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Histories of Cultural Studies
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Essay 2: Concepts of Commodification in Gramsci, Williams, and Eagleton

Rather than the close reading pursued in the first essay for this class, this project takes a slightly broader scope through which to explicate the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, and Terry Eagleton on the concept of commodification. It concentrates on a discrete section of each work.¹ Such a reading suggests that all three writers deploy a similar understanding of how commodities and commodification operate. It explores the specific consequences intimated by each writer for the products of intellectual or mental labor. In other words, this essay asks what happens when we think about thought as a commodity.

In general, the essay assumes that Gramsci, Williams, and Eagleton all know and use Marx's description of a commodity. That is, a commodity does not exist simply as an object in the world, but describes an ontological dialectic. Commodities manifest both the fixed value of the human labor required to produce them, and a fundamental equivalence with all other objects within capital. In short, a commodity possesses both use-value and exchange-value. Further, commodities may mediate flows of money towards profit (as shorthanded by Marx's formula $M - C - M'$, the mode of bourgeois capitalist production of surplus-value), or liquify the money

¹The versions referenced throughout:

Gramsci, Antonio. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*. Ed. David Forgacs. New York: NYU Press, 2000. "X: Intellectuals and Education," Notebook 12, Notes 1-3, pp 300-322.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Chapter III. Part 3: "From Medium to Social Practice," pp. 158-164.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. "Afterword," pp. 190-208.

required to purchase other commodities ($C_1 - M - C_2$, the mode of proletarian or merchant production). That is, they fluctuate in value depending upon their particular social and historical conditions. Finally, commodities embody a paradox, in that both the intellectual or mental activity and the physical or menial labor involved in their production disappears in the production of their use and exchange value.²

In short, a shared dialectical understanding of commodification allows each of these critics to concentrate on the cultural aspects of production, rather than solely the economic formulae used to calculate its particular value in an abstract market. Because each of their arguments builds on those before it, the paper proceeds chronologically, from analysis of Gramsci's writings, to Williams's, and then to Eagleton's. Although the scope of the following readings allows analytical issues such as translation, historical context, and broader arguments in each writer's body of work to go unexamined, it provides a gloss on each text that should adhere to both the letter and the tenor of their thought.

Gramsci qualifies the dehumanizing effects of the rationalized exploitation of proletarian labor-power by showing that as such a system accelerates the alienation of workers from their products, it also becomes irrational in its elision of the workers' mental activities. "In any physical work, even the most degraded and mechanical," he argues, "there exists a minimum of technical qualification, that is, a minimum of creative intellectual activity."³ Those who become aware, through education or reflection, of their "technical capacity" can become intellectuals. Gramsci allows that, in this narrow sense, "all men are intellectuals," but adds that "not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."⁴ He explains, in general, how this function arises according to class development.

²Marx, Karl. Capital. Volume One: Section 1: Chapter I: Part i: "The Two Factors of a Commodity: Use-Value and Exchange-Value (The Substance of Value and the Magnitude of Value)." Online at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S1> . Accessed 12 November 2010.

³Gramsci, op. cit., p. 304.

⁴Ibid.

Gramsci describes intellectuals as “the functionaries” of the “complex of superstructures” that form the cultural half of a dialectical historical bloc. Intellectuals perform their labor in a “mediated” relationship with the “world of production.”⁵ However, he distinguishes the development of “organic” intellectuals, “which every new class creates alongside itself,” from that of “traditional” intellectuals who do not represent class development, but remain in society across historical changes, and can therefore attach themselves to whatever class they like.⁶ Most importantly, Gramsci identifies “the educational system” as “the instrument through which intellectuals of various levels are elaborated.”⁷ Further, the dominant group or class employs their intellectuals in the production of the consent or coercion necessary to establish hegemony.⁸ The dialectical implication here, of course, is that the subaltern group’s intellectuals produce the ethico-political texts of a philosophy of praxis.

Gramsci’s rhetorical style corroborates this implication. All that remains of his intellectual labor from within Fascist prison are the massive quantity of well-categorized but unsynthesized notes; he produced no monographs from that confinement. Even in translation, the substitution of cryptic phrases and terms for clear ones, and the insistent vacillation of his texts between concrete and abstract analyses of historical and philosophical issues, both demonstrate the nebulous position that his work holds between material objects (the stacks of notebooks) and immaterial ideas (the vast project, proposed and continually refined in those notes, but never completed). Precisely because intellectuals produce praxis within and against hegemony for Gramsci, the intellectual labor that he identifies as a commodity tries to erase the tension between text and idea. His notes, however, retain that tension and reveal the contradiction in the commodification of intellectual labor.

⁵Ibid., p. 306.

⁶Ibid., p. 302.

⁷Ibid., p. 305.

⁸Ibid., p. 306.

Williams builds upon Gramsci's identification of intellectual labor's status as a commodity among any other. He takes up, in turn, the ontological contradictions of texts as commodities, by examining the specific creative practice of writing. Noting observations of William Blake, Adam Smith, and William Morris, among others, on the topic of mediation and the status of a "medium," Williams argues, "the form of social relationship and the form of material production are specifically linked."⁹ He connects, as well, "the idealization of art and the reification of the medium" to Romantic reactions against the mechanistic, rationalized mode of capitalist production.¹⁰ These theoretical developments insinuate that art, especially literature, becomes more able in advanced capitalism to exist independently of its creation. Williams's critique of this notion rests on his realization that "material cultural production has a specific social history."¹¹

However, as Williams reminds us earlier in the book, "no mode of production exhausts all human practice."

¹² Dominant forms must coexist with both residual and emergent forms. Despite the totalizing creep of modernization, literature includes both the process and the result of creative formal composition.¹³ Where Gramsci shows the commodification of mental labor like creative practice, Williams shows the commodification of the product of that creative labor, precisely on the basis of "the objectified properties of the working process itself." Art (and especially literature) disavow their own status as commodities by ignoring their medium; and yet, Williams argues, "it is because they (social relationships) are dissolved (into a specific art) that they are not 'media'."¹⁴

What Gramsci proposes, Williams continues: a detailed study of the ways in which cultural objects and

⁹Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

¹Ibid., p. 160.

¹Ibid., p. 162.

¹Ibid., p. 125.

¹Ibid., p. 46.

¹Ibid., p. 163.

processes also affect economic forms and structures, not merely the other way around. By showing the relationships between a modernist crisis in literature's forms, and the "altered processes and relationships in basic material production," including but not limited to "printing and publishing," Williams casts the text as another commodity that relies on rationalized capitalist modes of production, such as division of labor.¹⁵ As the dominant mode of creative production begins to favor other media forms such as cinema, literature can no longer rely for its cultural value on the simultaneous assumption and disavowal of its material status as written or printed texts. The revelation of this contradiction highlights Williams's key point: that creative practice produces emergent forms within and against a dominant mode of production. This focus on the connection between medium and social practice, that is also a connection between modernist aesthetics and Marxist praxis, marks Williams's acknowledgment of the textual and commodified status of his own argument.

What Williams tacitly acknowledges, Eagleton actively exploits. Alone of these three selections, Eagleton's has the unique content of a reflection on the author's own writing from thirteen years earlier. It takes as a given the context of professional academic publishing industries, and enjoys the status of one product of that context, so popular that it continues to require reprints and new editions. The uses of the author's own book as a commodified text takes the arguments of Gramsci and Williams about the commodification of intellectual labor and the products of that labor to a new dimension: the commodification of theory, including that of the theory of commodification. As Eagleton succinctly argues, "among the more glamorous commodities that postmodern society has on offer is cultural theory itself."¹⁶

He demonstrates how this situation arose, by tracing the development of literary theory since the publication of the first edition of his book, in the afterword to the second edition. As in the argument proper, Eagleton

¹Ibid., p. 162.

¹Eagleton, op. cit. p. 206.

situates each of the literary theories that he discusses within specific historical and (especially) political contexts. He explains major changes to feminism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, cultural studies, and other institutional and radical theories. However, the major contextual development that he identifies since the previous issue of his book is the rise of postmodernity.¹⁷

Because postmodernity represents an historical duration that draws its socially and culturally determining power precisely from its repudiation of historical thought, Eagleton realizes the dialectical underpinnings of postmodern theory. He elaborates on the same tensions that make postmodernity itself a challenging and fruitful topic for thought, as well as a constitutive context from within and against which such theory can debate at all. In the laying bare of structural necessities for the dissemination of theoretical argumentation, such as translations, publications, and academics as a whole, Eagleton shows how literary theory faces a contradiction in its own justification.

The long-standing disavowal of its own commodified textuality has, until postmodernity, increased theory's use-and exchange-values as a commodity. However, once that mechanism appears clearly, through postmodernity's emphasis of contradictions, theory can no longer sustain this disavowal. It must admit to this contradictory constitution, and Eagleton, by using his own book about theory as an occasion for commentary as well as self-citation, takes up that challenge.¹⁸

The effect is at once ancient and original. Eagleton manages to continue a scholarly and intellectual conversation, an exchange of ideas in the transparently mediated marketplace of language, that is, no less, an intellectual history. Simultaneously, he address a contemporary development in theory, pausing the very

¹Ibid. pp. 200-204.

¹Ibid., p. 195. Cf. note 5 to the chapter.

conversation in which his writing appears, in order to conduct a metatheoretical investigation, that invokes precisely the futurity forestalled by postmodernity in relation to historically prior theories. In short, Eagleton demonstrates how academics produce theory as a commodity within and against their specific institutional frameworks.

To summarize, and then to synthesize: In capital, ideas, as the products of intellectual labor, are mediated by texts. Gramsci articulates the commodification of intellectual labor, by arguing that intellectuals produce a philosophy of praxis within and against the hegemony of their particular historical bloc. Williams emphasizes the commodification of the products of that labor, the ideas *qua* texts, and shows how creative practice produces emergent forms within and against the dominant mode of production. Eagleton explains how the very theories about such commodification become commodities themselves, and describes how academics produce commodified theory within and against the traditions and political contexts of their time. Their common insistence on both the material and the abstract status of fixed manual and intellectual labor - the realization that mediated ideas have to account for their own use- and exchange-values, and that they do so by eliding those very values - binds the three writers' arguments to the same Marxist tradition. Most importantly and specifically, each of them argues that intellectual commodities disavow their own commodification, precisely in order to increase their value as commodities. Indeed, each of these writers produces a text within and against their particular circumstances. Taken together, their works suggest that the next development of the commodity in capital could well include a commodification of the very process of commodification itself.¹⁹

¹⁹To paraphrase Douglas Adams, this paper is getting needlessly messianic; therefore it ends here.