, in the face of cultural politics it might turn out to be a more useful concept. Firstly, the term culture refers here not to works and practices in any 'artistic' sense, but rather to a more 'anthropological' sense of the term as the distinctive forms, practices and techniques of, broadly, a 'way of life'. That is, I would suggest, more appropriate for our purposes despite its rather amorphous nature. It has at least the redeeming feature of being broader in its application and not something which is only talked about in the reviews pages of newspapers.

But there is a problem with the history of the concept of political culture which, as Tim Rowse clearly demonstrated a few years back,2 has a dubious heritage in so far as it emerged from a combination of behaviourist theory and sociology as a way of explaining, in post-war social science and political theory, the essential pragmatism of Australian political attitudes. It was a term deployed by political theorists and taken up by politicians to both theorise and, of course, consolidate in a national mentality, the essential and immutable elements of *consensus* in Australian society. It could be wheeled on to explain the nature of voting patterns, of political parties, the arbitration system and much more. In contemporary mainstream political science, the concept is still used to explain, for example, the 'countrymindedness' of Queensland voters or their predisposition to authoritarian forms of government.3 It was and is a term which ignores a great deal, not least explicit areas of conflict and contestation over class, race or gender which, being on the margins as the political theorists thought, really did not significantly affect the nature of the 'essential predispositions', the mental attitudes, the apparently permanent psychological orientations of the Australian
people. To frame a consensus, as we well know from more recent uses of the term, you have to exclude or marginalise more troubling conflicts from the picture.

Given all these problems associated with the concept political culture, why bother with it at all? Why is the term enjoying something of a resurgence and why am I prepared to argue that it might have some use in debates about the future of socialism? My answers to these questions are tentative but nonetheless insistent. They are both theoretical and more immediately political. Let me take the political point first.

The emergence of an increasingly well-organised and persuasive New Right committed to reforming 'attitudes', winning 'hearts and minds' and setting the agenda for new forms of 'common sense' by engaging in controversies over the family, education, morality, the nature of economic organisation and its concomitant field of 'rights' and 'duties' seems to me to indicate something of an assault not simply at the level of political theory or economic rationalism but also and, perhaps, most doggedly, at the level of popular opinion and beliefs. OK, you might say, we can recognise this, but what does it have to do with the notion of political culture?

To answer this, it might be useful to consider one definition of the concept which focuses not so much on the way it is deployed as an instrument of consensus politics as on what its basic analytical purpose is:

the subjective perception of history and politics, the fundamental beliefs and values, the focus of identification and loyalty, and the political knowledge and expectations which are the product of specific historical experience

Now, it might be objected that this is what Marxists have always called ideology. Fair enough, but the problem with the concept of ideology is the theoretical baggage it carries with it from the nineteenth century. It brings with it a sense of falseness, of illusion, of not seeing the real conditions.

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with it from the nineteenth century. It brings with it a sense of falseness, of illusion, of not seeing the real conditions.

Popular beliefs can be dismissed as ideology, as a sort of veil pulled over the eyes of the people by the dominant class either to keep them dumb or keep them amused. Not surprisingly, when you begin to speak of ideology as a form of political persuasion, people are either offended or bored. This is partly because we tend to think of ideologies as purely forms of belief at the level of ideas, in the head and pure forms of belief at the level of ideas, in the head and...
increasingly important. While the left has spent nearly twenty years wondering what 'the personal is political' actually means, or interpreting it in unduly narrow and uniform ways, the more perceptive proponents of the New Right have been getting on with doing it — with personalising the political and politicising the personal. Questions of 'lifestyle', getting government 'off our backs', fending for yourself, Right to Life, and so on; these are the markers of a personalist politics which confronts head on the area of subjectivity, of the ethical and moral spheres about which the left has had comparatively little to say. Occupying our little oppositional or 'alternative' niche, we have tended to operate on the 'Archimedes principle' of politics; find a point outside the world with a sufficient lever and a correctly placed fulcrum and you can move that world. The trouble is, of course, that the left, like Archimedes, would be all alone out there.

This, of course, is something of a caricature but, like all caricatures, it attempts to highlight a trait, a tendency. There are notable exceptions to the Archimedes Principle in, for example, the women's movement, which has engaged directly not only in critique of existing attitudes — that by itself would be no better than what I have been criticising in the left as a whole — but also in the transformation of elements of the political culture — forms of identification, loyalties, subjective perceptions and so on. The transformation of a cultural critique into forms of political action and the formation of specific policies and legislative imperatives; this is the crucial move from a cultural politics to a political culture. There is a difference however: the women's movement can identify its main and primary constituency — women. The left, the socialist movement, has more of a problem here. What exactly is its constituency? The working class? Working people? Workers by hand and by brain? Oppressed people? All of these? If the latter is the case, as it probably is since it comprises most of the population, then how do we address our constituency?

Part of the answer to this lies in taking seriously areas of identification, attitude and belief and to acknowledge that they have more than illusory or 'ideological' forms of existence; that they have popular forms of existence. The recognition of 'the popular' and a systematic engagement with its resilient texture has important implications both with its resilient texture has important implications both for the ways in which we direct our analysis of existing conditions and for the ways in which we might want to shape a more vigorous, expert and confident left political culture.

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The left has historically viewed the 'popular' with stern suspicion. With faultless dialectical logic, marxists have insistently demonstrated that the popular, the people, populism are at best illusory forms concealing the realities of class and, at worst, the watchwords of fascism and reaction. Socialists are, after all, concerned with classes — easily definable as we used to think — and not with this nebulous entity 'the people'. In fact, the reverse now operates. Other political forces are able to make great play of 'the people' because, although it is difficult to get hold of in an intuitive sort of way — you and I are people after all. Class, on the
other hand, is proving increasingly difficult to define even by the most skilled practitioners, especially when the adjectives 'working', 'middle' or 'ruling' are added to it. Class has not, of course, disappeared; it's more a question of our resources and political imagery being no longer adequate to defining its place in political processes. Certainly, when the definition of the primary components of what you had taken to be your political constituency is at stake, then you are in a bit of trouble. One thing is sure here, though: we can no longer rely on the sort of ecclesiastical condensation with which we have customarily explained to 'the people' that it's really all about class.

Perhaps the logic is not so rigorous any more but it is difficult to note a certain legacy of left suspicion of 'the popular' in our refusal to engage with what is demonstrably popular in Australian culture? If the only occasion for saying something about — to use the consistent example again — sport — is when it is primarily defined in the political arena of, say, tours of South Africa or the financing of the Sydney Swans by big business. If, in other words, sport is reduced to a mere side effect of central political and economic issues, and if it is allowed no realm of sufficiency, no claim to **pleasure** by itself, is it any wonder that we fail to engage with a dominant element of the national culture? With a few exceptions, notably — and ironically — in journals directed at mainly academic audiences, serious analysis of sport, its effects on our 'dispositions' — not least the disposition to go to a football or netball match rather than attend another boring meeting — is significantly absent from, and radically impoverishes, current left political culture. There is an awful lot, on the 'subjective' side of politics, that can be said about sport — on codes of masculinity, for example, or on its effects on national, regional and class and gender identifications or on 'lifestyle' and the star system *a la* Gerg Matthews, or on its effects as a medium for the 'New Nationalism'.

The same goes for popular television and film, ignored by the left or, at best, construed as a contemporary opiate of the masses. All we can do is recommend 'worthy' programs on the ABC or SBS, or an intensely meaningful and relevant film at the local art house cinema, pretty much in the manner of a well-meaning parson. We can say nothing about the mass audiences for *Dallas*, the features of indigenous programs like *Neighbours*, *A Country Practice*, *Sons and Daughters*, *Prisoner*. And what about *Crocodile Dundee*? We may not like them or, simply by virtue of attending too many meetings, be ignorant of them and other spheres of popular pleasure and leisure activities, but let us be very sure that the way in which they handle issues such as gender relationships, the national character, community politics, ethical values, representations of 'ordinary folk' and so on is much more effective on a daily and weekly basis than a thousand mass meetings. You don't need to subscribe to any crude theories of the effects of television on behaviour to accept this proposition; the simple fact is that, whatever their effects, important elements of political cultures are regularly deployed and circulated in these programs; they are talked about and 'put on the agenda' in ways the left knows and says little about. Crucially, these areas pose the central question of the range of complex and effective social identities suggested by the concept of political culture.

On the basis of these two examples, I would suggest that our current constituency, or at least our ability to address a constituency, is impoverished. It is probably vacuous to say that our constituency is 'the people' but we should at least initiate and maintain a sustained engagement with 'the popular'. There is a large and fatal discrepancy between the resilient and resourceful fabric of the dominant culture and the means we have at our disposal for engaging with it. In the absence of such forms of address and engagement is it any wonder that both the image and the practices of the left are perceived and experiences as severely constrained ones? Agendas, meetings, slogans, conspiracies and a lot of unwelcome 'soap box' noise operating on a logic of illusions and trying to persuade the people where they have got it wrong and what they ought to be doing in the evenings or on a Saturday afternoon. Again, I apologise, a caricature but certainly, as another session at the Broad Left Conference on 'The Pleasure Principle in Politics' pointed out amid the smirks of 'serious socialists', we (who live in the realm of urgent necessity) do have a problem with our social imagery and our political symbolism.

Putting aside the smirks for a moment, though, let me suggest that this 'pleasure principle' or whatever you want to call it is crucially related to the questions that I have raised above concerning our engagement with the forms of popular culture. I can best do this by illustrating an experience from the UK in 1977. That year was, as you may remember, the year of the Queen's Jubilee. The most memorable image that I have of this was the glum faces of the left as they witnessed what they thought was their natural political constituency in working class communities organising street parties and festivals and festooning the streets and neighbourhoods with bunting. The care-worn left stood back, looked on disapprovingly and mumbled things like 'stuff the Jubilee' or 'down with the monarchy'. For 'serious socialists' there could only be one pessimistic meaning to this; the masses were in thrall to a monolithic royalist ideology. But, as Latin American friends more familiar with the nature of popular festivals pointed out to me at the time, the meanings of these celebrations were not exhausted by the fact that they...
explicit object was the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of the Queen and its official train of reactionary national pageantry. Celebrations, festivals — in the manner of the Italian Communist Party’s national and regional Feste dell’Unità — have a surplus of meaning beyond their immediate objects. They are occasions for establishing, reinforcing, and furthering community values, values of solidarity and of locality and, crucially, of a range of social identities. Neighbourhoods which had forgotten that they were neighbourhoods were re-established more in spite of than because of the explicit and official intentions of the celebrations. At a broader level it celebrated certain features of both local and national membership, kinship and citizenship which are not at all defined purely by the existence of a monarchy. The British Communist Party at the time took advantage of this ‘surplus’ of meanings and organised a ‘People’s Jubilee’ which turned out, in fact, to be the largest social gathering of the British left since the war. A momentary indication, perhaps, that in engaging with ‘the popular’ we will need to get our hands ‘dirty’ by dealing with popular pleasures but might come out looking brighter and less jaded than we do now.

Over the next couple of years we are going to be confronted with this problem on a grand scale in Australia because of the advent, in 1988, of the Bicentenary celebrations. We have just witnessed how, in the USA, a potent and monumental symbol such as ‘Liberty’ is all too easily appropriated to a Reaganesque design. What are we going to do about our own forthcoming national celebrations? How are we to participate in the shaping of a national identity at the level of popular symbols and sentiments. Are we to leave this to the corporate imagination of the Quiet Achiever? Are we to celebrate a tradition of unity or diversity? How will the national image be shaped ethnically — a celebration of costumes and ‘traditions’ in a sort of vast national museum? Self-congratulation or critical scrutiny? Clearly, the role of the Aboriginal peoples will be crucial in this if they decide to participate but in addition to this we cannot afford to stand on the sidelines and watch the composite national image being put together as if it had nothing to do with us, as if it was just another show for the dominant culture, and as if, finally, we were outside of that dominant culture. As if dominance were purely an issue of imposition ‘from above’ and not also a signal of some form of acceptance ‘from below’, however negotiated and attenuated that acceptance might be.

On this last point — the dominant culture — we need, as I have suggested above in relation to sport and the media, to develop much more sophisticated lines of engagement and argument. The notion of a ‘dominant culture’ is itself, perhaps, a useful abstraction but one which it is quite difficult to identify, rather like the ‘dominant ideology’. I am not arguing that there is no such thing as dominance; it is just that when the adjective is applied to complex areas like culture and ideology, it tends to convert them into monoliths and, at the same time, to suggest that we who can identify it are somehow outside of it, in a purely critical relationship of opposition. Archimedes again. So how should we approach or, indeed, attempt to identify what we customarily refer to as the dominant culture?

Popular movies are generally construed as contemporary opiates of the masses: Star Wars.

The normal way of doing this is to identify its attributes. Let’s take a broad selection and say that it is capitalist, bourgeois, individualistic, competitive, patriarchal, racist, and neo-colonial. All of these are no doubt accurate in their own ways and in their specific fields of reference. The problem is, however, that they are ultimately only describing components of the dominant culture. Except by some notion of imposition by the dominant classes, this form of argument says nothing much about how this combination of attributes became dominant. This part of the argument is left to the assumption that, under capitalism, there is a certain logic which dictates that given ideas will come to dominate. This, of course, is not unlike that other, earlier, conception of political culture which identifies the essential attributes of Australian society in order to organise them into a monolith called consensus.

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But whether the monolith is called consensus or class struggle, it remains, nonetheless, a monolith. In these forms of analysis, the question remains as to how particular ‘subjective perceptions’ became established in the ways they did, and how these perceptions played an important role in sedimenting forms of social identity, beliefs, loyalties and political knowledges. In the face of this enormously complex array of questions we have been accustomed to using rather blunt and heavy forms of analysis. Central to the formation of a left political culture would be the noise of the frantic sharpening of our analyses.

If we are to retain some usefulness from the concept of political culture, some emphasis on how forms of social identity are not reducible to simple origins in class, consensus or capitalism, then there is a strong argument for pluralising the concept, in speaking of a range of political cultures, elements of which may be in conflict and contestation within the national culture. Certainly, there are preferred and, if you like, dominant arrangements within
that culture, preferred and dominant forms of identification which are grounded firmly within the popular imagination, but the important thing is that we recognise that this is a complex and plural form of arrangement in the light of which a notion like the 'dominant culture' might seem a little inadequate. The women's movement has repeatedly emphasised that gendered forms of subordination cannot be explained away by the existence of capitalism and nor, consequently, do they automatically disappear when capitalism does. The same is certainly true of racism and the persistent theme of individualism against which, we have to acknowledge, the counter position of the experience of forms of collectivism has not been resoundingly successful. Australia is a composite of political cultures, a field of conflicting positions and identities in which some become dominant, others subordinate or marginalised. That is not a once and for all situation describing the baselines of 'national character' or the 'class basis'; it is, precisely, a field of forces in which it is possible to intervene provided that we have adequate means for intervention.

The concomitant to this argument about making our arguments, forms of analysis and subsequent procedures of policy formation more sophisticated is to acknowledge an important point made recently by Michael Rustin in his argument for forms of 'complex equality':

_The more prosperous and seemingly pluralistic society has become in its life-styles, the more difficult it has been for socialists to defend egalitarian ideals against the imputation that they would enforce an unwanted uniformity._

More directly related to questions of economic planning, Rustin goes on to argue that

_Visions which conceive the abolition of a single dominant form of inequality — such as the replacement of the market by central economic planning — are often blind to the characteristic inequalities of the alternative form. Even arguments for more extensive forms of participatory democracy — for the transparency of social decision making, as it is sometimes called — often take a simplistic view of what could possible be 'transparent': Any modern society has to have innumerable specialisms, many centres of value and decision, and therefore many competing interests, and socialist politics must now take account of these facts._

Rustin is confronting here quite simply the whole nature of a socialist vision, the whole basis, if you like, of a left political culture. It is difficult to deny the power of this argument even though it entails the unloading of a good deal of ideological and political baggage. The commitment to a pluralist socialism, the recognition of a diversity of interests and the concomitant requirement of the development of levels of sophistication in analysis, range of engagements and policy formation are all elements which, in our current left political culture, are floating around in rather disjointed ways, some partial, some more fully developed. If we could find ways of strategically developing and uniting these expertises, commitments and more localised skills in a common program of socialist renewal, then we would be talking about a vigorous and effective left political culture. This would entail, in turn, the formation of a diversified theoretical and intellectual base for socialism in Australia; intellectual, that is, not in terms of the powers of 'pure thought' but at the level of organisation, policy formation and decision making procedures in all fields.

It would require also the unloading of a good deal of the baggage of 'class nostalgia' and frequently pervasive forms of 'workerism'. It would certainly mean sharpening up some of our present tools of analysis but also, and perhaps more important, the development of new forms to match the growing technical and ideological sophistication of forces currently dominant or emergent.

Our range of knowledge needs to be more specific; we need to know at least as much about the workings of local government as we do about the global economic crisis and international politics (a common problem of the left, this). We need, developing these resources, to get far away from the mentality of the 'ginger group'; to know more about the complex features of specific and regional political cultures, to know why, for example, Joh Bjelke-Petersen is popular without recourse to demeaning platitudes about 'The Deep North' and we need to engage, much more insistently and productively, with the major themes of popular and national culture, with forms of collective memory and self-definition without reducing them to excrescences of a capitalist controlled media.

And we need, finally, not so much a 'vision' of an alternative society as a set of working principles for the qualitative transformation of current forms of social and economic organisation. We need 'technicians' rather than prophets.

This, of course, is an elaborate range of demands but no apologies should need to be made for it.

1. Raymond Williams, _Keywords_, Fontana, London, 1976, p.80
3. See, for example, the recent essay by Patricia Smith 'Queensland's Political Culture' in Allan Patience (ed), _The Bjelke-Petersen Premiership 1968-83: Issues in Public Policy_, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1983.
7. For more extensive argument about the necessity to engage with the popular see Tony Bennett, 'In Search of the Popular' in Bennett, Mercer and Woolacott (eds), _Popular Culture and Social Relations_, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986.

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