

AFFIRMATIVE CULTURE RECONSIDERED

Matt Erlin (Washington University in St. Louis)

Marcuse's critique of affirmative culture, which first appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1937, may seem more relevant to analyses of fascist Germany or the student movement than our contemporary cultural landscape. Yet Marcuse's basic thesis—that the sphere of culture provides a space for the virtual exercise of human capacities that find no outlet in capitalist society—continues to influence, or haunt, debates about disciplinary identity in the humanities. It has, for example, provided a conceptual framework for a number of important studies of “aesthetic ideology” in the past few decades. Such analyses tend to focus on the antagonistic but nonetheless dialectical relationship between culture and economics: cultural pursuits offer the possibility of non-alienated activity that stands in opposition to the purely instrumental rationality of the economic sphere, but as a form of displaced reconciliation, these pursuits can also be seen as a means of stabilizing that sphere. As the site of an oppositional practice with an uncertain impact on society at large, then, culture finds itself in a dubious position. Lest one think that Cultural Studies has resolved this dilemma through its thorough demystification of the claims of high culture, it is worth remembering that much recent work done under this rubric still adheres to the notion of culture as the sphere of an authentic, oppositional praxis. The focus has simply shifted from bourgeois art to the cultural productions of marginalized groups. And the debate rages on as to whether these productions, and the critical commentaries that they generate, ultimately help to subvert or to stabilize an unjust social order.

My presentation seeks to offer an alternative genealogy—and a much less dialectical definition—of affirmative culture, and to reflect on its implications for our current critical practice. Marcuse, true to his Marxist roots, bases his argument on an ideal of non-alienated labor, that is to say, his focus is on production. If we return to the period in which the cultural discourse that interests Marcuse emerges, however, we can see that in Germany, at least, this discourse is best understood as a response to an unsettling expansion of the sphere of consumption. The key question is how to regulate consumer

desire and reconcile it with the productivity requirements of an emerging market economy. As Daniel Bell memorably remarked in his controversial study, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1979), the modern consumer must be a “Puritan by day and a playboy by night.” A consideration of eighteenth-century German literature and aesthetic theory can illuminate the ways in which conceptions of aesthetic experience in the period are concerned precisely with the question of how to reconcile these two apparently contradictory roles. By returning to eighteenth-century European debates about luxury, together with a selection of literary works (Campe, Moritz, Novalis) that respond to these debates, we can see that the ideal of “disinterested pleasure” so crucial to modern aesthetic theory is less a critique of modern capitalism than the key to its successful functioning. In fact, the very same ideal figures prominently in political-economic writings from the period. From this perspective, culture (or Culture) appears both less dialectical and more affirmative than Marcuse claimed. As I hope to demonstrate, however, this need not be a cause for despair for contemporary practitioners of German studies.

