The Uses of Cultural Theory

For a year or so I have been wanting to say something relatively formal about cultural theory, and this seems to be an occasion.* The point is not, at least initially, one of proposition or amendment within this or that theory of culture, but rather a reconsideration of what cultural theory, in the strictest sense, can be reasonably expected to be and to do. Moreover this will involve, as a challenging emphasis, a social and historical exploration of what, in its various forms, it actually has been and done. For cultural theory, which takes all other cultural production as its appropriate material, cannot exempt itself from the most rigorous examination of its own social and historical situations and formations, or from a connected analysis of its assumptions, propositions, methods and effects. My view of what can properly be taken as cultural theory is in itself and especially in this context controversial. For I want to distinguish significant cultural theory, on the one hand from theories of particular arts, which in some of its least useful forms cultural theory offers to supersede or indeed suppress, and, on the other hand, from properly social
and sociological theories of general orders and institutions, which some
cultural theories offer to replace or enclose. In our own period, any
naming of these insignificant and uninteresting types of cultural theory
can be taken as likely, and very rapidly, to clear the field or more
specifically clear the room. Yet though something of that kind must
indeed be done, it should not be rushed.

For of course I am not suggesting, as the received spatial model inclines
many to suppose, that the making of useful cultural theory is in some
intermediate area between, on the one hand, the arts and, on the other
hand, society. On the contrary, these now a priori but historically
traceable categories, and the conventional forms of their separation and
derived interrelation, are just what useful cultural theory most essentially
and specifically challenges. Yet I am saying that cultural theory is at its
most significant when it is concerned precisely with the relations
between the many and diverse human activities which have been historically and
theoretically grouped in these ways, and especially when it explores
these relations as at once dynamic and specific within describably whole
historical situations which are also, as practice, changing and, in the
present, changeable. It is then in this emphasis on a theory of such
specific and changing relationships that cultural theory becomes appro-
priate and useful, as distinct from offering itself as a catch-all theory of
very diverse artistic practices or, on the other hand, as a form of social
theory proposed or disposed as an alternative—though it should always
be a contributor—to more general social and historical analysis.

In fact the problem of the relations between what we now call the arts
and intellectual work, on the one hand, and the generality of human
activity which we loosely delineate as society, only arises—I mean as a
theoretical problem; the practical problems have always been there—
when certain historically significant changes have come about in both.
If we look back, for example, at the great lineage of theories of art, or
of particular arts, we find no necessary tensions, of a kind to make all
such relationships problematic, between such theories and the general
underlying forms to which, by extension, they were customarily referred.
All classical and neo-classical theories of art and of particular arts,
typically culminating in rules of practice, had as the matrix of their
further relations the general underlying forms of the idealist tradition:
whether specifically as underlying and shaping Ideas or as propositions
of an essential and unchanging human nature. Some difficulties occurred
when these Ideas or this Nature were given a defining contemporary
social form, necessarily of a normative kind, from which particular
kinds or examples of art could be seen as deviant: description of actual
relations then coming through as primarily moral—exemplary of an
established moral state or of lapses from it. These difficulties became
critical in that succeeding phase of theory which we generalize as
Romantic. Yet the change from the rules of art to the proposition of
unique creative forms did not in itself affect wider relationships, since
the new claim was based on comparably general and ideal dimensions:
notably an undifferentiated creative Imagination. The change of social

reference, from the reproduction of civilized society to an idea of imaginative human liberation, also had less effect, in its early stages, than one might at first suppose, since the new project was still theoretically ideal and general. It was only at a subsequent stage, with the differentiation of creative and uncreative periods—historical social forms relatively favourable or unfavourable to both art and liberation—that an approach to the modern equations began to be made.

But other changes were now beginning to interact. The sense of art as both a specialized and an autonomous activity was strengthened rather than weakened by its increasing claim to represent, indeed to dominate, human creativity. The experience of practice continued to confirm, among artists, the sense of an autonomous skill. But this could again be strengthened rather than weakened by radical changes in the conditions of livelihood of artists, in the long move from different forms of patronage to different forms of the market. To set art as a priori above any market, in an ideal sphere of its own, was as regular a response to the new difficulties as their frank empirical recognition. Social changes and extensions of audiences and publics had more radical effects, and some direct interactions with production began to be observed as well as practised. Yet full specification of what we see as the modern problem did not really happen until social and historical analysis of the increasingly evident major changes—economic and political but also changes of material and of media in industrial and in cultural production—offered challenging specifications of social organization and historical development, including systemic crises and conflicts, to which many of the problems of art could appear to be directly related.

Art and Social Structure

What at last came through, theoretically, in the significant new keywords of ‘culture’ and ‘society’, was the now familiar model: of the arts on the one hand, the social structure on the other, with the assumption of significant relations between them. Yet the types of theory developed from this model were not yet especially useful. This is as true of the immensely influential ‘base and superstructure’ version—in practice more widely adopted than just in Marxist or other socialist movements—as of the various versions of an elite, in which there was a structural affinity between high culture and forms of social privilege deemed necessary to sustain it. Theoretically there is often little to choose between these otherwise opposed positions, since the accounts usually given, in either, of the actual formative relationships between these separated categories are at best selective or suasive. In Marxism, for example, there was a shared predominance of idealist theories, in which generalized states of consciousness, which might be imputed to classes, were in ways never fully explained transmuted into forms and genres or styles and phases of art, and of economist theories, in which there was some form of direct transmission of basic economic structures into modes of art, as in the proposition of what was called ‘capitalist poetry’. There was better work, drawing on earlier empirical studies within a different historical perspective, on the effects of changes in the social and economic situation of artists and of corresponding changes in audiences. Yet this, while important in itself, typically failed to engage
closely enough with those actual and diverse internal changes in the different arts, which were of course seen as not only substantial but primary both by working artists and by an increasingly specialized analytical or technical criticism.

It was within this aroused but unsatisfied phase that the first important theoretical initiatives began to be made. I would look first at what might be called the road from Vitebsk. I mean that still imperfectly understood but major movement, involving (uncertainly and inextricably) P. M. Medvedev, V. N. Volosinov and M. M. Bakhtin, who were together in Vitebsk in the early 1920s and later worked in Leningrad. This is also my first example of the indispensability of social and historical analysis to study of the structure of an initiative in cultural theory. For the key fact of these theoretical moves was their complex situation within a still actively revolutionary society. Medvedev, notably, had been Rector of the Proletarian University and was actively engaged in literacy programmes and in new forms of popular theatre. We might then expect some simple affiliation to what was already known as a ‘sociological poetics’, in which the transformations of audiences and of the position of artists could be seen as leading directly to a new and confident theory and practice of art. But that was not the way the initiative went, quite apart from the fact that its work was interrupted and broken off by the Stalinist consolidation of control and dogma: a period of which Volosinov and Medvedev appear to have been direct—and mortal—victims, and in which Bakhtin was marginalized.

For what had been seized was the problem of specificity: one which applies just as closely to their own intellectual work as to their understanding of art. What they were faced with was just that polarization of art and society characteristic of the received models. In those turbulent years, shaking free from so many old forms, the dominant theoretical trends were, on the one hand, formalism, with its emphasis and analysis of the distinctive, autonomous elements of art, and, on the other hand, a generalized Marxist application of social categories to the conditions of cultural production. What this group moved, correctly, to try to identify were the real gaps then left: the actual and specific relations between these practically unconnecting dimensions. They still nominally retained the model of base and superstructure, for they were writing as Marxists, but everything they said about it emphasized the complex and oblique practical relations which the formula typically overrode or obscured.

There is a special problem for us in a subsequent history, itself socially and ideologically determined (and, in some complex ways, also politically determined). What appeared in the West from the 1960s, following these internal and privileged lines of force—and what is still sometimes offered as modern literary theory as if it had not, within years of its first appearance, been comprehensively analysed and refuted—was that early Formalism which had itself been a reaction against the externalities of a then ‘sociological poetics’. Medvedev and Bakhtin correctly identified this formalism as the theoretical consequence of Futurism, in which, as they put it, ‘extreme modernism and radical negation of the
past is combined with complete absence of inner content.’ Yet they could see also what was both formative and positive in this bourgeois-dissident version of the modern and the avant garde. In striving for art as autonomous, formalism was simultaneously rejecting the reduction of art by the bourgeois social order (and with that the forms and institutions of established bourgeois culture) but also those forms of thinking about art which connected it with that or indeed any other social order. The great gain of formalism was in specificity; in its detailed analysis and demonstration of how art works are actually made and gain their effects. And there could then be no serious going back to applied general categories.

On the other hand, though, the move to specificity, for example in the ways in which the different arts visibly change through time, was beyond the formalist perspective. The best they could eventually manage, moving on from the hopeless cataloguing of a timeless repertory of styles—that staple of inert academic analysis—was the idealist notion, eventually to be urged again by what became known as structuralism, of systemic evolution within a still autonomous activity: the complex internal interactions of possible strategies and devices. Yet of course, as has continued to be overlooked by orthodox sociological poetics, this process in which working artists and writers—and indeed theorists—learn from, adapt, move away from, return to methods used by their specific predecessors, in quite other societies and historical periods, is itself undeniable and even crucial. What the formalist could not see was that this specific and complex process is itself historical: yet not a specialist history dependent on the given forms of a more general history, but a distinct historical practice, by real agents, in complex relations with other, both diverse and varying, agents and practices.

The Rejection of History

Thus the a priori rejection of history as relevant or even possible, which has distinguished this tendency from formalism through structuralism to what has called itself post-structuralism, was actually a move away from some key forms of specificity, under the cover of a selective attention to those versions of specificity which Medvedev and Bakhtin defined as the formalist assumption of an ‘eternal contemporaneity’.

Moreover, and as a true effect of this, the expulsion of intention which had followed the translation of all content into form had a particularly abstracting effect. Excluding the real and serious pressures of the actual making of art, the formalists and their successors necessarily reduced the language of culture to a rationalism. As Medvedev and Bakhtin put it: ‘They reduce both creative and contemplative perception to acts of juxtaposition, comparison, difference and contrast, i.e., to purely logical acts. These acts are treated as equally adequate to both the perception of the reader and the creative intention of the artist himself.’

It is very sobering to think that this was in (Russian) print fifty-eight years

2 Ibid., p. 170.
ago, long before the errors it identifies were again, and devastatingly, propagated as theoretical novelties.

As it happened this critique, which marked a major theoretical advance, moved only partially and incompletely into direct analysis. Only Bakhtin, but then remarkably, was able to complete that kind of life’s work. Formal analysis within a consciously historical dimension continued, but as a mode subordinate—perhaps still subordinate—to academic cataloguing and to those modes of formalism which until they were again theorized, in very much the original terms, found their practical base in specialist forms of criticism. These, meanwhile, were both less systematic and less fiercely exclusive of history, which was converted, as and when needed, to ‘background’: a new form of the old familiar polarization. Cultural theory, especially in its English and French-speaking sectors, then largely reverted to idealist and economist modes.

It is now necessary but obviously (for local reasons) difficult to look at another moment of initiative in cultural theory, which has been widely and indeed generously catalogued but too little analysed. I do not mean those loops in time—their slack, I would now hope, becoming more evident to everyone—in which a reinstated formalism offered ever more elaborate and rationalized constructions of systemic production and evolution, or where a reinstated idealism found a new general category—ideology—which could be applied in essentially undifferentiating and unspecifying ways to the most general forms. Compared with these, the widening stream of empirical studies, in forms and changes of the position of artists and even more of publics and audiences, and their eventual theorization in forms of reception theory, were moving in useful directions. But I am thinking past these to a very specific moment, in Britain, in which cultural theory of an elite idealist kind was interacting with a very deliberate development of empirical cultural studies, including the now influential new media, and this within a complexity of class relationships which had much to do with the eventual theoretical outcome.

It is true that this work was in all its early and middle stages well behind other significant projects. The work of Gramsci on cultural formations had been a major advance, especially in its historical and analytic elements, though the theoretical indication of types of formation was still relatively simple. Again, there had been the important practice of the early Frankfurt School in Germany, which had genuinely found, though on its own distinctive base—radically influenced by psychoanalysis—new and penetrating methods of formal-historical analysis. The work of Benjamin, early Adorno, Löwenthal and others was a striking advance, which cannot be cancelled by—though it has to be separated from—the eventual and enclosing, even self-cancelling theorization of its survivors, in radically changed and dislocating social and historical situations: their strange reinstatement of the autonomy of art in what was in effect the ending of significant history by the development of what they called ‘mass society’: a rejoining of what had been a Marxism to the central bourgeois theorization of its own crisis.

The point is apt in that the English theory which accompanied the
intensive early empirical investigations was already, rather earlier, of this kind. History, in effect, had become a general topical term for decline and fall. Even historical investigation was at once intensive and terminal. It is here that the actual and developing class relations were decisive. For in the 1930s, notably in *Scrutiny*, this was the work of a marginal petite bourgeoisie, which combined the general fatalism of its class with an aggressive campaign against those who were shielded by establishment or privilege from recognition of the true depth of the crisis. It is this double character of what emerged, though unsystematically, as theory which explains both the continuity and the discontinuity into the next phase. The continuity was, first, in the intensely practical emphasis on the specificities of art: that element which properly resisted, and continued to resist, the broad generalizing applications of epochs and categories. The continuity was, second, in the general area of rejection of established and privileged accounts: an emphasis which connected, powerfully, with all those who were coming into higher education from classes largely excluded from it, as well as—at first sight—with the radical politics of these and others. Yet it was also in this precise area that the discontinuity was to be based.

For by the late 1940s and notably the 1950s the newly spelled-out social consequences of the underlying theoretical position came to be in sharp conflict with the deeply formative social and political beliefs and affiliations of a new generation of students from working-class families and of other socialists. It is easy now to say that this should have happened much earlier, when Leavis and *Scrutiny* were attacking Marxism and yet when many Marxists shared not only literary-critical but anti-establishment cultural positions with them. One reason, which lasted well into the post-war period, was precisely the advantage in specification—so notable in contrast with economist or idealist applications—which in the twenties in the Soviet Union had led the Vitebsk group to recognize the same advantage in the formalists, by contrast with more official Marxist versions.

Yet the key area in which a discontinuity, and eventually a break, came through in Britain was of a different kind: not the turbulence and diverse construction of an actual revolutionary society but the quieter yet still tense area of a changing and contested structure of public education. It has been noticed, but not, I think, analytically, that the leading figures of what came to be called, in this and related areas, the British New Left had chosen to work, in these critical years, in adult education. This was the social and cultural form in which they saw the possibility of reuniting what had been in their personal histories disrupting: the value of higher education and the persistent educational deprivation of the majority of their own originary or affiliated class. The practice of actual adult education, at the edge of a largely unchanged establishment, was to be complex and even in some ways negative, but the intention is still very clear. Moreover it can be usefully contrasted with the dominant initiative of the otherwise continuous educational perspective of *Scrutiny*, where the site chosen was the grammar school with lines of minority connection to the existing universities.

This contrast between the attempt at a majority education and the, in
fact more successful, attempt to enlarge a significant cultural minority has an almost exact correspondence with the break in cultural theory of the late 1950s. Moreover, and interacting with this, the break in European communist movements from 1956 released some members of this tendency from the cultural emphases which still passed as Marxism: at its best an alternative selective tradition, which was however simply counterposed rather than theorized; at worst formulaic applications of economism or populist idealism. In some individuals, of course, this break had come some years before the open political fragmentation.

One of the advantages of the whole shift that was made especially possible by the political break was the inpouring of a whole range of less orthodox Marxist cultural theory from elsewhere: work of the most serious kind, from Lukács and Goldmann to Gramsci and Benjamin and Brecht. A still relatively untheorized new position now began to interact with several (in fact alternative) forms of this work. Yet within a few years, in one of those awful loops in time which may, on further analysis, be properly seen as explicitly anti-popular and anti-radical (but then with the necessary disguise, as earlier, of an avant-garde rhetoric), this developing theoretical argument was overridden and for perhaps fifteen years obscured. There was a simple recrudescence of early formalism, running from the United States through France, but much more damaging were the accommodations with it now made by a self-consciously modernist Marxism. In this great period of inpouring nothing, or virtually nothing, was heard from that lost moment in Vitebsk, though its significant identification of Formalism as the theorization of Futurism—that precisely violent but empty and unaffiliated moment—could have saved many wasted years. An essentially undifferentiated avant garde in culture, which already between the wars had shown its formational and political range from revolutionary socialism to fascism, and more directly, in art, from new forms of exploration to new forms of human reduction, was offered as the cutting edge of what was reputedly new theory. Undifferentiated rejections of ‘realism’ and of ‘humanism’ were catatonically repeated. The precise mix of incompatible theories which had been confronted in Vitebsk—a version, now increasingly false and misleading, of Saussure in linguistics; a version of individualist human sources and intentions from Freud and psychoanalysis; a rationalized abstraction of autonomous systems, which had been the theoretical defence of those bourgeois dissidents who had primarily constituted the avant garde, against not only bourgeois society but the claims of any active, self-making (including revolutionary) society—this precise mix now poured over Western cultural theory and radically altered its intentions of practice.

The Role of Public Education

For what was now also the case, by contrast with the problems of relatively lonely tension and emergence in the 1950s, was that a version of a reformed and expanding public education was coming through, in the new universities and polytechnics, as the key site. At the same time, the importance of new media, and especially television, was changing all received definitions of majority or popular cultural enterprise. In terms of practice what happened between the 1960s and the 1980s was
in the main, a brave and sustained attempt to enter the new forms with new kinds of cultural production: whether as new content and intention within the dominant media, or as a surge of independent and marginal enterprises, from roadshows to video and community publishing. This body of practice, uneven as of course it has been, needed theory, even when it was most on the wing. It indeed cited, from time to time, general positions or aspirations from the arguments of the late 1950s. But the theory it practically coexisted with was just that body of work, often strenuous enough intellectually, which was deficient above all in this key area, of the nature of cultural formations and thus of ongoing agency and practice.

It was here (it is a point that applies in different degrees to all of us) that for all its own often useful energies the new centring of theory within what were still minority educational institutions had its worst effect, including upon itself. Blocks of ideology could be moved around in general historical or cultural analysis, but in practice—and as what anyone next actually does—they lacked almost any useful form of specifiable extending agency. Again, it had been shown in Vitebsk that a literary work is invariably full of content and intention just because it is also a specific disposition within a specific form. Yet what was now again being said, by nearly everyone, was that specification depended on the excision of such naiveties as ‘external’ content and agency, and the name for this specification was text. Ironically this was from the same vocabulary as the academic ‘canon’. A text: an isolated object to be construed and discoursed upon: from pulpits, now from seminar desks. Nor could it make any useful difference when this isolated object began to be opened up to its internal uncertainties and multiplicities, or to the further stage of its entire and helpless openness to any form of interpretation or analysis whatever: that cutting loose of readers and critics from any obligation to social connection or historical fact. For what was being excluded, from this work reduced to the status of text, or of text as critical device, was the socially and historically specifiable agency of its making: an agency that has to include both content and intention, in relative degrees of determinacy, yet is only fully available as agency in both its internal (textual) and social and historical (in the full sense formal) specificities.

Of course in practice many other things went on being done, both because there were so many different kinds of people and because the whole period—which I am now, at least programmatically, taking as ended—was marked by an extraordinary eclecticism and by very rapid theoretical and quasi-theoretical—not to say merely fashionable—shifts. Yet the key task of all theoretical analysis is identification of the matrix of any formation, and here the affiliation is clear: there were texts because there were syllabuses and there were syllabuses because there were institutions and there were institutions of that only marginally open kind because the drive for a majority public education of the most serious sort, as part of a more general democratization of the culture and the society, had been first halted, leaving an expanded but still privileged and relatively enclosed space, and then in the counterrevolution of the last ten years—from Callaghan to Joseph and Thatcher—pushed back, spreading unemployment and frustration among a gener-
ation which was still, on the whole, theoretically contained by the protected and self-protected modernisms of the intermediate stage.

It is from this condition, not in spite of the cuts and pressures but indeed because of them—the disruption of what had seemed and in many of its theoretical elements actually was a stasis—that we have now to break out. Most of this will be done, if at all, in ways quite other than cultural theory, but it is still important—as we can recognize even from the story of Vitebsk, within dislocations and pressures much greater than any we now confront—that at least theory does not hinder anyone.

For imagine what might have happened if that brief major intervention of the 1920s had succeeded not only intellectually—as in my view it so decisively did—but socially and politically. Its emphasis on specification and on real as distinct from imputed social and cultural formations would have offered key resistance to the bureaucratic imposition and rationalization of an applied and externally determined art. At the same time, by linking artistic specificity to the real and complex relationships of actual societies, it could have ended the formalist monopoly of those kinds of attention to art and its making which practitioners above all, while they are working, must value. This would not only have prevented the relapse to an unfounded idealism of ‘art for art’s sake’; it would have foreclosed the discovery within a revolutionary society, or indeed any working society, of this so much more convenient an opposition: one relatively easy to dispose of, in hard times, when what is then actually also being disposed of is the necessary working independence of any artist. We have paid, all of us, and in areas far beyond art, for that failure, which was also, as far as it went, so striking an intellectual success.

Related issues now again matter. I began by asking what significant cultural theory can be and can do. This question is still more important than the internal history of any phase of theory, which becomes useful only at that point where it identifies key linkages and key gaps within a real social history. The picking over of texts and individuals, from above, which is the worst legacy of academic criticism, and which determined the tone, the complacency, of a whole generation of dependent exegesis and critique, has to be replaced by the practice of an equal-standing involvement, including in new works and movements. Or to put it another way, in the words of Medvedev and Bakhtin: ‘Works can only enter into real contact as inseparable elements of social intercourse . . . It is not works that come into contact, but people, who, however, come into contact through the medium of works.’ This directs us to the central theoretical question in cultural analysis: what I defined at the beginning as analysis of the specific relationships through which works are made and move. It is an explicit and challenging contrast to what has been a dominant mode, which John Fekete defined in this way: ‘The variants of the language paradigm offer a definition of human life that invites us to be satisfied with the brute factuality of the multiplicity and serial succession of symbolic and institutional

3 Ibid., p. 152.
systems, whose significance we have no standards to evaluate and about which nothing can or need be done.⁴ Certainly that ‘brute factuality’ declines, within privilege, to mere play: nothing actually brutish, but multiple games.

Yet the ‘language paradigm’ remains a key point of entry, precisely because it was the modernist escape route from what is otherwise the formalist trap: that an autonomous text, in the very emphasis on its specificity, is, as Volosinov had shown, a work in a language that is undeniably social. The formalist move to ‘estrangement’ was similarly an ideological substitute for the more complex and diverse actual relations, in different social and historical situations, between the shared language and the still, in whatever obliquity of relationship, sharing work. It is then precisely in this real work on language, including the language of works marked as temporarily independent and autonomous, that modern cultural theory can be centred: a systematic and dynamic social language, as distinct from the ‘language paradigm’. This was already clear, theoretically, in Volosinov’s work of the late twenties (Marxism and the Philosophy of Language). And then with the return of language, in any full sense, we enter the most available evidence of the full and complex range of agencies and intentions, including those agencies which are other than analytic and interpretive: creative and emancipatory agencies, as in Fekete’s correct emphasis that ‘the intention of emancipatory praxis is prior to interpretive practice’.⁵ Precisely so, because any such social or cultural or political intention—or, we can say, its opposite—is drawn not, or at least not necessarily, from the objects of analysis but from our practical consciousness and our real and possible affiliations in actual and general relations with other people, known and unknown.

Specifying Cultural Formations

What then emerges as the most central and practical element in cultural analysis is what also marks the most significant cultural theory: the exploration and specification of distinguishable cultural formations. It has of course been necessary, within corporate-capitalist and bureaucratic societies, to analyse the more sociologically manageable institutions of culture. Yet unless more specific formations are identified this can decline into such abstractions as the ‘state ideological apparatus’, or the still relatively loose ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’ intellectuals. It is often as much in movement, tension and contradiction within major institutions as in their undifferentiated dominance that we find the significant specific relations. Moreover, since our kind of society began, and especially since the late nineteenth century, it is a cultural fact that relatively informal movements, schools and campaigning tendencies have carried a major part of our most important artistic and intellectual development. What we can learn from analysing these historically, from the pre-Raphaelites to the surrealists, from the naturalists to the expressionists, can then be taken forward to try to analyse our own actual and changing formations. What we learn above all, in the

⁴ J. Fekete, ed., The Structural Allegory, Minneapolis 1984, p. 244.
⁵ Loc. cit.
historical analyses, is a remarkably extending and interpenetrating
activity of artistic forms and actual or desired social relations. It is never
only a specifying artistic analysis, though much of the evidence will be
made available through that, nor only a generalizing social analysis,
though that reference has to be quite empirically made. It is the steady
discovery of genuine formations which are simultaneously artistic forms
and social locations, with all the properly cultural evidence of identifi-
cation and presentation, local stance and organization, intention and
interrelation with others, moving as evidently in one direction—the
actual works—as in the other—the specific response to the society.

There is intellectual satisfaction in this kind of analysis, but as it is
theorized we know that it also involves us directly, in our own forma-
tions and work. Thus I could say that what has been most remarkable,
in the last thirty years, is the energy and proliferation of a diversity of
radical artistic and intellectual initiatives: that liveliness which is real
and which might be reassuring if we did not have to remember, for
example, the comparable liveliness of Weimar culture in the 1920s,
which had also gone as far as its Red Shirts and its Red Rockets and
which was not only repressed by Hitler (the constant political warning)
but which, when it came under pressure, was shown to have been all
along a double-edged vitality, unified only by its negations, as through-
out the whole period of the avant garde.

Are we now informed enough, hard enough, to look for our own double
edges? Should we not look, implacably, at those many formations, their
works and their theories, which are based practically only on their
negations and forms of enclosure, against an undifferentiated culture
and society beyond them? Is it only an accident that one form of theory
of ideology produced that block diagnosis of Thatcherism which taught
despair and political disarmament in a social situation which was always
more diverse, more volatile and more temporary? Is there never to be
an end to petit-bourgeois theorists making long-term adjustments to
short-term situations? Or, in the case of several kinds of recent art,
can we raise again the question whether showing the exploited as
degraded does not simply prolong the lease of the exploiter? Are we
not obliged to distinguish these reductive and contemptuous forms,
these assayers of ugliness and violence, which in the very sweep of their
negations can pass as radical art, from the very different forms of relating
or common exploration, articulation, discovery of identities, in those
consciously extending and affiliating groups of which, fortunately, there
have been at least as many? Can theory not help in its refusal of the
rationalizations which sustain the negations, and in its determination to
probe actual forms, actual structures of feeling, actually lived and desired
relationships, beyond the easy labels of radicalism which even the
dominant institutions now incorporate or impose?

Through a hundred local tangles and rivalries these questions can, I
believe, be positively answered. The central problem of actual and
possible class relationships, through which new art and theory can be
made, has a new and in some ways unprecedented complexity, but in
practice—and surely now as a decisive bearing—there is a mode of
formation based primarily on location, for example in the English cities
and in parts of Scotland and Wales, where the cultural and artistic intention is shaped, from the outset, by the acceptance and the possibility of broader common relationships, in a shared search for emancipation. Of course we have also to move between and beyond these identifying formations, but the more usefully as we carry their strengths as ways of refusing and opposing the systematic dislocations, the powerfully funded alienations, which are now the true source of the whole formalist tendency and its arts in a late bourgeois world, and which everywhere stand waiting to displace and to divert our diverse actual confusions, pains and anxieties. And then the challenge comes in theory as clearly as in everything else: this our content, this our affiliation, this our intention, this our work; and now tell us, for or against—and it will run both ways—each of these of your own.