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CULTURE TALK

THE SEMANTIC FIELD encompassed by the single term 'culture' is now so large and so complex, and possessed of such a tangled history, that it may no longer be really practicable to attempt to treat it as a single topic. The very existence of the plural, 'cultures', signifies a radically different subject-matter from that designated by what some, often defensively, always self-consciously, call 'Culture with a capital C'. The adjectival forms throw further fat on the fire: the business of a cultural attaché may have nothing in common with that of a professor of Cultural Studies; 'cultural criticism' as practised by a descendant of the Frankfurt School will bear little resemblance to that carried on by a broadsheet theatre-reviewer. Any new book on the topic, even one clearly signalling its affiliation to one established academic discipline or discourse, has thus to pick its way very carefully through a minefield of potential misapprehensions.

'There are few easier paths into difficulty than the one paved with fixed expectations'.¹ Thus Francis Mulhern, warning readers of *Culture/Metaculture* about what *not* to expect from it. But the warning could be repeated in a much more affirmative and annunciatory register. This slim, pocket-format volume comes disguised as a contribution to the 'New Critical Idiom' series, a collection clearly aimed at the floundering student and offering (in the words of the series blurb) to provide 'a handy, explanatory guide to the use (and abuse)' of the main elements in 'today's critical terminology'. But there is little, its physical shape apart, that is 'handy' about this short book, which is far removed indeed from those warmed-over summaries of other people's ideas that now flood this particular market. For *Culture/Metaculture* is an important theoretical statement in its own right; as a result of its publication, Mulhern may well have taken a step towards becoming one of those authors whose ideas will be summarized in the next generation of 'handy guides'.

The book will no doubt provoke disagreement from more or less all quarters (I have my two pennyworth to throw in presently), but it should be said in plainest terms at the outset that this is in many ways a brilliant work. There has long been a distinctive economy and conceptual neatness about Mulhern's writing, but here these qualities mutate, as it were, into a more confident version of themselves, producing an impressive analytic power and incisiveness of phrase, especially in the highly condensed closing pages. The book is, then, not exactly a wolf in sheep's clothing, but rather a kind of stylish heist in which unsuspecting readers are first enticed in by a familiar-looking array of usual suspects (from Mannheim and Leavis on to Williams, Hall and company), and then are systematically stripped of all their accumulated assumptions about 'culture and society', before being released into an austere, somewhat impenetrable space of 'cultural politics', a bracing but not at all reassuring space where so much of what one might have thought had been done once and for all now appears, in the chill half-light allowed us by Mulhern's unforgiving analysis, to need doing all over again. In fact, there is a slightly Beckettian feel about the ending: try again, fail again, fail better. Or, adapting another idiom close to home for Mulhern: strenuousness of the intellect, stoicism of the will.

It is correspondingly difficult to summarize the contents of this dense, challenging little book. Mulhern's central argument is that although the tradition which he calls 'Kulturkritik' (of which more in a moment) and the movement or discipline now called 'Cultural Studies' may appear to be almost diametrically opposed in their aims and political affiliations, they in fact exhibit a fundamental continuity at the level of form. They each appeal to a (very different) notion of 'culture' to 'mediate a symbolic metapolitical resolution of the contradictions of capitalist modernity'. 'Kulturkritik' attempts to 'spiritualize' the notion as 'the higher truth of humanity or the nation'; Cultural Studies attempts to 'politicize' it as 'the unregarded democracy of everyday life'. These kinds of explicit appeal to 'culture' Mulhern christens 'metacultural discourse', that is, 'discourse in which culture addresses its own generality and conditions of existence'. But metacultural discourse, he urges, should not deceive itself that it can somehow supplant the authority of politics, and in place of such hubristic practices, he recommends a more modestly framed conception of 'cultural politics'.

¹ Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, Routledge: London 2000, £8.99 paperback, 198 pp, 0 415 10230 8.

In practical terms, the first part of the book contains brief discussions of Mann, Benda, Ortega, Leavis and Mannheim, of Freud, Woolf and Orwell, of Eliot and Hoggart, and then a much longer account of Raymond Williams. The second part takes up Williams (again) and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, deals at some length with Stuart Hall, and then touches on the work of several recent practitioners of Cultural Studies. The brief concluding section states his own alternative position. It should just be recorded that quite a few of the paragraphs in this book have done more than one tour of duty before. Thus, much the greater part of the chapters on Hoggart and Williams is reproduced verbatim from the essay 'A Welfare Culture? Hoggart and Williams in the Fifties', which first appeared in *Radical Philosophy* in 1996 and was then republished in his collection *The Present Lasts a Long Time: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1999). Similarly, his account of Benda, Mannheim and company borrows from other essays reprinted in that volume, the earliest of which was first published as far back as 1981, while Leavis has, of course, been at the heart of Mulhern's critical concerns from the very outset of his career. It is in the more extended account of Cultural Studies, and especially in the argument about the hidden continuity of form between that discipline and the Kulturkritik tradition, that the novelty of the book is chiefly to be found.

Birmingham and beyond

Mulhern says several times (in slightly differing terms) that the defining aim of Cultural Studies has been 'to de-mystify the presumptive authority of Kulturkritik', that as a movement (which in some ways it is better described as than as a 'discipline') its informing aspiration has been to contest the status of the kind of 'culture' laid claim to by the older tradition. He emphasizes that 'popular creativity' is 'the very principle of Cultural Studies', and points to the pitfalls of treating some selection of such activities as a locus of value. He is properly severe on the posturing of 'the intellectual as fan' and devastating on the 'street pastoral' of certain theorists' invocation of an implausibly unmediated set of 'spontaneous' popular tastes. Following other critics, he dissects the desire in Cultural Studies to 'be politics', to constantly assert that what one is doing is, somehow, political, indeed more 'political' than conventional politics. And he approvingly cites Todd Gitlin's call for a 'harder-headed, less wishful cultural studies, free of the burden of imagining itself to be a political practice'. Mulhern writes (as some other

critics, including myself, clearly do not) from a position that is in some ways *inside* contemporary Cultural Studies—one which, as always, gives his critique more purchase and more force. But although deeply familiar with this literature, he maintains a certain theoretical distance from its populist enthusiasms, and his own idiom is inflected by the austerer tones derived from the European high Marxist tradition of Gramsci, Lukács and Adorno.

It is clear that the two figures who most engage Mulhern's intellectual energies in this book are Williams and Hall; no other writers mentioned in the book are discussed at anything like the same length nor, despite occasional polite remarks elsewhere, with the same respect, a respect which expresses itself in the form of that highest tribute, extended and responsible criticism. The section on Hall is particularly impressive, involving a neat exercise in practical criticism (if Mulhern will forgive the term) on Hall's style, especially the function of its characteristic 'thickness of modification'. These tics, Mulhern acutely observes, give the appearance of exactness without the reality. 'Emphasis, in cases such as these, is the opposite of what it purports to be: it is a way of not coming to the point. It is the deceptive figure of theoretical evasion.' His analysis here is theoretically as well as stylistically sharp, indicating, for example, the loss of explanatory power in Hall's tendency to treat 'the conjunctural' and 'the concrete' as equivalents. (I have to say that the picture of Hall which emerges from Mulhern's analysis, though it is no part of the latter's intention so to represent him, seems to me that of an exceptionally alert and responsive social critic who cannot quite bring himself to acknowledge that his most fruitful perceptions are constantly escaping, and thereby drawing attention to, the limits of his inherited materialist idiom.)

I have two reservations about the argument of the book, reservations which, though fundamental, do not seem to me to detract from its value but, rather, to challenge its self-description. The first concerns his construction of the tradition of 'Kulturkritik', while the second focuses on his analysis of the function of the idea of 'culture' itself and the role of his own book in relation to this.

It is vitally important, I believe, to recognize that 'Kulturkritik', as the term is used in this book, designates a position or tradition that has been constructed by Mulhern himself. Of course, in its original German

it refers to a recognizable genre that stretches back, perhaps, as far as the end of the eighteenth century. But Mulhern uses the term to refer to something that is both more general and more specific than that particular German tradition. It is more general because for him it is Europe-wide, embracing figures as different as Benda and Leavis as well as those like Mann who undeniably belong under the heading as conventionally used. But it is also more specific, partly because for Mulhern it effectively begins in 1918 (and particularly flourished between the wars, albeit with postwar British continuations), but partly because it denotes a particular intellectual and political conjunction. 'Kulturkritik', as used here, denotes the revulsion from 'mass society' of a mandarin elite, the appeal to an inherited, if also largely intangible, way of life or 'national spirit', most lastingly embodied in the higher artistic forms, which is seen as threatened by democracy and the popularization of taste. The polarity between 'minority culture' and 'mass civilization' is constitutive of the critical position occupied by this tradition.

A truncated tradition

Now, no one could possibly deny that something like this was a powerful strain in twentieth-century European social thought, but, first, the figures whom Mulhern cites as its representatives seem a heterogeneous crew, exhibiting more dissimilarity than resemblances; and, second, the 'tradition' so constructed is far from co-extensive with all invocations of the critical value of 'culture'. Thus, Benda, for example, surely belongs in a specifically French tradition of looking to a transcendent conception of Reason to function as a *pouvoir spirituel*, dismissive not only of all engagement with mere practice but, more particularly, explicitly hostile to that Germanic insistence on the priority of a *national* way of life that was such a feature of the core tradition of *Kulturkritik* (even though Benda himself was not above treating France as the national home of the universal). By starting his account of the tradition in 1918, Mulhern makes European inter-war cultural pessimism its defining moment, so that the appeal to 'culture' has to be socially elitist, culturally alarmist and politically conservative. But this foreshortens and radically distorts the historical possibilities. If one returned to, say, Ruskin and Morris, or even, in the period Mulhern focuses on, to Tawney, one would find a tradition of social criticism that in various ways appeals to what is understood by 'culture' but which shared few of the reactionary features Mulhern makes constitutive of 'Kulturkritik'.

The structure of Mulhern's argument assigns 'Kulturkritik' firmly to the past, not just chronologically by tying it to the first half of the twentieth century, but also in the sense of treating it as a wholly discredited enterprise. It is upon this opening move that the logic of his book depends. What, from there, he goes on to say about a certain structural or formal continuity between this alleged tradition and Cultural Studies seems to me wholly persuasive and valuable. But what it rules out, at a stroke, is the validity of any attempt to speak from 'culture' as part of political debate within society. To seek to draw upon a source of critical thinking which may help contest some of the exploitative effects of instrumental reason in contemporary global politics is not simply to repeat some outmoded mandarin gesture. One may acknowledge the force of Williams's criticisms of the 'culture and society tradition', and indeed profit from Mulhern's own detailed criticism of his predecessors, while at the same time still finding 'culture' a useful mnemonic for the kinds of values that those principally engaged in controlling the wealth and power in the world habitually tend to neglect. Seen in this way, 'culture' still names an ethical move, an allusion to the bearing which that kind of disinterested or autotelic exploration of human possibility, characteristically (but not exclusively) pursued in artistic and intellectual activity, can have upon those processes that are governed by the need to bring about proximate instrumental ends.

This leads into my second reservation. It is not clear to me that Mulhern's own book is exempt from the charges he lays against what he calls 'metacultural discourse', but, by the same token, I do not necessarily see this as a bad thing (this is what I meant by saying that I am challenging the book's self-description rather than its value).

As I have said, Mulhern describes the alternative practice he wishes to recommend as 'cultural politics', in a very specific and idiosyncratic sense of that term. Culture and politics will, he asserts, always be 'discrepant', and this discrepancy should be seen not just as a negative or awkward case of non-correspondence, 'but as a space of possibility'. 'Cultural politics', then, seems to be a kind of constant acknowledgement of this 'discrepancy', an acknowledgement which would prevent us succumbing to the defining illusion of metacultural discourse (that an essentialized, largely inherited 'culture' provides some kind of overarching or corrective locus of value and hence of authority), but which would still seem to furnish us with some grounds from which to criticize

any actual politics. For no actual politics can be, as it were, adequate—Arnoldian vocabulary has a way of seeping back in—to the cultural complexity of the social setting in which it seeks to operate. (This is offered as a conceptual truth, not as an empirical judgement on the limitedness of actually existing politicians.) The ‘excess’ should, however, not be reduced to ‘the higher truth of humanity’, as ‘Kulturkritik’ was wont to do; nor, as Cultural Studies is wont to do, to ‘the unregarded democracy of everyday life’. What he here calls ‘the cultural principle’ is not, in those ways, fixed in its content. Between the necessary failure of ‘politics’ to encompass the complexity of the meaning-bearing reality within which it seeks to act on the one hand, and the necessarily ‘heterogeneous mass of possibilities’ which can never be codified into a determinate body of works or activities designated ‘culture’ on the other, lies the possibility of ‘cultural politics’.

‘Art of the possible’

It is, in the end, clearer what the ethos of his ‘cultural politics’ is supposed to be—modest, unillusioned, accepting of irresolvable antinomies—than what, as an activity, it actually amounts to. Stripped of its strenuous refusal of all comforting self-justifications, Mulhern’s ‘cultural politics’ may at first appear hard to distinguish from what others might simply call ‘politics’, a thought reinforced by the fact that the very final phrase of the book speaks of understanding cultural politics as ‘the art of the possible’. This phrase, beloved of pragmatic and generally conservative politicians (R. A. Butler used it as the title of his autobiography), ends the book with a disconcerting bump. In itself, the use of the phrase might seem to signal the abandonment of the ambition of critique, which would be a very odd conclusion for a left cultural theorist to be recommending. Mulhern is not, it is clear, recommending this, though a chastened sense of the intractability of these issues does express itself in a (to my mind admirable) modesty of tone. But if ‘cultural politics’ is not just everyday politics by another name, if it somehow involves the field of ‘culture’ (as the whole conception of the book suggests it does), then it becomes important to see what the relation is between this distinctive sense of ‘cultural politics’ and what he characterizes as ‘metacultural discourse’.

In the closing pages of the book, he concisely restates a central element of his argument: ‘If culture, in its general reality, is the moment of

meaning in social relations, if it is nothing less but also nothing more than the sense-making element of all practice, then it cannot also be exalted as the higher moral tribunal before which the lower claims of politics must submit to arbitration'. This is an excellent summary of the line of criticism that has flowed from the work of Williams and, to some extent, of Hall. However, the problem then is to ask whether there is any consequential distinction to be made between 'culture' and 'politics', if 'all practice', as is now sometimes urged, is to be seen as inherently political. Mulhern argues that politics is not, and cannot be, 'everything'. Politics he chooses to see as distinguished by its form, which will always be injunctive: the attempt to bring about a state of affairs on a collective social scale. But not all human activities have to have this form and, elaborating this point, he goes on to say: 'cultural practices proper—those second-order elaborations of social meaning whose principal function is signification—have no need of that modal specialization'. However fruitful the general argument about the distinctive form of political activity may be, the bracketed phrase here sounds awfully like our old friend 'culture': not, to be sure, 'high culture' in its purely contingent social form (galleries, opera houses, etc.), but nonetheless those forms of signifying activity which are not principally governed by an instrumental purpose, and certainly not by the goal of bringing about, amid the clash of contending interests, the least bad state of affairs in the world.

Mulhern says more than once that the 'fixed impulse' of metacultural discourse is 'to displace politics as a form of social authority'. This has an initial plausibility as a formulation on account of the primarily German antecedents of 'Kulturkritik', where *Kultur* did at times function in this way. But on a broader view, 'displace' surely seems too strong, and hence distorting: the impulse of self-conscious appeals to culture has rather been to introduce and make effective *in* public discussion the kinds of considerations that the instrumental and present-driven world of purely political discourse habitually underplays or neglects. But that being so, what Mulhern calls 'metacultural discourse' cannot be equated with 'Kulturkritik' (as he constitutes the tradition he so names) and Cultural Studies. Both of these traditions are only examples of the deployment of the standpoint of 'culture'; they are not exhaustive of its possibilities. Moreover, they are individual historical instances, as well as antitypes. Their particular *content*—a class-specific form of lost Eden on the one hand, a no less class-specific form of popular, democratic energy on the other—is indeed not simply to be endorsed as an adequate

ground from which to challenge the everyday forms of contemporary politics. But that only underlines that we need to go further and recognize that what he calls 'metacultural discourse' is in fact the practice of reflexivity where the object of first-order discourse is society itself. In other words, it does not require the positing of 'culture' as some kind of given or transcendent locus of value; it only requires the presumption that disciplined reflection partly grounded in an extensive intellectual and aesthetic inheritance can furnish a place to stand in attempting to engage critically with the narrow pragmatism (or 'specialism') of any particular political programme. Mulhern's own politics, not to mention his conceptual sophistication, certainly mark a decisive distance from those he brackets as exponents of 'Kulturkritik', but is there not a sense in which, in his own re-worked vocabulary, he is repeating precisely what he has earlier identified as the disabling gesture of all such criticism, namely the appeal to certain 'elaborations of social meaning whose principal function is signification', or, in other words, the appeal to culture?

Collective reflections

It may be helpful here to return to some of the formulations in Williams's *Culture and Society*. Several of the glosses Williams gives on the term 'culture' involve a central emphasis on looking at 'the whole form of our common life', on 'the effort at total qualitative assessment'. I would argue that the *generality* of the perspective is the key here. The contrast is with all partial or specialized perspectives. Implicit in this (though not, perhaps, recognized in these terms by Williams himself) is the perception that instrumentality or practice can be seen as yet another form of specialization. 'Culture' is one of the shorthand terms for the 'standing back' or 'taking a more general view' which is the characteristic of intellectual labour in its broadest aspect. Part of what was *historically* misleading about the way Williams pursued this perception in *Culture and Society* was that he equated earlier efforts to elaborate such a perspective with a critique of 'the bourgeois idea of society' (or 'individualism', as he also termed it), that is, in its positive form, with the working-class ethic of solidarity. This produced an oddly distorted picture of nineteenth-century British intellectual history, in which a wide range of writers and critics were recruited to speak for 'culture', leaving only a few implausibly strict political economists to serve as representatives of the 'society' side of his pairing.

But if, instead of following Williams in using this particular political contrast to organize our account of nineteenth and early twentieth-century thought, we develop his perception that 'culture' came to stand for various attempts at 'total qualitative assessment', we shall find that *Culture/Metaculture* is more continuous with the traditions it criticizes than its self-description would have us believe. After all, insofar as the book is offering something other, or more, than 'politics', it surely depends upon the critical potential of that 'heterogeneous mass of possibilities' identified earlier. The critical function of the 'discrepancy' is what his own metacultural discourse seeks to establish. But does this then not bear a structural resemblance to 'the appeal to culture' characteristic of the earlier traditions? Is it not an attempt to do something more than merely endorse the norms of current political practice and discussion, precisely by identifying a level of considerations which might in some sense check or chastise any more restricted or near-sighted forms of political debate? Looked at in this way, Mulhern's argument does not escape the logic of metacultural discourse that he so brilliantly diagnoses: in other words, *discourse about metacultural discourse is still a form of metacultural discourse*. It is still trying to bring something to those forms of political discussion that operate with shorter horizons. And one of the uses of the protean term 'culture' is precisely to name the standpoint from which such criticism speaks—even such self-scrutinizing and theoretically acute criticism as Mulhern's. In other words, 'cultural politics', as Mulhern (sketchily) characterizes it, is bound to share the formal properties he identifies in appeals to 'culture' itself, but I would argue that this is in itself no bad thing. For it concerns nothing less than the bearing of intellectual and imaginative labour on those (other) aspects of the world that are principally determined by instrumental labour. Looked at in this way, what Mulhern calls 'cultural politics' seems to me to be one further formulation of the standpoint from which the task of aiming at 'total qualitative assessment' may be attempted; it is not the supersession of that task.

And this is the common ground of my two reservations. If you first reduce the various forms of the appeal to 'culture' to the narrow frame of 'Kulturkritik', then it becomes necessary to propose jettisoning this as always enacting an appeal to a lost Eden, a form of social virtue which actually expresses an elitist disdain for ordinary life. But if culture is seen as a useful shorthand for a set of collectively practised prompts to reflection—in other words, culture as the aspect of meaningfulness

in all activities *raised to reflexivity*—then we should not simply disown these (and other) predecessors, however much we may wish to distance ourselves from the historically contingent content of their critiques. Mulhern himself, after all, is not in fact here practising ‘the art of the possible’: he is writing a book attempting to give a clearer analytical account of what can be involved in so doing. That is, properly in my view, the work of intellectuals (in one sense of that no less protean term). But it is not a *resolution* of the tensions between ‘culture’ and ‘politics’; it is a further, cultural, *statement about* the relations between the two. It is, as I have tried to bring out, a very valuable and at times scintillating statement, but we should not lose sight of the fact that it is also recognizably a modern meditation upon (if Mulhern will forgive another antique formula) ‘the function of criticism’.