

# To Hell with (the contemporary commodification of) Culture!

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In 1941 Herbert Read – a British art critic, poet, novelist and political thinker – wrote an essay, to be published as a pamphlet in ‘The Democratic Order’ series, entitled ‘To Hell with Culture’. The essay sought to criticise the capitalist co-optation of culture, whilst simultaneously calling for a functional art within a democratic society. As Matthew Adams notes in this issue, it was a peculiar essay within its series. Read focuses on art’s role within society rather than the more ‘immediate’ (political, financial and material) issues facing British society during and after the Second World War. I came to Read’s essay in 2013 after filmmaker Huw Wahl, who was making a film about Herbert Read, contacted me and requested to meet and talk about Read and his work. As a student at the University of Leeds, I had studied under Read’s son – the Art Historian Benedict Read – during which time I encountered Herbert Read in his role as art critic. I had read (and written an essay on) his book *Contemporary British Art* (1951) and was familiar with Read’s proximity to key mid-twentieth century British artists such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, in addition to the genealogy of the term ‘geometry of fear’ coming out of his catalogue essay to the British Pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale. In short, as I understood, Read was a figure central to the history of British Modernist art. Read’s political writings had, for the most part, been bypassed. There was something about Read and anarchism in the background, but that was as far as my engagement with Read’s political writings had travelled.

Prior to meeting with Wahl, I picked up a copy of ‘To Hell with Culture’. The essay presented familiar arguments, especially from my Marxist scholarship, about the relationship between culture and capitalism and the role that art and culture might have within society. It soon became clear that, despite certain shortcomings, this was a text that raised questions still pertinent today and one to which we should return in order to, once again, think about culture’s role in society today. This issue, therefore, is the result of this return to Read’s essay under our present model of capitalism: neo-liberalism. On 30 October 2014, Huw Wahl and I held a conference titled *To Hell with Culture? Re-examining the commodification of culture in contem-*

porary capitalism at Manchester School of Art, which brought together a number of participants, including artists, activists, curators, theorists and art historians to discuss, develop and update Read's ideas. This special issue presents a number of contributions and articles selected from the response to the conference, most of which were presented on the day. Before turning to the contents of the issue, we must first take a closer look at Read's essay.

Read begins 'To Hell with Culture' by presenting a problem: culture is inherently tied to capitalism. Culture is man-made, whilst beauty is natural. He argues that 'the thing we call "culture"' was born alongside capitalism, stating that it was only separated from work in the period of the Industrial Revolution. (Read 1941/2002:12) This separation has led to a non-democratic culture. The solution, therefore, is to create a democratic culture in which '... culture in a natural society will not be a separate and indistinguishable thing ...' (Read 1941/2002:13) In order to make things naturally, society needs to achieve its natural order, reflected from nature, which Read defines as 'democracy'. However, for Read, democracy had never existed in modern times. Therefore, before we achieve a democratic culture, we must first achieve a democratic society for which Read proposes three conditions: 'The first condition of democracy is that *all production should be for use, and not for profit*'. (Read 1941/2002:15) Read elaborates on the first condition; capitalism is only concerned with production for profit, as such, cheap materials are disguised with 'veneer and varnish'. Similarly, processes such as distressing materials to create an antique appearance or cheaply imitating a decorative detail add, in Read's words, 'a bit of culture'. (Read 1941/2002:17) The alternative, therefore, is production for use. Under a system of production for use, only two factors matter: function and fulfilment. This 'fitness for function', Read argues, is the 'modern definition of the eternal quality we call beauty'. (Read 1941/2002:18)

'The second condition is that each *should give according to his ability and each receive according to his needs*'. (Read 1941/2002:15) Read does not dwell on the first half of the second condition as it is self-explanatory. In order to examine the latter half of the proposition derived from Marxian thinking – 'according to his needs' – Read turns to consider, for the remainder of his essay, the third condition: 'The third condition is that *the workers in each industry should collectively own and control that industry*'. (Read 1941/2002:15) Adding to his earlier cry of 'to hell with culture', borrowed from artist Eric Gill, Read further proclaims 'To hell with the artist'. (Read 1941/2002:23) This statement mirrors Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*: 'In a communist society there are no painters but at most people who paint'. (Marx and Engels 1845-6/1978:109) Contrary to Marx and Engels's notion that there would not be a strict division of labour under Communism, but that man would be free to take on many roles (hunter, fisherman, herdsman and critic, for example), Read maintains distinct roles: 'In a natural society it should be possible for people to sort themselves

out so that every man and woman is doing the job for which he or she feels naturally qualified ...' (Read 1941/2002:19). Notably, in this working model, although there are no named artists, those who 'design so superlatively well' are to be exempt from 'routine tasks' in order to do 'creative' work. (Read 1941/2002:23-4)

At this juncture, the argument begins to reveal conflicting ideas within Read's own thinking. On the one hand, he is calling for a culture of 'pots and pans' based on a democratic (for which he refers to the socialist model) or natural (presumably, anarchist) organisation of society; on the other, he thinly veils a problematic view of culture in which, despite his left-leaning ideas, he prioritises those with an artistic sensibility and exposes his own nostalgia for past modes of art making (Greek culture and the Guild system). Most telling, perhaps, are the references to 'genius' and the privileged position of the poet, who, Read argues, has already attained the model of 'democratic artist' (without fully elaborating on poetry's *use* within a democratic society).

Furthermore, Read's conception of art – which combines the ideas of nature, beauty, the senses and education – is indebted to Western aesthetics. Aristotle, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller come to mind when reading 'To Hell with Culture', all of whose ideas form the basis of a Romantic approach to art.<sup>1</sup> In particular, one may recognise a reference to Hegelian aesthetics in Read's privileging of the poet; Hegel saw poetry as higher than other art forms, due to its inner spirituality and its freedom from materiality.<sup>2</sup> Hegel writes: 'Poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature, and which is not tied to find its realisation in external sensuous matter ... Yet just in this its highest phase art ends by transcending itself ...' (Hegel 1886/2004:96).<sup>3</sup> Read ultimately concludes his polemic on culture by turning to poetry, with a citation from Walt Whitman's poem *Blades of Grass*.

'To Hell with Culture' blends the roles of art critic, poet and political thinker in its subject matter, style and tone. It has been noted that Read's political approach fell out of fashion within the mid-twentieth century, when an openly Marxist Cultural Studies, associated with Raymond Williams, became dominant in Britain. Today, Read's political approach is defined as 'anarcho-syndicalism', which draws on elements of anarchism (natural order) and in which we could identify ideas aligned with socialism (moments of necessary collectivism or syndicalism). These two facets of Read's politics are represented within this issue which includes contributions from scholars of both anarchism, Marxism and those in-between. In his new introduction to the book also titled *To Hell with Culture* (2002), Michael Paraskos suggests that Read was written out of the narratives of Art History and art criticism due to this shift. (Paraskos in Read 2002) The struggle between both anarchist and socialist ideas in Read's thinking is, arguably, played out in the pages of 'To Hell with Culture'.<sup>4</sup> The focus on nature and natural order from anarchist thinking is juxtaposed with Read's three conditions of democracy which are clearly Marxian in tone. (In their manifesto, Freee suggests these conditions are plagiarised from *The Communist Manifesto*.)

To these two approaches, I would add a third: Romanticism. As noted earlier, there are moments in which Read borders on Romanticism, particularly with reference to the 'genius' figure with its accompanying myth of the 'artist-as-individual' born with 'natural' or even 'god-given' talents. Often conceived as 'set apart' from society, the Romantic artist is aligned with the bohemian, the figure of the flâneur in nineteenth-century Paris and canonical artists such as Vincent van Gogh or Pablo Picasso.

Under the neoliberal period, this model of artist – the Romantic – is co-opted by capitalism. In their book, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999/2007), French theorists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello show how management theory, around the 1990s, adopts the artist as a model worker. They argue that capitalism absorbs the models of critique aimed at it in order to develop new 'spirits' (or ideologies) which, in effect, disarm these critiques. In the book, they present two models of critique aimed at challenging capitalism around the 1960s and 1990s, appearing around moments of social and artistic change. (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999/2007:8) The first is social critique, which appears post-1930s after the implementation of Fordism (the period in which Read writes 'To Hell with Culture'). This model criticises capitalism as a source of poverty among workers and for unprecedented inequalities (especially between the rich and the poor), and for being a source of opportunism and egoism, which destroys collective bonds and solidarity by exclusively encouraging private interests. The second model – the artist critique – appears around the 1960s and is foregrounded in, and begins to be co-opted after, 1968. Within the artist critique, capitalism is criticised, firstly, for being a source of oppression and, secondly, for being a source of disenchanted goods leading to disenchanted lifestyles (something which Read also highlighted in 1941). This critique questions the freedom and autonomy of humanity. Boltanski and Chiapello claim that the artist critique presents itself as a 'radical challenge to the basic values and options of capitalism'. (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999/2007:39) Thus, Boltanski and Chiapello identify a new 'spirit' emerging from the absorption of artist critique by capitalism. This ideology had fully saturated management discourse, and is thus passed onto the workers, by the 1990s.

The resultant capitalist ideology (based, in part, on artist's criticisms of capitalism) can be compared with that of neo-liberalism, an economic model appearing in Britain and the US post-1979, that encourages flexibility (as opposed to the rigidities of Fordism) and individuality (as opposed to collectivity) in its working models. Both traits can, of course, be found in the Romantic model of artist. Economically, we witness the shift from manufacturing to service industries in the West and also an increased commodification of cultural forms (as opposed to art for the elite).<sup>5</sup> In 2001, the 'creative industries' were established in Britain, perhaps, signalling a high point for the commodification of culture and creativity and the re-merging of culture and work, which Read argues were separated during the Industrial Revolution. Within this period we also witness the rise of the 'creative class', as Richard Florida (2002) terms

it, comprised of educated ‘knowledge workers’ and a core set of workers with creative roles (including poets, designers and educators). Later, terms such as ‘neo-bohemia’ (Lloyd 2006) are coined, which directly references the bohemian model, often associated with the Romantic artist in the twentieth century, now subsumed into capitalism. Neo-bohemia refers to the gentrification of ‘artistic’ neighbourhoods (Lloyd focuses on Chicago but the term is now more widely applied) for economic development.

The reason for the call to a return to Read’s ‘To Hell with Culture’, written almost 75 years prior to this issue, may now be clear. What Read identified in 1941 as a problem – the commodification of cultural forms – is now fully subsumed into capitalist ideology. The democratic model of culture (for use and not for profit) never came; in July this year, whilst Sotheby’s were selling Andy Warhol’s work inside their London auction house, outside its cleaners were protesting for their right to sick pay.<sup>6</sup> The gulf between the rich and the poor deepens. However, contrary to the idea that the art world is now entirely commodified, there are those who put their artistic talent to *use*, rather than for *profit*. Contributors to the event at Manchester School of Art included Liberate Tate, whose creative interventions within the Tate Galleries highlights the unethical sponsorship of the galleries by British Petroleum, and Gavin Grindon, who last year curated the *Disobedient Objects* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The exhibition brought together a diverse range of designed objects for civil disobedience, activism and political practice; objects designed for use.

Presented here are a number of contributions that demonstrate diverse approaches to the call to update Read’s essay. Within these contributions, the term ‘culture’ is broadly interpreted to encompass art, performance, architecture, speech-writing, design and literature. Art in this issue, takes different forms; it includes alternative contributions from the art collective Freee and artist Leah Modigliani, alongside ethnographical research on community art projects in Paula Serafini’s article. Freee present an alternative reading and critique of Read’s essay in their manifesto ‘To Hell with Herbert Read!’ reproduced here in its original format. The Manchester event concluded with participants gathering to participate in Freee’s ‘people’s chorus’, during which the manifesto was collectively read, with participants reading aloud the sections of the text with which they agreed. Leah Modigliani’s contribution also involves a re-presentation of a text; this time an adaptation of Emma Goldman’s 1933 speech ‘An Anarchist Looks at Life’. Modigliani’s text takes two forms: The first is the re-presentation of Goldman’s speech infused with Modigliani’s personal history, whilst the second is a series of notes, which exposes the artistic labour (research, formatting decisions and explanations) behind the text itself.

In addition to the artistic, the issue brings together heterogeneous approaches from various disciplines: ethnography, history, activism and architecture history. Matthew Adams begins the issue with a look at the historical context of ‘To Hell

with Culture'; his contribution provides a metaphorical 'archeological dig' of Read's text, exposing and expanding upon his sources and reasons for using these in his call for a democratic society which, in turn, would lead to a democratic art. Adams' contribution may offer an explanation for the criticism aimed at Read's contradictory argument. Reading Freee's damning critique of Read's essay in their manifesto alongside Adams' excavation is useful. In his analysis, Adams' cites F.S. Flint's critique of Read whose language, coincidentally, is mirrored in Freee's manifesto when he refers to (his friend) Read as 'Good old Herbert'. Beyond the similarity in sardonic greetings, Flint, we learn, like Freee, picked apart Read's text piece by piece, criticising his knowledge of economics, his sentimentality and his romanticism.

Adams devotes some time to unpacking the discussion of 'production for use' in 'To Hell with Culture' through drawing on Read's example of a chair. In the essay, Read asks the reader to think about the kind of chair on which they are seated and to categorise whether it is, ultimately, good or bad design based on how well it is made and its cost. He concludes that capitalism is inherently oriented towards bad design due to the evolution of 'a design which is cheap to produce and easy to sell'. (Read 1941/2002:17) The appearance of 'culture' is finally added to the finished object to make it desirable and thus, saleable. In his contribution to this issue, Michael Coates uses Read's chair example to argue that architecture – and housing in particular – has also succumbed to this fate. Coates scales up the chair to architectural standards in order to suggest that, architecture could be interchangeable with a work of art in Read's 'fitness for function' argument as another form of culture that is now produced with profit rather than use in mind under neoliberal capitalism. Returning to consider the user of housing (the inhabitants), Coates presents alternative (and radical) examples of housing built in consultation with the community.

Taking community as the focus of artistic practice, Paula Serafini draws upon her ethnographical research with community art groups to highlight alternatives to creating commodified art objects. Although distinct from what we can assume Read imagined when he writes about 'fitness for function' in artistic production, Serafini foregrounds artistic practices which are not focused on creating an object, but bringing together communities, be it psychogeographers in Manchester, young people in Birmingham or the LGBT community within Trade Unions. Read states: 'It is not until art expressed the immediate hopes and aspirations of humanity that it acquires its social relevance'. (Read 1941/2002:28)

Converse to the Manchester event which she opened, Leah Modigliani's 'The Snake and the Falcon' concludes the issue. The speech invites the reader to reflect on her own experience, in relation to Goldman's 1933 speech, as perhaps this issue may ask the reader to do in terms of 'To Hell with Culture'. The speech concludes with Maxim Gorky's prose-poem, 'The Song of the Falcon' (1902), leaving the reader to decide whether they are the snake, who remains hidden in the moist mud and

darkness, or the falcon who scales ‘dazzling heights’ and which, on its death-bed, states: ‘I have lived!’ This parable could be read in different ways. For the purpose of this issue, we could look to the examples of (radical) alternatives to the status quo of capitalist, cultural production as the falcons, who are not afraid to take risks (and live) in their attempt to escape the murky territory of the capitalist co-optation of culture.

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## NOTES

1. The capitalised term ‘Romanticism’ is used to refer to the movement in art and literature that drew on aesthetic philosophy, experience and nature.
2. Read was familiar with Hegel, as he wrote about his work in relation to Surrealism in his book *The Philosophy of Modern Art* (1953).
3. Read also shares in common with Hegel the idealisation of Greek culture on which his idea of a pre-capitalist culture is based.

4. It is worth noting that Read acknowledges the division between the ‘democratic ranks’, when he writes: ‘Since that fatal day in 1872 when Marx scuttled the First International, the socialist movement has been split into two irreconcilable camps’, Read, 1941/2002, p20.
5. The rise of ‘artist as celebrity’ within this period magnifies the commodification of culture with artist-brand collaborations (Tracey Emin for Vivienne Westwood; Takashi Murakami for Louis Vuitton and, in 2015, Vans).
6. See John Stone, ‘Sotheby’s Cleaners Banned From Work After Protest Asking For Better Sick Pay’, *Independent* online, 2 July 2015: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/sothebys-cleaners-banned-from-work-after-protest-asking-for-better-sick-pay-10361235.html>