Radicalism and philosophy

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Philosophy is popular in Britain at the moment, if the media be the measure; albeit mainly in the guise of a 'guide to happiness' – a television guide and a happiness of a rather minimal sort.[1] Radicalism is not so popular, Ken Livingstone's victory in the London mayoral contest notwithstanding (although we may be witnessing the emergence of a genuine radical populism there – which is not the same thing as a popular radicalism, of course). One might be forgiven for wondering whether there is a connection. For if philosophy is indeed a form of consolation, as Boethius, the original 'divine popularizer' of the practice proposed,[2] this can only be because it is premissed upon an acceptance that the world cannot be changed in relevant ways. Consolation is premissed on unalterability; it is compensation for defeat. Perhaps this is the connection, then: defeat. For we live in many ways, politically, in a defeated world ('we' on the Left, that is) and Left intellectual culture has yet to find an effective mode of response; indeed, at times, it seems to have forgotten that what has occurred is in fact a defeat.[*]

Boethius may be excused the presumption of defeat. He was, after all, awaiting execution when he wrote his particular manual in the sixth century. By all accounts, his was a painful death, before which he was, and could have expected to have been, cruelly tortured. For Boethius, philosophy was consolation for mortality – an idea that it is necessary to credit with a certain irony nowadays (is there really any consolation for *that*?), even if, like Boethius, one were a Christian. Our-present day Boethius (de Botton), on the other hand, displays little sense of irony about the balm he offers for the quotidian woes of unpopularity, frustration, 'sexual inadequacy' and the like. His is an insipid sense of philosophy as intellectual unction for the anxious and the irritable, lubrication for what Walter Benjamin called the 'hidden spindles and joints' of the social machine.[3] Philosophy as consolation stands opposed to political radicalism of every stripe. The end, or at the least the irrelevance, of politics is a presupposition of its homely, individualistic, maxim-based practice of edified resignation. Hence, the essential timeliness of its trite projections of eternal truths.

The end of politics

More interestingly, Jacques Rancière has suggested that the 'end of politics' is not so much the presupposition of philosophy, as its goal. Indeed, he maintains that this is also, and has always been, the goal of politics itself. 'Depoliticization is the oldest task of politics', he writes, the ultimate use and purpose of political power. (This is one lesson in ancient philosophy, at least, that the current British government appears to have taken spontaneously to heart.) If the condition of the political is that not merely of social difference but of social *division* – division occasioned by the unequal distribution of powers and resources in the constitution of the social – then politics is perhaps best thought of, paradoxically, as 'the art of suppressing the political', a pacifying procedure of 'self-subtraction' in which the ideal solution is the reduction of the political to the social, of division to difference, or, in Rancière's phrase, the 'realist utopia' of 'the realization of the political subject as [a] social body'.[4]

The political suppression of politics, Rancière argues, is the 'means for philosophy to realize the closest image of political Good in the midst of the disorder of empirical politics, the disorder of democracy'.[5] The end of politics (both its goal and its

termination) – that is, the end of fundamental dispute, dispute driven by social division – is the goal of philosophy, because only then can it securely identify its concepts with the real. All philosophies posit a realist utopia. What Rancière appears to be doing here is generalizing Marx's conception of communism as the realization of philosophy (an explicitly *post*-political condition) into the thesis that '[e]very politics … works [in alliance with philosophy] on the verge of its radical demise'. He thus claims an intrinsic connection between politics and philosophy – which projects a final state of knowing, namely truth – whatever any particular philosophy's purported position on the matter. Inevitably, one thinks of Rorty: disavowing philosophy in the name of an ethnocentric form of liberal politics that only a philosophy of disavowal can make good. (Rorty's particular post-Wittgensteinian form of pragmatism is the philosophy of the disavowal of philosophy.)

Politics, on Rancière's classical view, is a conflict between parties competing to institute different states of depoliticization. However, the ineliminability of conflict (consequent upon social division, the source of politics) means that there are actually *two* fundamental and opposed forms or aspects of politics: one *de*politicizing, the other *re*politicizing. For one can only carry out one's own particular depoliticizing project (the realization of one's philosophy, one's image of the Good), in the face of one's enemies/competitors, by repoliticizing (that is, making an object of dispute) those things that your opponents have depoliticized (that is, socialized or naturalized): the wage relation, relations between the sexes, the ethnic terms of citizenship, the boundaries of the state, and so on. Politics is thus constituted through an essential tension between *de*politicizing and *re*politicizing tendencies, each of which, paradoxically, is *equally* 'political'.

Philosophically, we might describe these two tendencies in terms of the practical projection of two different modes of universality: repoliticization as *possibility*; depoliticization as *necessity*. In the first case (repoliticization/possibility), we have the speculative projection of universality in its difference from the given, from the present, from 'what is', in the name of what might be, or what Rancière calls 'political subjectivization'. In the second case (depoliticization/necessity), we have an identification of universality with the movement of the real, or political objectivization. This second, depoliticizing tendency, itself takes two interrelated forms: one theoretical, the other practical. That is, the identification of universality with the real can take the form of knowing, or what

appears in the modern period as a 'sociological' end of politics – the explanatory reduction of politics to social science (a tendency from which, historically, Marxism has not been exempt); or it can take the form of acting, making real, the necessity of an imperative – a process that depends upon a certain theoretical knowledge of the real it is to transform, just as it depends upon, but ultimately negates, the politicizing or repoliticizing mode of possibility to which it is modally opposed. This schema provides a convenient basis for a philosophical characterization of radicalism as a political form.

Radicalism, a logic of the new

A political conception dating only from the late eighteenth century, radicalism is generally understood to refer to any movement for fundamental change – originally, but no longer exclusively, democratic reform. (The 'philosophical radicals' of the early nineteenth century – whom Anthony Flew's *Dictionary of Philosophy* quaintly warns its readers to avoid confusing with supporters of this journal – were defenders of democratic reform.) In the 1970s, following the Marx of the 1840s, people were fond of reminding one another that the term 'radical' derived from the Latin *radix* = root: 'to be radical means going to the root'. This organic spatial metaphor conveys the romantic naturalism of Marx's early work, so out of joint with current electronic and geopolitical refigurations of social space (although the Deleuzean 'rhizome' – another root metaphor, this time from the Greek – has done its best to bridge the metaphorical gap, with its randomly proliferating Bergsonian naturalism). Either way, radicalism, as such, is famously politically indeterminate, since it is defined solely by the fundamental character of the desire for change, rather than by any particular political principles, or description of the desired end-state of the reform. There is a radical Right, familiar in Europe since the nineteenth century, briefly forgotten in Britain, but all too familiar again by the 1980s, as well as a radical Left. Such has been the prestige of this radicalism of the Right in Britain, in fact, that it has recently been thought expedient to invent the oxymoronic idea of a radical Centre in order to combat it, appropriating the rhetoric of radicalism for its opposite: a managerial administration of gradual sectoral change aimed at maintaining the status quo – in a word, conservatism, in the Burkean sense. It is the distinguishing political feature of the current Labour Party in Britain to have severed its connection to Left radicalism almost completely, thereby ending the symmetrical relations of the
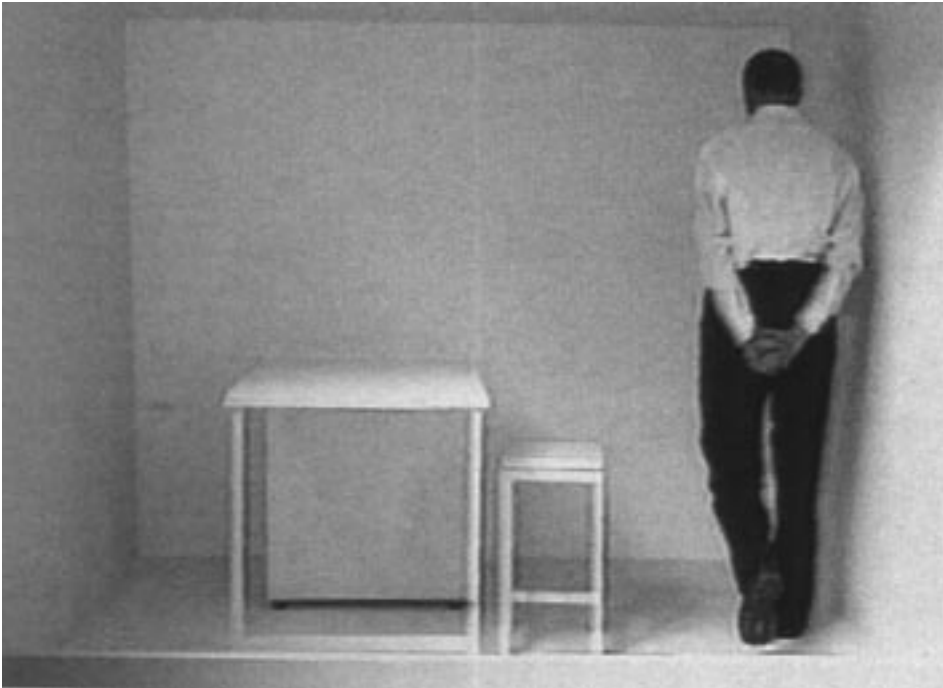
to suggest, as Giddens for example has, that radicalism therefore requires philo-sophical conservatism (with a small 'c') as its supplement.[6] For such conservatism involves an illegitimate naturalization of the limits to change. There is a characteristic dynamic here: the rebound of a generation from the recognition of the naivety of unlimited radicalism to a conservatism of natural limits, in which ecological consciousness appears as a tensely ambivalent, contradictory middle term. Rather, in so far as all determinate forms of radicalism incorporate what Rancière thinks of as a depoliticizing tendency or form of political objectivization (as their second moment, as it were), it lies in their *power of realization*, their capacity to turn political into social form. But the conditions of such realization must be constantly renewed through the opposed, *re*politicizing impulse, if radicalism is be sustained. Such is the dynamic, internally contradictory structure of radicalism as a political form. Any particular radicalism, qua radicalism, always points beyond itself. It is in this inherently self-surpassing sense that it reveals itself to be bound up with the historical time-consciousness of modernity as its principal political form. Radicalism is the political correlate of the temporal logic of modernity, the logic of the new.[7]

two main political parties to an ideal or fantasmatic 'centre', which can therefore no longer be occupied. (This is the founding illusion of New Labour: the idea that one can occupy a Centre when there is no Left.) It is this abstraction of radicalism *per se* from any determinate political principles, often represented as a psychological state (desire for fundamental change) that accounts for the historical tendency of certain individuals to 'flip over' from the radical Left to the radical Right, or (less often) vice versa. It also accounts for the political mobility on a Left/Right axis of other kinds of movements for fundamental social change, such as nationalism. But all this can be found in the manuals of political science... What concerns us here is the place of such radicalism within our appropriation of Rancière's philosophical-political schema.

Within the terms of this schema, radicalism appears as fundamentally split between repoliticizing and depoliticizing tendencies. On the one hand, radicalism clearly depends upon, and constitutes itself through, the moment of repoliticization, or political subject-ivization, the focus on division, and the opening up of a space of imaginative possibility between the present and future. As such, it runs counter to the realization and maintenance of any particular political form. Such is the restlessness of radicalism in general, which means that no politics can be exclusively radical if it is to have a determinate social content of any kind. This is my first point. It is familiar, but given the popularity of the 'pure' radicalism of a certain Deleuzeanism, it is worth continuing to bear in mind. However, this is not

A radical philosophy?

What, then, of the idea of a radical philosophy? The title of this conference – '30 Years of Radical Politics and Philosophy' – conjugates 'philosophy' with 'radical politics', studiously avoiding the more tricky term 'radical philosophy', and not just for reasons of modesty, or to avoid confusion with the history of the journal. (That confusion was deliberate.) For it is unclear that there is or could be such a thing as an *intrinsically* radical philosophy, as opposed to an exploration of the radical possibilities intrinsic to philosophical concepts *in general* in their distance from the given, in a particular case – possibilities towards which the name of this journal gestures from

within a particular political tradition. This is my second point: no philosophy is intrinsically radical, in its particularity, qua philosophy. In fact, qua philosophy (that is, in its conceptual self-sufficiency) no philosophy can represent more than one aspect of any particular radicalism: its possibilizing, (re)politicizing aspect, the moment of alienated universality. (This was the early Marx's conception of philosophy, of course: alienated universality, or the abstract universalism of alienated mental labour.[8]) Rather, if philosophy wants to be true to the political dynamic of radicalism – with its split, disjunctive, contradictory, self-surpassing form – it will have to embrace the moment of realization as the moment of its own supersession, qua philosophy. It will have to mediate its concepts with positivity, both theoretically (via other disciplinary knowledges) and practically (in relation to social and political movements), and thereby supersede its conceptual self-sufficiency in the direction of a more concrete, but nonetheless still speculative, trans- or cross-disciplinary universality. It will have to *destroy itself as 'philosophy',* in the strict sense, in order to be true to the political potential of its philosophical concepts: freedom, equality, and justice, but also truth. It will have to endow these concepts with determinate historical meanings.

Theoretically, one might say that 'radical philosophy' is an empty sign designating the *possibility* of a practical, productive connection between philosophical universality and positivity that must be constructed, experimentally, as a practice of mediation, at any particular time and place. The results of such mediation are not knowable in advance. Althusser was close to this idea, I think, in his later conception of philosophy as 'class struggle in thought', but he confused it with the idea that philosophy has no object, while reducing politics to class struggle. This idea of a radical philosophy as one that is inherently ambivalent about its own philosophical character is in line with the selfconception of historical materialism as a critique of 'self-sufficient' philosophy.[9] In this respect, the very

idea of a 'Marxist philosophy' is a sign of the *failure* of a certain radicalism, as Adorno, for example, saw clearly. Marxist philosophy is radical philosophy (that is, inherently philosophically radical) only in so far as it is capable of sustaining a sense of its own intrinsic contradictoriness, and maintaining the horizon of its own dissolution or demise. Yet, paradoxically, to move beyond Marx, an actual dissolution or demise would, simultaneously, abolish both philosophy and the conditions for radicalism in general, since it is the gap between concept and world that sustains the difference in which politics as the art of the possible resides. In this respect, just as radicalism in general must constantly renew itself, by transcending itself, through its repoliticizing moment, so a radical philosophy must, paradoxically, constantly renew itself qua philosophy, as the condition for its further realization – that is, its subsequent mediated destruction qua philosophy – through its production as social form.

What light does this notion of radical philosophy throw on the history of philosophy in Britain over the last thirty years? Is it, in fact, the last thirty years, 1970–2000, that is the relevant period to consider: 30 Years of Radical Politics? Or did the wave of Left radicalism associated with the 1970s break well before the end of the millennium? If one were to speak of long waves of radicalism – political Kondratieff cycles, as it were – in Britain, 1956–1986 (from Suez and Hungary to the end of Thatcher's second term) would be more appropriate years to choose: the period of the formation, reformation, and dissolution of an independent radical Left – a 'new' Left as it was called, a
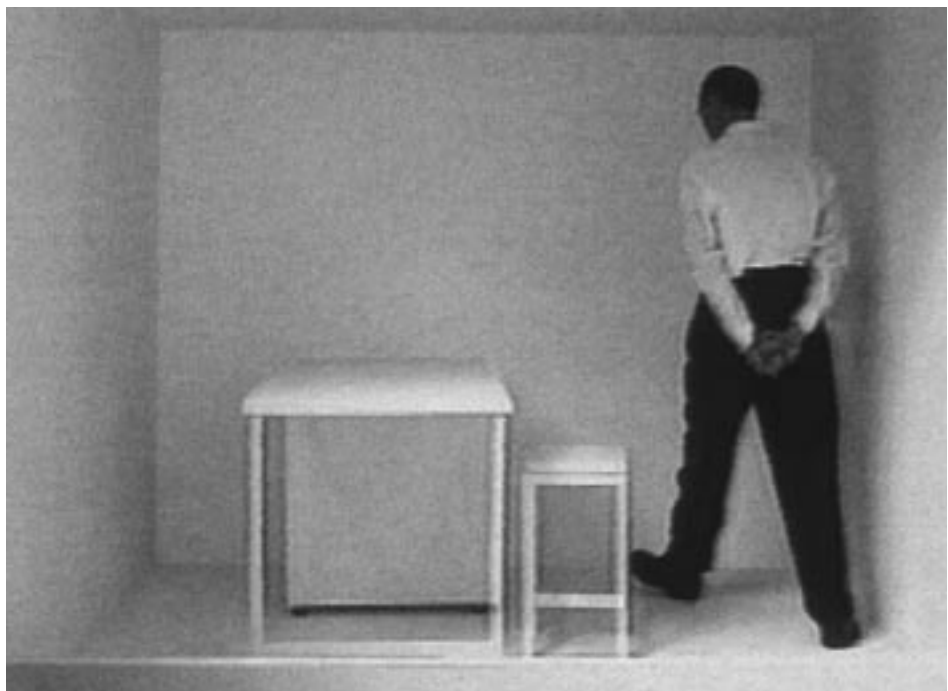
post-communist and postcolonial Left, as the symbolic markers of 'Hungary' and 'Suez' indicate.

This was also the period of the formation, reformation and (not dissolution, but) institutional establishment of what has become known as 'cultural studies'; the one formation shadowing the other, holding its main intellectual figures in common: Thompson, Williams, Samuel, Hall. If there is a singular contribution of the New Left to Left political culture it is surely the recognition of the increasing importance of 'the cultural' to the politics of developed capitalist societies in the period after the Second World War, consequent upon changes in the regime of accumulation ('consumer society' and the expansion of state education, in particular) and migration from ex-colonies ('multiculturalism'). (I take these to be the two main conditions for the emergence of a radical Left politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s – that is, for the new political subjectivization associated with various social movements, including feminism.) This raises the question, not only of the contribution of philosophy to Left intellectual culture in Britain since the 1950s (broadening the period to embrace '30 years of radical politics'), but also, more specifically, of its relationship to the theorization of 'culture'. The two questions are connected via the concept of mediation: the common totalizing structure of a 'radical philosophical' conceptual practice, on the one hand, and general concepts in cultural theory, on the other.

Philosophy, mediation and cultural form

It is, I think, no exaggeration to say that there was *no* contribution of philosophy to Left intellectual culture in Britain prior to the demands for course reforms within the student movement (out of which this journal emerged) and the parallel reception of the thought of French, German and Italian philosophers – mainly Marxist – whose writings were translated into English in the twenty-year period from the end of the 1960s until the late 1980s, largely, at least to begin with, by New Left Books. Prior to this, there was an almost total dominance of a politically conservative philosophy of language ('ordinary language philosophy') in which the aspiration to a purely descriptive form of conceptual-linguistic analysis left no gap between philosophy and the world – at least, at the level of its methodological self-consciousness – in which to construct a political project. (The same could be said of orthodoxly Husserlian phenomenology; which explains the otherwise apparently aberrant interest of Ryle in Husserl. It was existentialism and Hegelianism, not Husserlian phenomenology, which innervated the

philosophical body of the Left.) At another level, of course, someone like Austin was describing a very small portion of the world indeed, as Ernst Gellner pointed out in *Words and Things* (1959), an incredibly important book for the ideology-critique of the Oxford philosophy of those years. The section on philosophy in Perry Anderson's 'Components of the National Culture' (1968) is, not unjustly for the time, devoted more or less exclusively to Wittgenstein's historical amnesia and his 'massive, undifferentiated affidavit for the conceptual status quo'.[10] This is a critique which has been quickly forgotten in the rush to clamber aboard the raft of Rorty's pragmatism. (Anderson's more recent philosophical judgements, on the world-historical significance of the philosophical work of Brian Barry, are less reliable.) It was only the importation of existential phenomenology, Hegelianism and various philosophical forms of Marxism – in a word, 'continental' or 'modern European' philosophy – which broke the deadlock, by introducing concepts in structural disjunction from this common-sense linguistic empiricism.

However, despite the context of interdisciplinarity within which these traditions were received, the theoretical structure of such a trans-disciplinary reception was rarely, if ever, explicitly theorized. Their very rejection by the philosophical establishment projected these texts into the transdisciplinary space of a generalized (and generally Marxist) 'theory'. This protected them from the more narrowly scholastic, disciplinary reception to which they have subsequently been subjected. Yet, oddly in retrospect, they contributed very little, almost nothing, to either the formation of the intellectual field of cultural studies or that transformation of the humanities more generally that was characteristic of British and North American universities in the 1970s and 80s. Meanwhile, theoretical debates in both literary theory and cultural studies during this period followed, almost exclusively, the structuralism/poststructuralism axis of French theory, which was received largely independently of either its specifically philosophical history (neo-Kantianism)[11] or a specifically philosophical criticism. This is a deficit that is only now beginning to be made up. This alienation of 'theory' from philosophy, when 'theory' was effectively philosophical concepts at work in separation from the philosophical traditions out of which they emerged, has been mutually restrictive. Philosophy is perhaps the only discipline in the humanities and social sciences to have failed to contribute to the heterodox theoretical mix of cultural studies; except, perhaps, negatively and implicitly, during the 1960s, as a prefigurative warning about the potentially conservative

implications of the otherwise democratic connotations of the word 'ordinary', which had been so central to the early work of Raymond Williams, epitomized by the alleged ordinariness of Austin's version of ordinary language philosophy.[12]

Nonetheless, for all the uselessness to early cultural studies of the prevailing form of philosophical thought in Britain in the 1960s – a culturally restricted, disciplinary version of logico-linguistic analysis – there are two striking parallels between the intellectual structure of cultural studies as a political project of popular education and cultural democratization, and the transdisciplinary variant of a certain form of post-Hegelian philosophical thought and cultural analysis, represented paradigmatically by the Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt (Critical Theory) from which the former has been largely estranged. I shall end by drawing attention to this affinity, in order to suggest a way in which an awareness of the necessarily positively mediated, yet nonetheless still speculative, character of the concepts of a 'radical' philosophical practice might complement that of the necessarily, but at present only covertly, or even disavowedly, 'philosophical' character of general concepts in cultural theory. These parallels are: (1) their common paradoxical status as *anti-disciplinary specialisms*, or specialisms in a *cross-disciplinary type of generality*; (2) the connection of this common totalizing impulse of cross-disciplinary generality – for it is precisely that, whether it be Williams's 'relations between elements in a whole way of life', Althusser's 'decentred structure in dominance', or Bhabha's 'culture as difference' – to a specific form of practice, namely, politics, in its classical sense, as the constitution of the social *per se*: a willed ordering and reordering – production, reproduction and transformation – of the ensemble of social relations. It is the category of totalization which connects the philosophical tradition both to inter- or transdisciplinary work in the social sciences and humanities, and to politics in the strong sense, as a transformation of the divisions constitutive of the social.

If by 'cultural studies' we understand analyses of the ways in which the meaningful dimension of social practices contributes to formations of subjectivity, and the inscription of these formations into social organizations of power, then cultural studies involves conceptual practices of totalization at several different levels: from the concept of subjectivity (which has more or less replaced that of 'culture' in recent debates), via different forms and levels of social relations, all the way up to the current interest in the global cultural economy.[13] In so far as it is, and has always been, an implicit practice of totalization (with 'culture' the principle of wholeness or the meaningfulness of totality, rather than either a regional part of that totality, or, idealistically construed, as the totality itself),[14] cultural studies already engages, covertly, in the practice of mediating philosophical concepts with concrete historical concerns. Self-consciousness of what I am calling the 'radical philosophical' character of such mediation can help contribute to the theoretical transformation and repolitization of cultural studies and philosophy alike.

Notes

1. Alain de Botton, *Philosophy: A Guide to Happiness*. Channel 4, April–May 2000, based on his book *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2000. See Ben Watson, 'Philosophy on Television', *Radical Philosophy* 102, May/June 2000, pp. 2–5.
2. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V.E. Watts, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980, p. 8. The phrase is C.S. Lewis's, referring to Boethius's influence in the Middle Ages.
3. Walter Benjamin, 'One-Way Street', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, New Left Books, London, 1979, p. 45.
4. Jacques Rancière, 'The End of Politics or the Realist Utopia', in his *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron, Verso, London and New York, 1995, pp. 19, 11–12; *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis and London, 1999, p. 91.
5. Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, p. 19.
6. Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 10.
7. See Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London and New York, 1995, chs 1 and 5.
8. Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' (1844), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1975, pp. 326–46.
9. Karl Marx, 'The German Ideology' (1845), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 24–41.
10. *New Left Review* 50, July–August 1968, pp. 21–5.
11. See Craig Brandist, 'Neo-Kantianism in Cultural Theory: Bakhtin, Derrida and Foucault', *Radical Philosophy* 102, May–June 2000, pp. 6–16.
12. Cf. Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, 'Culture and Power: An Interview with Stuart Hall', *Radical Philosophy* 86, November/December 1997, pp. 26–7.
13. See John Kraniauskas, 'Globalization is Ordinary: The Transnationalization of Cultural Studies', *Radical Philosophy* 90, July/August 1998, pp. 9–19; and 'Empire, or Multitude: Transnational Negri', in this issue, below.
14. See Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000.