

# **Globalization and the Politics of Culture: An Interview with Imre Szeman**

**BY MARC JAMES LÉGER<sup>1</sup>**

What is the role of culture in an era of globalization? This is one of the questions that animates the work of Imre Szeman, founder of the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies and Canada Research Chair in Cultural Studies at the University of Alberta. Szeman's thinking combines a strong appreciation of the critical potential of cultural studies work with an understanding of the importance of Marxist theory, especially at this critical moment in human history. With the end of national culture as a framework for progress in the arts, culture becomes increasingly tied to the new master narrative, he says, of the traumas of globalization. As culture's agenda is increasingly set by the operations of global capital, it becomes imperative, he argues, to create an imaginative vocabulary that can challenge biocapitalism's fantasy of endless accumulation. While globalization democratizes the imagination, creating new identities and new public spheres, for Szeman, it simultaneously shifts our focus away from culture—the predominant aesthetic and representational condition of postmodernism—towards macropolitical issues. In this context, he says, class struggle reasserts itself, political economy returns with a vengeance, and even the immanent aesthetic of workerist theory seems to pale in comparison with the transcendent mediation of radical contestation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Marc James Léger is an artist, writer and educator living in Montreal. He has published many essays in cultural theory, including contributions to *Afterimage*, *Art Journal*, *Creative Industries Journal*, *Etc*, *Fuse*, *Inter*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, and *Third Text*. He is editor of *Culture and Contestation in the New Century* (Intellect, 2011) and author of *Brave New Avant Garde: Essays in Contemporary Art and Politics* (Zero Books, 2012).

Whereas the theorists of empire, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, argue that desire must become practical, that joyful communitarianism must of necessity replace the “fanatical ethical purity” of revolutionary theory, Szeman emphasizes the fact that this immediacy of desire is largely a result of biopolitical cultural production, which, while it causes a mutation of capitalism, is nevertheless fueled by older, basic processes of resource extraction and the industrial exploitation of wage labor. If globalization implies that culture’s relative autonomy is unsustainable, Szeman proposes that we should fight to win spaces of autonomy, that revolution holds more promise for us than the evolutionary anti-art of exodus. Against the fetishization of theoretical novelty, Szeman therefore suggests that the imaginative resources of cultural resistance are readily at hand and all it takes for us to imagine an after to globalization is the return to a strategic realism that is willing to confront the limitations and arbitrariness of neoliberal economics.

After a lecture he gave in Montreal in March 2011, I asked Imre for an interview, the outcome of which produced more questions and more topics than we could reasonably manage in one text. Over the summer months we corresponded over email and he kindly endeavored to provide responses to a few questions.

**Marc James Léger:** In your essay “Imagining the Future: Globalization, Postmodernism and Criticism,” you argue that the idea of the artist as a vanguard is definitely over and that this is a good thing. Art and politics proceed today with uncertainty, you say. I was particularly interested in this essay with the simple way that you contrast postmodernism with globalization. Globalization is less about aesthetics and cultural representation and has more to do with an agenda set for culture by global capital. Could you tell us how it is that you came up with this solution to post-postmodernism? Also, could you say more about this predominance of capitalist globalization and what you might say to a thinker like Nicolas Bourriaud who is eager to ask, well, what then is the mode of aesthetics that corresponds to this new era? I wonder if you think there is any space for an avant-garde articulation of culture in this context.

**Imre Szeman:** The relationship between art and politics is indeed uncertain—or so it seems to me. The gestures of many of those art works (and artists) explicitly committed to political engagement and change are towards little more than simply difference from the present rather than some (aesthetically or politically) well-articulated interrogation of system and structure. In art as in other areas of our social life, we exist at a moment in which political ideas adequate to the present are in short supply. Despite all manner of social inequality and political obscenities done in the name of democracy, a broad swathe of the planet's population has come to accept that the primary function of the state is to run itself out of business. After 2008, neoliberalism exists less as ideology than as habit—an increasingly common ready-to-hand vocabulary of quotidian complaint about public waste that supposedly can only be cured by private pragmatism, whatever the consequences to public life. The inadequacies of the state as a result of the reduction of its services only confirms the veracity of this social narrative—a closed spiral of cause and effect that has proven to be enormously difficult to challenge or unsettle.

I don't need to rehearse the now long and persistent attacks that have been carried out on the idea or ideal of the avant garde that lent to the practice of art a revolutionary potential. The collapse of the autonomy of art as a result of the expansion of mass culture—a process described authoritatively by Peter Bürger—is viewed by some critics as cause for alarm and by others as no big deal. The alarm? Only through its relative autonomy from capitalism could art offer a challenge to it. However, this very possibility tended to occlude the fact that its autonomy left it always already separate from the quotidian in a manner that meant it could not truly intervene in capitalist culture. There is still another response to this configuration of the power of art, which is to view the original formulae by which art is assigned its potentially powerful autonomy as something like a category mistake, which is why its eclipse is seen as no big deal. This is certainly true of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, for whom aesthetic judgment acts as a euphemism that underwrites and enables social distinctions, and little more. It is true, too, of Jacques Rancière's intervention into the relationship between aesthetics and politics, which reconfigures it in yet an-

other way: art as a specific form of work on the “distribution of the sensible,” a field in which politics proper acts as well. The rupture or break once associated with vanguardist imaginings of the aesthetic are in this schema muted, to say the least. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, for instance, Rancière writes,

the arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, parceling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation. (19)

To me this view is not so far removed from the “relational aesthetics” championed by Nicolas Bourriaud, though he lacks anything like the politico-aesthetic structure Rancière has elaborated around visibility/sensibility and equality. I’m inclined to agree with Hal Foster’s critique that Bourriaud’s aesthetics amounts to little more than a “shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society, as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian world” (193).

I have a slightly different take on the eclipse of artist as a vanguard. If Bourdieu sees the politics hitherto associated with the aesthetic as bad sociology and Rancière views it as something akin to sloppy political philosophy, what strikes me with especial force are the impacts of historical shifts in dominant discourses on the social significance of art and aesthetics. In “Imagining the Future,” several things emerge from a comparison of postmodernism and globalization as dominant narratives. The postmodern was an aesthetic category before it became a larger descriptor of an epistemic or ontological condition. Globalization, on the other hand, seems to have little to do with culture or aesthetics *per se*. When one says ‘global culture’ it is to affirm the realities that postmodernism only hinted at rather than to name a specific artistic or architectural mode or style. With globalization, the emphasis is directly on the restructuring of relations of politics and power, on the rescaling of economic production from the national to the transnational, on the light speed operations of finance capital, and on the societal impacts of the explosive spread of information technologies—no need for any complex symptomatology! Finally, globalization is a

dominant discourse with a much stronger public presence than postmodernism. Social and political struggles occur over the ideologies and imperatives of globalization in a way that they never did in postmodernism—more is at stake, and more directly so. One of things that I argue for in “Imagining the Future” and elsewhere is that this shift in dominant social narratives away from culture to a blunter, cruder argument about the nature of power is a sign of an evacuation of the power of art and culture. Dominance once required an investment in the practices and discourses of art and culture, including the humanities in universities; now power seems less anxious about having a purchase on this terrain—it’s no longer where power is lived and consolidated. This has to do, of course, with social and technological developments that have led to a commodification of images, which is, in the words of Fredric Jameson, “why it is vain to expect a negation of the logic of the commodity production from it” (135), as well as the different relationship to culture generated by mass culture—a development narrated by many thinkers, from Guy Debord to Jameson himself.

Does this mean that art and cultural production once had a power that has completely evaporated in the context of globalization? This is how many critics seem to read the situation. But isn’t this to fix art at a specific moment in time—an avant-garde moment whose politics are already in question in any case? Doesn’t art, too, change in conjunction with broader social developments? Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen has recently suggested that while much art practice remains complicit with established powers, “at the same time it is important to point out that the space of art is still characterized by the presence of various representations of the political and attempts to use the field of art as a starting point for the visualization of conflicts that have been marginalized in the broader mainstream public sphere” (199). It’s a mistake to write off the political possibilities of art; it’s a mistake, too, to imagine it to be more than a sideshow in the ebb and flow of global capital—that is, as a site at which one might expect wholesale political change. It might seem a banal point, but it has to be made: it’s 2011, not 1911.

**MJL:** Indeed, it’s not 1911 and by all accounts we’re in a world of biopolitical governance. However, I completely agree

with Alain Badiou when he argues that certain sequences and events cannot be limited to specific dates—for example, the idea that communism died a very certain death in 1989. A specific sequence has come to a close but this does not condemn us to a post-traumatic complicity either. We can have anxieties about affirmative culture or about recuperation but that's not all there is. One can look at this in very pragmatic terms to say that socialism is not something that exists only in China and Cuba, but that many social programs, environmental and labor regulations that we benefit from here in Canada are the products of socialist ideas and endeavors. By the same token, if autonomous art has been falsely sublated into culture industry, as Bürger says, we can nevertheless find avant-garde forms of resistance to capitalist domination that are not on the same order as the postmodern politics of representation. I wouldn't say "good riddance" to the idea of the avant-garde anymore than I would say it to the idea of communism. And if there is to be an after to capitalist globalization, I can't personally imagine how Marx wouldn't have something to do with getting there.

In terms of what I wanted to bring up with regard to Bourriaud's idea of the "altermodern," what I meant to ask you about is the eagerness with which cultural theorists may want to wish away the problems associated with economic globalization, least of all its implications for neoliberal policy, and brings the focus back to culture. The particular form that this takes today is that of variations on the idea of pluralism: difference, hybridity, transnationalism, multiculturalism, diaspora, cosmopolitanism. In the same essay, "Imagining the Future," you argue that the agenda that is set for culture is informed by the operations of global capital and that this has become a new master narrative. Is the culturalization of politics that one finds in postmodern discourse in any way challenged by the return to political economy and class analysis? By the way, I don't think that Bourdieu thought that politics associated with aesthetic ideology was bad sociology, but rather the outcome of a particular class habitus, which had to do with his appreciation of the concept of totality. As I see things what we have today is an ascendance of petty bourgeois allodoxia in which the lifestyle concerns of an international class refuses all determinations in matters of identity and so we

have a clear shift from national culture to global petty bourgeois culture.

**IS:** I don't think that anything I suggested above means "good riddance"! Questioning the specific politico-aesthetic configuration associated with the historical avant garde is intended to get us past a (still, it must be said) widely held feeling that the connection between art and politics is over and done with—over and done with because it is thought to be able to operate in a certain way (now gone) and no other. I agree: this doesn't mean we have to wallow in the certitudes of affirmative culture. It does mean, however, that we have to address new circumstances head on.

With respect to the focus on culture in contemporary thought, there are two related but importantly different claims being made here. The first has to do with a focus on culture as opposed to analyses of political economy or class; the second asks a question about the nature of that focus—what you here describe correctly as variations on ideas about the importance of pluralism. I don't think one can avoid assessments and analyses of everything that constitutes 'culture.' The social world is legible only through the discourses and narratives that constitute it. Capitalism is one of these, as are, say, the varied discourses of governmentality that comprise the 'rational' and efficient organization of populations at the present time. This is not to say that all cultural or social discourses operate with equal force or importance, or that some cluster of them shouldn't be taken as a politico-social axiomatic that offers a key to what is happening to us now. But nor is it to say that those elements determined to be axiomatic are plainly and clearly the dominant site of power 'in the last instance'—the kind of idea that legitimates reductive or vulgar analyses of all kinds. We sometimes forget why there was a cultural turn in the first place, which has to do with the reshaping of everyday life in the context of mass culture and new technologies of communication and information, and the consequent impact of this turn on epistemologies and ontologies of the social and political. *Nothing* social or political is given immediately to sensation; we have to comprehend it through the web of desires, beliefs, information and affect that constitutes 'culture'

today. If this is the case, we can't possibly avoid thinking about culture.

My objection is that as important as culture is, there is also a tendency of cultural theorists to overvalue it—to not even be tempted to vulgarly assert the significance of economics or political structure, since they don't recognize the importance of these factors for culture to begin with, and because their concern begins and starts with cultural objects whose significance for analyses is framed not by a problem to be solved, but by traditions of analysis within institutions of higher education. The pressures and politics of the latter also tend to generate analyses that have to place novelty or innovation at the heart of critical writing—the discernment in this or that piece of fiction or work of art of, for instance, the secret to the entire system of capitalism, or just as frequently, of a model of political engagement one doesn't find in the world at large. The impact of culture on social epistemologies doesn't mean that one should wallow in culture, or that knowledge as such is now impossible (as one variant of postmodernism suggests), but that our sense of the world and its operations have of necessity to be complex and multi-layered.

As to the second point: insofar as hybridity, transnationalism, multiculturalism, diaspora, etc., draw attention to the operations of power vis-à-vis the management of difference, the shaping of populations through movement in space (or the prevention of such movement), impediments to social possibility and mobility due to cultural, social, and racial differences, etc., these are valuable concepts with which to understand globalization. My anxiety is that often enough such concepts are deployed in the absence of an analysis of the operations of identity and difference *within* capitalism; such a politics as does exist is often unreflexively liberal, connected mainly to the dynamics of political and social tolerance and the extension of rights but without a larger consideration of the imperatives of global capital. As long as it can extract surplus, difference isn't a problem for capital (though it obviously is for the older formations of nation and nationalism). Indeed, as many critics have pointed out, pluralism and difference are today powerful ideas guiding and organizing the practices of consumption and consumerism.



I wouldn't bundle 'cosmopolitanism' into these pluralistic terms. The criticisms of cosmopolitanism tend to be that it *isn't* particularistic or pluralistic, but that in its presumed universalism it is far too limiting a concept. There are liberal cosmopolitanisms (such as Daniele Archibugi's) that see the concept as little more than the name for international political schemes that would address problems that are global rather than national in scale. Tim Brennan's suggestion that we can already take "contemporary neoliberal orthodoxy as a form of unofficial party organization across national frontiers" (42) is pretty much all one has to say in response to Archibugi's "cosmopolitical democracy project."

But it is possible to use cosmopolitanism as a powerful regulative and political ideal—as something akin to how equality works in Rancière's thought. This is, it seems to me, how it first appears in Immanuel Kant's "Perpetual Peace." The first two of the three definitive articles of perpetual peace echo Archibugi's aims by laying the groundwork for a formally instituted international body that would be the managing political organ of a federation of independent nation states, each established on the basis of a republican constitution (think today of the UN or IMF). The third and final definitive article ("Cosmopolitan Right Shall Be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality") attempts to identify a right that all people should have everywhere—a *universal* right. Universal hospitality means that a stranger who arrives on someone else's territory must be treated peaceably if they themselves are not hostile. The reason for this? Kant writes:

All men are entitled to present themselves in the society of others by virtue of their right to communal possession of the earth's surface. Since the earth is a globe, they cannot disperse over an infinite area, but must necessarily tolerate one another's company. And no one originally has any greater right than anyone else to occupy any particular portion of the earth. The community of man is divided by uninhabitable parts of the earth's surface such as oceans and deserts, but even then, the *ship* or the *camel* (the ship of the desert) make it possible for them to approach their fellows over these ownerless tracts, and to utilize as a means of social intercourse that *right to the earth's surface* which the human race shares in common. (29)

This strikes me as an important and radical claim, and it is one that seems to go against almost everything else that Kant writes in “Perpetual Peace.” The right to the earth’s surface—a right that necessitates universal hospitality for those crossing borders—does not supersede the fact that claims *have been* made to this or that patch of the earth, and that hospitality has to be *granted* by owner to visitor, by citizen to foreigner. However much in Kant’s view nations might in the future be held together in an increasingly powerful international federation, underwritten by increasingly universal laws that apply to everyone, the borders between nation states appear to remain fixed. At times, Kant simply presumes the inevitable existence of nations; at other times, he argues for their necessity: nations can’t or shouldn’t intermingle due to linguistic and religious differences produced by nature (through a kind of geographic determinism); or nations shouldn’t be brought under a single power, because “laws progressively lose their impact as government increases its range” (38). Nature separates humanity into nations, and does so, according to Kant, “wisely” because the leader of a single earthly nation could only ever be a despot. As a root universal principle, all of humanity can claim the right to all of the globe; the reality of the situation—which is seen by Kant less as something unfortunate than as a productive and valuable state of affairs—is that borders create strangers, and to strangers we owe little more than hospitality. If we take cosmopolitanism to be the right to universal access, however, it places a demand that a justification be made in every situation where such access doesn’t exist, a demand we can turn on Kant himself. The articulation of a right to the earth’s surface in the same passage in which the universality of this right is undercut by the assertion of a need to tolerate visitors goes to the heart of the problems and limits of the liberal rights regimes that manage our legal and political affairs today.

Can we not say that political art makes a similar demand, engaging in a conceptual and political game that asks why *this* and not *that*? It might not be a demand that is answered by society at large; it is important, however, that such demands which pierce to the heart of the organization of power are made, and, to bring it back around to where your question started, this

of necessity goes beyond the limits that still adhere to how we tend to understand 'culture.'

**MJL:** The problem with affirmative culture is not that one might wallow in it, it's rather, as I understand Adorno and Marcuse, that it allows us to forget suffering and at the same time it might also, as is evident in some forms of progressive culture, seek to satiate audiences with moral indignity and sentimentality without imparting any useful sense of how a situation could be subjectivized. In other words, the criticism of affirmative culture is not what it allows in terms of pleasure, it's what it doesn't allow in terms of equality, truth, justice. I tend to agree with your description of cosmopolitanism, though I am concerned to distinguish class politics from cosmopolitics, which promotes legal notions of human rights that act in tandem with the developmentalist aspects of economic globalization and military incursion. I think that it could be useful to propose a triangulation of culture, politics, and economy, and avoid what anarchist thought and media studies often do, which is, when speaking about culture and politics, to collapse social relations with means of production, or to assume that culture is directly political. This is to say that we should allow culture a certain measure of effectivity and even of autonomy with regard to both politics and economics.

What you say about hospitality relates in some ways to what I alluded to in terms of petty bourgeois allodoxia and biocapitalism. Progressives are enthralled at the moment with models of culture that propose various ways that social subjects should change their structures of feeling through affective bonding, stranger intimacy, tolerance towards the other and towards the stranger within ourselves, etc., with variations on ideas borrowed from Bergsonian models of creative evolution or Levinasian ethics which are then linked to various political agendas (anarchist, social democratic, liberal and even conservative). Most often these anti-revolutionary reformist models make use of very naive or idealist notions of social engineering that are not unlike counter-cultural models from the past decades and which typically exclude class analysis. This to me is an indication of the ascendance of petty bourgeois culture, as it's understood for example by Giorgio Agamben in his book *The Com-*

ing *Community*. The problem here is that in this cultural context left militancy is made to stand in for everything that is universalizing, masculinist, totalizing, and so on. This attitude tends to avoid complex uses of the notions of totality, rationality, subjectivity, and universality that are in fact necessary if we are to pursue a politics of universal emancipation.

With reference to what you discussed, an interesting example of critical public art is that of Christoph Schlingensief's *Bitte liebt Österreich!* (Please Love Austria!) of 2000.<sup>2</sup> The artist organized an outdoor "Big Brother" type reality show in which the Austrian public was asked to vote for which asylum seeker should be allowed to stay in the country and which should be deported. The participants were kept in a container camp that was marked *Ausländer Raus* (foreigners out!), which was meant to stage the popularity of extreme right-wing ideas in Austria and the state's recognition of the right populist FPÖ party of Jörg Haider. In many ways Schlingensief's work anticipated the recent violent acts of Anders Behring Breivik in Norway and the communication of sympathy for his ideas on behalf of neo-fascist groups in France and Italy, not to mention the exploitation by the mainstream media of anti-Muslim rhetoric. In less drastic terms, this also reflects public policies in Canada and the U.S. that are meant to detract from scrutiny of labor policy, industrial relations, and the like.

My next question then relates specifically to your essay "Marxist Literary Criticism, Then and Now," which was published in the journal *Mediations* in 2009. In this piece you state that there are three basic modes of Marxist art criticism: (1) reminders to historicize and to focus on class and political economy, (2) critiques of the institutions of cultural production and analysis, and (3) anxieties about affirmative culture and critique of the cultural studies tendency to find moments of resistance in almost anything. I'm wondering, with reference to your recent collaboration with Eric Cadzyn, *After Globalization*, if there is still some room within critical theory for the Marxist analysis of the transition to communism and also if there is anything left of the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist experiment with political organiz-

---

<sup>2</sup> **IMAGE (opposite):** Christoph Schlingensief, *Bitte liebt Österreich!* (*Please Love Austria*), 2000. Performance event. Photo © David Baltzer/bildbuehne.de.



Christoph Schlingensief, Bitte liebt Österreich! (Please Love Austria), 2000. Performance event. Photo © David Baltzer/bildbuehne.de

ation. In other words, it seems to me that if class struggle is to reassert itself and if “political economy is back in style,” which

indeed it is, art criticism would have something to say about political organization. I ask this question knowing very well that in the contemporary “visual arts” at least there is enormous energy being dedicated to organization in relation to new class compositions. Most of this, however, tends to be devised in terms of utopian and small-scale anarchist models, which the international class of capitalists, the state bureaucracies and their military-police apparatuses are hardly worried about. How then can (2) spend less time worrying about (3) and do more to be useful to (1) and what do you think the role of cultural studies is in this age of post-politics, austerity capitalism, and the corporatization of the university?

**IS:** These are good points to make. Certain concepts come loaded with meanings that, as a result of their histories, cannot be easily shaken off. And so cosmopolitanism does speak to human rights regimes and developmental schema, even if at its core it names a possibility of affiliations and connections that go beyond national sentiment or the prohibitions of a lifeworld organized around property. As those theorists who draw attention to negative cosmopolitanisms make clear, all too often discourses of cosmopolitanism legitimate imperialistic and hegemonic intrusions by the powerful into spaces they want to manage and control. Narratives of human rights, of economic and social development, and (more lately) of globalization appeal to universalistic measures of the human *as such*, against which the state of this or that part of the world can be assessed. Given the imperatives and desires of the forces that are creating and promoting these measures, it comes as little surprise that the universalism they promote is suspect.

As for the effectivity and autonomy of culture: this, too, is a good point to make. If I tend to err in the other direction it is because culture is more often than not viewed as fully autonomous (in both critical thought and in society at large), and so reminders of limits, blocks, and conditions of possibility can't help but introduce important considerations into the discussions of the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of culture. And I take your point about the fear of notions such as totality and universality. As I said above, there's no question that appeals to universality made by some thinkers (for example, liberals such as Kwame Anthony

Appiah or Martha Nussbaum) have to be read with a critical eye. At the same time, a complete rejection of universality—as something akin to a category mistake when it comes to the rich diversity of human Being—is in fact a perverse affirmation of that universality which already exists: the universality of capitalist subjectivity. In an era that has been described as one in which the hitherto formal subsumption of labor under capital has become real, we already have a universal subject—an exploited subject, lacking in rights, who endures “the meaningless and alienating qualities of so many jobs and so much of daily life in the midst of immense but unevenly distributed potentiality for human flourishing” (Harvey).

Is there room for an analysis of a transition to communism? One hopes so. Is there anything left of experiments with political organization? There are. I think immediately of Erik Olin Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010) as an example of a recent book that unapologetically devotes itself to framing emancipatory social possibilities, or of the 2006 documentary *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*, which examines the country’s imaginative, collective response to the loss of more than half of its oil imports. Though it is perhaps too easy to be cynical about the significance of contemporary visual arts in its explorations of political organization, I agree with you that the visual arts *are* a site in which this issue of organizational possibility is being posed and examined. However the arts might be greeted by the capitalist class, however they might be contained and consigned to spaces of relative predictability, the conceptual experimentations of the visual arts remain a genuine resource—*especially* as so many artists and art collectives move beyond lingering modernist interrogations of the nature and subject of art, and simply enact scenarios and carry out social investigations to see what these might reveal or produce. I like Hal Foster’s recent reading of the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, for instance. Foster sees Hirschhorn’s work as consisting of explorations of precarity, expenditure, and of the conceptual difficulty of reading the present (the mode of the *bête* in Hirschhorn’s work, who operates within the social circumstances of emergency); the resources Hirschhorn draws upon in doing so are those “that lie dormant in the ‘general intellect’ of the multitude, a multitude that, to different de-

grees, faces a state of emergency today” (Foster 2011: 105). Here we have an artist engaged in an exploration of the fundamental problems of organization today: a socioeconomic system governed by fear and insecurity, as well as a helplessness in the face of everything from the scale of existing infrastructure (from the military-security apparatus to our sheer dependence on technology) to looming ecological crises; a world premised on narratives and fantasies of growth that will have to re-build itself around perpetual lack; and finally, a historical moment of confused epistemologies which are hurt rather than helped by the enormous amounts of data we are so adept at generating. Foster describes Hirschhorn’s use of everyday materials and techniques as the “search for a nonexclusive public, a public after the apparent dissolution of the public sphere” (114). That seems to be a good description of where many of us find ourselves at the moment when it comes to confronting the problem of political organization.

The question you end with about cultural studies is a big one. I refuse to write off the university, despite its many problems and limits. It remains a central site of knowledge production and legitimation; it is a space in which a large part of the population in Western countries (and an increasingly large part in the rest of the world: non-Western students now make up more than half of the globe’s university population) spends a key point in their lives, a place in which the passage to (an imagined) full citizenship takes place alongside an immersion in social and political codes and beliefs. There are numerous other sites at which such social pedagogy takes place—everywhere from the communications media to spaces of religion. Still, the university matters, even if different parts of it might matter to different degrees, and even if it is not the sole political-social-cultural arbiter.

And so, in this context, is it not important to have an approach to culture that is (ideally) self-reflective about its practice as a mode of knowledge production (and indeed, clear about the need to consider the status and function of an institution such as the university within this practice), that looks at the full range of sites and spaces in which meaning is communicated (and the subject and social are produced), that explores with students the kinds of questions we’ve been raising in our own



discussion, and finally, that might take as its subject post-politics, austerity capitalism and the corporatization of the university (and so what it can to provide students with the concepts to understand these developments)?

On the other hand I can't help but worry that the embrace of cultural studies within universities—to the limited degree that this has happened—is evidence of some of the pressures faced by the contemporary university. Raymond Williams famously identified three elements of culture: dominant, residual and emergent. The arts and humanities within universities reflect the dominant values of society, though they are also importantly residual insofar as their configuration represents a different social formation than that of the present. Within the relative autonomy that exists for many of those operating within universities, should we not instead try to occupy the position of the emergent? At their very best, cultural studies are driven by the imperative to do just this.

**MJL:** I agree with you about the need to affirm the mediating role of institutions. Universities definitely contribute to the creation of social values and creative industry advocates typically ignore this educational contribution that the welfare state makes to the general economy. If I could ask you one last question, I would be interested in knowing what kinds of policy issues are foremost in your mind at this moment in both the national situation and in terms of globalization. With the re-election of the Harper Conservatives and the arrival of Sun News, many in the various arts sectors in Canada are expecting the state to push culture further in the direction of a commercial and free market orientation—the kind of policy offensive that we've seen recently with the memorandum put out by the Dutch State Secretary for Culture. George Yúdice makes the observation that in the context of globalization, and even if the neoliberal state maintains public funding for culture, “culture-as-resource” acts as an expedient, both in terms of economic stimulus and with regard to the management of social conflicts (2003). The exemption of culture from free trade deals like NAFTA has proven to be something of a myth, however, and this is borne out in some respects as culture wars replace notions of national culture, or dovetail with it. Yúdice argues that trade liberaliza-

tion has made culture more of a protagonist than it ever was. Beyond what you've already said about cosmopolitanism and universal access, what do you think of this special place of culture in the midst of global class polarization and proletarianization? Are the free traders correct? Is culture the ultimate commodity? I ask you this in part because our first meeting was in Montreal in March 2011 on the occasion of a lecture you gave at the Sauvé Scholars Foundation that was provocatively titled "Why We Don't Need Creativity."

**IS:** Let me talk first about why I don't think we need creativity. The 'we' is not just the left, or cultural producers, but *everyone*. And it isn't that we don't need novelty, or innovation, or change, or radical insights or interventions: it's creativity specifically that I think we don't need. I argue that creativity has become not just an empty honorific (the kind of thing that one says in praise of one's children) but also a dangerous one. It is a concept that is imagined as lying at the heart of artistic and cultural activity. Over the course of the twentieth-century, but with special force during the past two decades of globalization discourse, creativity has also come to be associated with any and all kinds of innovation in the business community. What I find significant about (for instance) Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) is the manner in which he tries to connect the (supposed) autonomy of artists and cultural workers to the work of those involved in the high tech industry. Florida's argument is that more and more workers are becoming freer and freer (and also generating more money) because they are engaged in creative work in a manner that is similar to artists. In his eyes, artists have the maximum creativity, spending their days engaged in self-expression and self-definition. We're lucky then to live at a moment when *all* work becomes akin to being an artist, as we can thus express our creativity at work as well as at play.

What Florida and other champions of creativity overlook is, first, that many artists and cultural workers continue to receive far from living wages, and second, that those who are being creative in the tech industries are also receiving salaries that are less than they otherwise might. The (supposed) joys of being able to be creative seem to blind these workers to the fact that

their employers are still making a surplus off of their labor. But even beyond this, I can't help but be suspicious of the very idea of creativity. It seems to do little real analytic work in comparison to its ideological function, which can range from expressions of pleasure or approval, to covering up the exploitation and the extraction of surplus through the narrative that we are all artists now, and so have reached whatever self-fulfillment we might expect from society. Creativity is far from a coherent concept, though we often enough take it to be so. In my reading of Florida's work, creativity has multiple, often contradictory definitions. It is at times an innate quality of the human everyone possesses; at other times, this quality is shared unequally, such that only some will ever be creative (and this is determined genetically); sometimes it is a cultural characteristic (some cultures being more creative than others); other times it is associated with certain kinds of work; frequently it is tied simply to innovation, and even more specifically, to innovations in technology.

For artists and cultural producers, the sudden importance of creative labor—and associated concepts, such as creative cities—might make it seem as if it their own work has finally assumed the social importance they always imagined for it. To whatever degree, in an effort to develop the immaterial and affective aspects of their economies in the new century, cities, regions and countries around the world have created programs to support and encourage culture. Instead of being a drain on economies, the arts and culture sector is now seen as having a positive fiscal impact on the economy. So one might think: even if creativity is a specious concept, what could be wrong with taking advantage of creative discourses that help generate more money for museums, increase grants for artists, expand government sponsorship of festivals, and so on?

I don't see it this way. The use of the concept of creativity to render non-cultural activities as having the same freedom as artists' work functions to transform a romantic fiction of the latter into a way of affirming the permanence of labor under capitalism—which now becomes okay because it is creative, and so unalienated, too! It also undermines the relative autonomy of arts and culture—an autonomy (however questionable, however problematic at a theoretical level) that enabled and supported a

critical vantage point on the social and political. Yúdice writes that “the role of culture has expanded in an unprecedented way into the political and economic at the same time that conventional notions of culture largely have been emptied out” (9). If culture has become a protagonist, it is only through an emptying out of any critical notion of the arts and culture. It may well be that culture is the ultimate commodity. The profit margins on cultural goods can be huge, and it seems to be as necessary to our daily lives as food and water. But this of course is a further problem of our moment as opposed to anything like a solution—a collapse of art and life that is perverse in ways well beyond the trauma of the rise of mass culture that concerned Peter Bürger in his meditations on the fate of the avant garde. And though one element of capital might champion creative culture and creative cities, I suspect that even so it is funding for arts and culture that will be most deeply impacted by austerity measures around the globe. As the Dutch example you point to makes evident, when money is in short supply, whether due to a lack of taxes coming in (in the case of states) or a drop in consumer spending, there is a quick turn to ‘vulgar’ analyses of what is most socially significant or important. Culture and the arts usually don’t cut it—and I should add, this vulgar analysis doesn’t always need fiscal shortfalls to animate states or cause companies to reduce their support.

We’re in an interregnum. We continue to operate with older ideas of the critical capacities of art and culture. We’ve challenged from multiple perspectives some of the problems and limits of a critical autonomy that comes only through a separation from life. Yet given the examples of an art integrated with life, whether this is Bourriaud’s aesthetics or the world of immaterial labor named in Florida’s use of creativity, we can’t help but want to return to an older configuration of the politics of the aesthetics, unless we decide to abandon the equation of art and politics entirely. This is something that, for instance, Gerald Raunig seems to do in *Art and Revolution*, where he re-narrates the avant garde as a series of “transitions, overlaps and concatenations of art and revolution [that] become possible for a limited time, but without synthesis and identification” (17-18). But to say we’re in an interregnum is far from saying that

things are hopeless, or that art is compromised and can generate no political insight or action.

Surveying the landscape of contemporary art, Rasmussen offers the following account of where aesthetics stands in relation to politics at the present time:

traditional forms of intellectual and aesthetic opposition no longer seem to be at all available. Visual images as well as words and music appear to lack their former alienating effect and are rarely antagonistic towards the prevailing order. Wherever we direct our gaze, it is the complicity of the art institution with the established power that is most conspicuous. The speculation economy of neoliberal capitalism pumped huge sums of money into the art market after 1989, with the result that art today is closely tied to the transnational circulation of capital. At the same time national governments, provinces and cities use art as a marketing instrument in the feeble competition for manpower, investments and tourists. These developments towards an ever-closer link between art and capital, and between art and the ruling order, are undoubtedly the predominant tendency when it comes to contemporary art. (199)

This passage can be read as listing a series of failures—as the ever-greater deterioration of the critical capacities of art and culture. But it can also be read as a blunt, non-moralizing description of where we are, whether we like it or not; that is, as an outline of the challenging circumstances in which we find ourselves. Is it a complete list? No. However, by not naming those critical capacities and possibilities that do exist it is pessimistic and one-sided in the extreme. And there is a developmental narrative suggested that is often present when we paint pictures of where we find ourselves, one that suggests that an open door that once existed is not only being closed but written out of the picture. Better instead to understand that every moment has its crises and problems. Our challenge as scholars is to understand these so that we might do our part in making sure that what appears on the other side of the interregnum is a reality we would want to live in rather than merely endure.

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1990] 1993).
- Archibugi, Daniele. "Cosmopolitical Democracy." In Daniele Archibugi, ed. *Debating Cosmopolitics* (New York: Verso, 2003) 1-15.

## 130 RADICAL CRIMINOLOGY

- Brennan, Timothy. "Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism." In Daniele Archibugi, ed. *Debating Cosmopolitics* (New York: Verso, 2003) 40-50.
- Cazdyn, Eric and Imre Szeman. *After Globalization* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
- Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
- Foster, Hal. "Chat Rooms." In Claire Bishop, ed. *Participation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006) 190-195.
- . "Towards a Grammar of Emergency." *New Left Review* 68 (2011) 105-118.
- Harvey, David. "Feral Capitalism Hits The Streets." *The Bullet* (August 12, 2011). Web.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity." *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York: Verso, 1998) 93-135.
- Kant, Immanuel. "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch." *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).
- The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*. Directed by Faith Morgan. USA, 2006.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
- Rasmussen, Mikkel Bolt. "Scattered (Western Marxist-Style) Remarks about Contemporary Art, Its Contradictions and Difficulties." *Third Text* 25:2 (2011) 199-210.
- Raunig, Gerald. *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).
- Szeman, Imre. "Imagining the Future: Globalization, Postmodernism and Criticism." *Frame: Tijdschrift voor Literatuurwetenschap* (Netherlands) 19:2 (2006) 16-30; <http://individual.utoronto.ca/nishashah/Drafts/Szeman.pdf>
- Szeman, Imre, "Marxist Literary Criticism, Then and Now," *Mediations* 24:2 (Spring 2009); <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/marxist-literary-criticism-then-and-now>
- Szeman, Imre. "Neoliberals Dressed in Black; or, the Traffic in Creativity." *English Studies in Canada* 36:1 (2010) 15-38.
- Wright, Erik Olin. *Envisioning Real Utopias* (New York: Verso, 2010).
- Yúdice, George. *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).