The 'cultural industries' approach advocated by Gay Hawkins, Kathie Gibson and Colin Mercer really represents a strategy for 'selling' this broad concept of culture to hard-nosed planning and economic administrators who may not have given much thought to how culture may be integrated with social and economic policy. The cultural industries approach carries a number of inherent dangers which need close examination.

For a start, the focus on the market that will inevitably restrict what counts as culture. The overriding logic of the marketplace is the pursuit of profit, and the drive for profit leads to a focus on, and the constant attempt to create, a mass audience. While the idea of industry conveys an image of a set of organised and broadly related activities with a common orientation to the market, many 'cultural' activities either do not resemble components of an industry, at least as traditionally conceived, or they have limited value in the market. It is difficult to identify the common 'industrial' concerns of such diverse activities as Macedonian folk dancing, community choral performances and graffiti 'art' and the demand for these products in the market is certainly restricted, but they all, nonetheless, meet the 'cultural needs' of their respective groups insofar as they provide a vehicle for the expression of individual pleasure, group identity or life experience.

In pursuing the cultural industries approach, there is the danger in being locked into an economic rationalist argument about the 'marketability' of particular cultural activities. Without doubt, the market has provided opportunities for many cultural producers and has created a broad range of cultural products for the general population. But it has to be recognised that this 'packaging' of culture for a mass audience tends to occur at the expense of minority cultural producers and consumers. Given the logic of the 'cultural industries' approach, policy makers will always be disinclined to support the cultural pursuits of minority or fringe groups because they do not pay their way.

Again, the idea of treating culture as a 'thing' to be packaged and sold on the open market denies the intangible, yet very 'real' significance of cultural practices to the participants. It also turns one's attention from examining the moral content of cultural phenomena. Does one wish to promote cultural forms which are racist, sexist, and ageist, and so on, but which have high market value?

Aspects of 'pub culture', female topless bartending and mud wrestling are popular (ie, have high market value) in Australian society, but they also help promote the view that women are merely sexual objects. The free market embodies no notion of justice or equity and, unless there is political will within the state to intervene in appropriate ways, the flow of capital to areas that generate highest profits will tend to dictate 'cultural', as well as economic and social, priorities.

All the 'Local Cultures' articles, in varying degrees, tend to attribute a 'thing-like' quality to culture, which reflects a more general problem of many contemporary analyses of culture: the failure to inspect the economic and political processes underlying the production, promotion and consumption of culture.

Hawkins and Gibson suggest that cultural planning is emerging as the 90s buzzword to replace cultural democracy as the new objective for local cultural development. If this is so, then let us hope that 'cultural planners' do not also abandon the cultural democratic ethos that was beginning to emerge in the 70s and 80s: a primary concern with access, equity and participation.

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Real World

Dear ALR
I wish to inform you that I will not be renewing my subscription to ALR. Quite frankly I fail to see the role which articles on Madonna (ALR, August 1991) can play in the debate over strategies to defend the interests of working people. Nor am I aware of the connection between an alleged Sixties revival and the urgent need to build a coalition of forces on the Left to challenge the Accordist policies of the Hawke Labor government and the ACTU. ALR has become simply too indulgent and lifestyle-fixated to play any significant role in this project.

As for the dross entitled “Correct Line Cooking” and “Dr Hartman”, I can only suggest that if ALR’s editors can drag themselves away from their yuppie terraces for a moment, they might discover that such feeble attempts at ‘humour’ cut no ice with working people out in the real world.

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