3 Dislocations of Postmodernity

Transition in the Political Economy of Culture

CHRISSE. George is dead.
LOGGO. So y’ve said.
CHRISSE. Yeah. But George is dead.
LOGGO. I know, Chrissie, I know.
CHRISSE. But . . . you know what he stood for, don’t y’?
LOGGO. What do you mean?
Chrissie shakes his head.
CHRISSE. Yeah. Well that’s dead an’ all isn’t it?

(Bleasdale (1982) ‘George’s Last Ride’,
Boys from the Blackstuff, Sc.32.)

I THE ECONOMY

George Malone stood for something, now past, which Chrissie strongly senses but is unable to articulate. Scene 32, the final scene of Alan Bleasdale’s Boys from the Blackstuff, is set in an industrial wasteland against ‘a derelict, part-demolished warehouse, “Tate & Lyle’s 1922” written across the front’ (emphasis indicates directions). In terms of the specific history of Liverpool docks which George invokes in his last wheelchair ride (see Scenes 18–21) there is a sense of loss of a labour tradition stretching back to the trade of Empire and Britain’s maritime past. What Chrissie cannot quite formulate in 1982 – the year of the series’ first transmission – more specifically concerns, however, the breakdown of an economic, political and social formation: the post-1945 accommodation between labour and capital in Britain. George ‘stood for’:

politics and power and come the day when we’d have inside toilets and proper bathrooms. Of Attlee and Bevan . . .
(Bleasdale, 1982: 213).

R. Nelson, TV Drama in Transition
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What Chrissie senses to be symbolized in George’s death is the passing of a historical moment, of a relative high-point of spirit and power in the British socialist, labour tradition. Following the marking of that historical moment, Section I of this chapter sketches the subsequent changes in the political economy and their impact on TV drama culture. The economic outline draws particularly on David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) tempered by Callinicos’s *Against Postmodernism* (1989).

As outlined in the Introduction, the political economy is but one factor in the constellation with which this study is concerned. The emphasis, following Harvey’s marxist analysis, placed initially here on the economic ‘base’ is a means of affording a framework for my discussion of what Williams termed ‘structure of feeling’ (1973: 10–11) and does not signal economic reductionism. In the new circumstances described, for example, the consumer ultimately has a greater reciprocal influence than hitherto. Any ‘reflectionist’ inscription of meanings and values in textual encoding, moreover, is provisional rather than determinant in a reception context where diversity of response is, textually and contextually, actively encouraged. Indeed, in the shift to be traced in the balance of influence between a producer-led and a consumer-driven economic process, reception is seen to become an increasingly powerful force not merely by way of those ‘skewed and structured “feedbacks” into the production process itself’ – famously observed by Hall (Hall *et al*., 1980: 130) in his encoding/decoding model – but quite directly through extended market research.

Significant shifts in the operations of capitalism are, however, discernible, even if this does not amount to a distinct ‘postmodern condition’. In reviewing the period 1945–73, Harvey broadly accepts:

> the view that the long post-war boom . . . was built upon a certain set of labour control practices, technological mixes, consumption habits, and configurations of political and economic power (1989: 124).

After 1973, centralized, labour-intensive industries of mass production declined in Britain, resulting in a dispersed labour force and weakened union power. High unemployment – particularly amongst the white males who had benefited most from the post-war British context – followed, and led to the predicament in which Chrissie and the other ‘boys’ find themselves.²