ANTI-POLITICS OR THE TRIUMPH OF POSTMODERN POPULISM IN PROMOTIONAL CULTURES?

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Abstract

Promotional cultures, to use Wernick's expression, have transformed communication, as the ideology of the market seeps into every facet of social life. Promotional texts, whether verbal, written or visual, now have great impact upon cultural formation and are contributing to a reflexive transformation of both individual and collective political identities. Much commentary on political change (and especially electoral change) is exercised by a powerfully normative concern with the alleged death of modernist forms of politics and political discourse. This paper goes beyond metaphorical hand-wringing to examine changes in the cultural currents which are transforming the politics of many post-historical societies, and which are conveniently summarised in the changing character of electoral politics and campaign discourses. Although frequently discussed as a kind of anti-politics, these currents, and their phenomenal appearance in the guise of media parties and forms of lifestyle marketing are producing a highly self-referential style of electoral discourse, and are better understood as imitations of postmodern populism, where that involves: (1) a growing reliance on the techniques and outputs of culture industries to provide sites where meaning is constituted, (2) a de-centring of ideas and outputs about authentic forms of publicness, and (3) the side-lining of palpable modern forms of politics, like mass political parties.

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Introduction

Promotional cultures, to use Wernick's expression (1991), have transformed communications, as the ideology of the market seeps into every facet of social life. Promotional texts, whether verbal, written or visual, now have great impact upon cultural formation and are contributing to a reflexive transformation of both individual and collective identities. Politics too is caught up in these changes, and as Manuel Castells says, is now "framed" by the logic and organisation of electronic media (1996), which logic informs the projects and strategies of mainstream parties and politicians as well as touching the wilder shores of political activism. Inevitably, none of this takes place without a good deal of angst about the putative effects of such developments on the quality of democratic politics. In order to engage with the discussion, this article takes the widely bruited concept of anti-politics, sometimes rendered as anti-party politics, anti-party populism or even techno-populism (Lipow and Seyd 1996), and examines it in the light of those primarily cultural and technological forces which are having a significant impact upon the politics and sociality of many post-historical societies, and of some robustly historical ones too. These forces must be understood as cultural forces because culture is made up of processes of communications, and as Castells also opines, electronically-based communications, including forms of multi-media and computer-mediated communications systems, now encompass all expressions of culture (1996, 374-5). In addition, culture industries such as advertising are key providers of cultural capital and sources of signification.

These features of what it is now only mildly contentious to call postmodern living, are often discussed as mere instrumentalities which are suborning modern and thus, some might argue, more authentic forms of politics and political discourse. Indeed they are often taken as evidence of the cynical use and misuse of media and technology by politicians, or as simply sheer bad faith or inefficiency on the part of communications professionals. We wish to offer, if not a completely opposite and sanguine view, then one which is perhaps more sociologically informed. In particular we will argue that mediatised politics in promotional cultures is expressed increasingly through the forms and discourses of a postmodern populism (Piccone 1995) and that what ensues is not symptomatic of democracy in crisis, but part of a radical transformation of politics and of political identities. Debates about the changing nature of political allegiance in general and partisan identification in particular, are also to be found in the more conventional literature on electoral politics and political change (Johnston and Pattie 1997) but rarely as part of a consideration of the ways in which broader cultural currents are affecting the temper of political life.

Postmodern populism, found in many countries of the West in recent years, can be seen in the appearance of media parties, leader-dominated and systematically marketed political brands and a highly self-referential style of political discourse, in which political actors seek to organise and reproduce the environments in which they operate through processes of self-reflection and strategic monitoring. Such processes can be seen at work most publicly during election campaigns, but they are by no means confined to these heady periods of activity. Following the victory of "New Labour" in the UK general election of 1997, the rookie government proposes to institutionalise the market research techniques it used during the protracted election campaign, by setting up a "people's panel" representative of the population, to test public reaction to existing and new policies and to the performance of public services. But postmodern

populism is not only a top-down phenomenon. It can be seen too in the more unbuttoned grass-roots politics of anti-nuclear or roads protesters and in the sometimes febrile discourses of wired groups and virtual communities of interest. Among these constituencies, sentiments run the gamut from the designer cynicism of media-wise under 30's, through the more lived-in disillusion of their parents, to the "can-do" enthusiasms of single-issue protesters. Overall then, postmodern populism is an unsettling combination of designer politics — rule by market research — and the opportunity for greater visibility (at least) by more exotic forces. The burden of our wider argument is that politics has ceased, or is ceasing, to be about conflict over dominant ideas and much more becomes the "opportunity to participate in cultural production and conflicts and tensions over identity," as Martin Albrow puts it (1996, v). All cultural and political expressions are increasingly mediated by electronic communications, and as Castells notes (1996), information and communications circulate primarily through diversified and comprehensive media systems. Because of this, politics becomes ever more conducted in what he calls the space of media, but not, as we shall argue, in such a way as to reduce one to the imperatives of the other.

So the key issue is not, or not only, the authenticity of political discourses and forms in a mediatised politics, a concern that exercises many other commentators on the media and politics, but their construction and deconstruction, in circumstances where individuals and collectivities are required to engage with rapidly changing cultural scripts and technological forces. We examine these and other features below and also offer some thoughts on the extent to which postmodern populism actually decanters notions about the authenticity of particular forms of publicness and is transforming (rather than traducing) palpable modern forms of political brokerage and representation and ways of thinking about them.

While we acknowledge the difficulty of establishing agreed empirical referents for all these putative changes, it is important to emphasise how easy it is to mistake them as no more than a deviation from modernist political genres under the impact of new technologies. As a result, any discussion carries with it a very heavy normative burden. We are not unmoved by this debate; indeed it is impossible to traffic in this area without some kind of normative engagement. However, it does seem important to shift the discussion beyond a defence of a particular form of publicness, that associated with a profoundly modernist version of democratic politics, usually by conjuring its timeless or transcendent qualities, or else by invoking comforting myths to frighten away demons (see for example Lipow and Seyd 1996; Hall-Jamieson 1992; Keane 1991). On the way we also hope to qualify the wilder flights of fancy essayed by some postmodernists. However somewhere between the resigned or optimistic accounts of technological determinists on the one hand, and the positions of those who see change as an aberration from the democratic norm, is an account which recognises the socially and politically transformative potential of communications technologies and culture industries, but also notes that for the time being at least, a growing number of postmodern characters will continue to perform in still powerful modernist scripts (Rosenau and Bredemeier 1993; Norris 1997).

Postmodern populism is of course a difficult key concept to press into service here, because in an Orwellian sense it is either an expression of approbation or of abuse depending on the context in which it is being used. Fred Inglis (1996) talks about social theory and especially cultural theory being addled by "ecstatic relativism" and

"chiliastic postmodernism," both of which we hope to abjure. At the same time, even a useful exegesis on electoral change in the UK (Norris 1997) discusses the postmodern election campaign as no more than an ensemble of techniques, including the clip-on tools of strategic marketing, "permanent" campaigning and tailoring political messages to niche audiences. We will also try to avoid this anodyne reductionism.

Of course the very idea of populism, itself barely rescued from a more sinister past by the claims of some contemporary politicians, including Clinton and Blair, as well as Perot, to be "populist," still invites its share of opprobrium. Because of this unenviable legacy, "telepopulism" of the sort espoused by Silvio Berlsuconi in the 1994 and 1996 Italian general elections, easily commutes to a less wholesome "video-demagoguery," and Pat Buchanan's "new populist" appeal to the worried burghers of Virginia in 1996 touched raw nerves, in part because it looked set to attract a coalition of support among people who might not normally vote together, but also because he was, in Pierre Taguieff's noteworthy phrase, the epitome of the "tele-tribune" (1996).

Now down-home populism of the Buchanan variety may be some way from Berlusconi's managerialist brand of politics, but the frisson of distaste engendered by both has common roots in the objection to what Lipow and Seyd, discussing the anti-party trends in British politics, call "techno-populism." In this version, an already suspect populism has become vulgar tele-populism and relies entirely on a sophisticated exploitation of media resources by cynical political actors. The transformation of politics through the media is then conveniently, and for many observers uncontentiously, treated as a form of "democratic illness," or a "cathodic anaesthesia of political life" (Balandier 1992). We examine this and similar mordant diagnoses by way of a more detailed consideration of the concepts of anti-politics, mediatised culture and postmodern populism.

Anti-Politics

Much canvassed these days, the notion of anti-politics (anti-party politics, anti-party populism) clearly describes some of the features of what we would call a postmodern populism, but without always locating the phenomenon as part of the reworking of modernist political genres. Looked at from certain perspectives this neglect is understandable. The appearance of single issue "pressure parties" such as the anti-abortion Pro-Life Alliance in the United Kingdom, may be taken as no more than a confirmation of Anthony Downs's prediction that, in two-party systems at any rate, the main parties will shift ever closer together in an effort to capture the support of the median voter. When this happens those left standing on the margins of usual politics become alienated and minority parties will spring up to serve them. These exotic blooms — the aforementioned Pro-Life Alliance, varieties of greens, handgun lobbyists, re-traditionalists, regionalists like Umberto Bossi and the Lega Nord, and in the UK, enthusiasts of either a Euro-sceptic or a Euro-friendly persuasion — are generally seen as doomed to a brief flowering, a momentary electronic visibility, and even in their prime worthy of no more than a passing mention.

Yet even if this is true, such developments are still likely to feel disabling for those activists caught up in the changes, and discommoding too for those commentators who have perhaps mistaken a transient index of political organisation — the mass political party — for a modal democratic phenomenon. Other commentators, among them mainstream political activists and parliamentarians, are exercised by what one

former British MP, referring to the activities of groups disputing the extension of a regional airport near Manchester, called "[this] perversion of the normal democratic processes." There seem to be two main reasons for this energetic response, which although couched at different levels of generality, are part of the same overarching objection. The first rehearses concerns about the democratic propriety of single-issue groups in general, especially where, as in the UK, they use public media to promote their cause during election campaigns by trading on their new-found and by implication, counterfeit, party-political status. The Pro-Life Alliance, along with other pressure parties such as the Referendum Party, took advantage of the UK rules governing the granting of one party-election broadcast on all public TV channels. The second objection questions the democratic credentials of these groups when set against the established canon, that is, the familiar politics of democratic elitism, where member parties of a more-or-less brokerage kind compete periodically for support among the electorate. On this basis, the Referendum Party in the UK was dismissed by critics as a rich man's plaything, and those groups with more street-cred, like the anti-roads protesters, as passionate but misguided, bombed out on both Ecstasy and e-mail.

The rise of single-issue politics and pressure parties is of course only one symptom of a notional anti-politics. Other features include the alleged decline of established political parties, both as organisations capable of attracting and keeping members and, perhaps more significantly, as vehicles able to integrate sections of society and effectively perform those functions usually associated with mass political parties in democratic systems: the identification of societal goals and their embodiment in platforms and ideology, the articulation and aggregation of interests, the education and mobilisation of mass electorates, and elite recruitment (von Beyme 1996; Biorcio and Mannheimer 1995). As a result, runs the argument, the very idea of party government has been vigorously challenged, though never superseded — by social movements, through attempts to instantiate the concept of rule through the media and by way of more-or-less strong forms of corporatism — and political parties themselves have undergone a sea-change under the influence of a variety of "postmodern" forces.

In a recent analysis of party systems in Continental Europe, Klaus von Beyme (1996) suggests that while there is no generalised crisis of party systems (seen in a secular decline in membership, systematic partisan dealignment and the rise of parties hostile to the system) there have been and continue to be rapid changes in the functions performed by parties across different European polities. These changes take the form of a kind of Downsian convergence in the ideological and policy identities of major parties, which in turn creates more opportunities for interest groups and single-issue parties to harness support among committed publics. The conventional mass party function of interest aggregation has also become more problematic during this period of ideological incoherence, statist deregulation and the fragmentation of previously firm or culturally thick identities centred on social class or a sense of place. Traditional (or traditionally modern) functions connected with the education and mobilisation of voters, especially through dialogical communications and face-to-face encounters (on the door-step, in the meeting-room) transmute under the impact of electronically-mediated communications. Mail-shots and the techniques of data-base marketing, including sending birthday cards to newly enfranchised young voters and constructing more-or-less interactive Web sites, sanitise some of the earthier aspects of traditional election campaigning, but allow negative campaigning to achieve art-form sta-

tus through the speed and sophistication with which rumour and scandal can be spread (Axford et al. 1992; Castells 1997).

Party members are now much less crucial to fund-raising and campaigning than in previous stages of party development, having been superseded by advisers in the guise of campaign managers, marketers, systems analysts and various sorts of media professionals. Finally, says von Beyme, the new media or professional framework party begets a leadership which is increasingly independent of the party membership in fulfilling its duties, and more and more reliant upon media constructions of self (through positive and negative image management) and policy (via the politics of spin) to establish direct links to the electorate. In this respect the argument is not a million miles from Taguieff's jeremiad on the potential that is released by "video-populism," for media-constructed "saviours" to market and manage an electronic plebiscitary enterprise, where electors as viewer-consumers, are mesmerised by potent visual symbols and the weasel words of the creative director or the team responsible for negative research (see Hall-Jamieson 1992).

Not much room is here for either cognitive or aesthetic reflexivity on the part of voters (Lash and Urry 1994), let alone a symbolic interactionist model of audience reception, or one which traffics a creative reading of symbolic texts by voters. Yet all these might be taken as salient features of cultural economies in which the mediation of political information by broadcast media is a dynamic factor in both attitude formation and in the process of political change, as well as in the opening up of previously closed or else horizontal political discourses (Seymour-Ure 1968). So, whether all this constitutes an anti-politics in the sense conveyed above is open to question. In fact von Beyme is more exercised about the prospects for postmodern party systems which are intimated in these changes than about their negative connotations.

Evidence from the United Kingdom on the pervasiveness of anti-political or postmodern trends is also mixed. Lipow and Seyd point to the rapid and often large turnover in the memberships of various interest groups, notably those from the conservation and human rights lobbies, and work also done in the UK by Jordan and Maloney (1996) confirms this volatility. But while they are right to be cautious about the reliability of data on the appeal of such groups relative to political parties, they also gloss over one of the key points about the nature of membership — its volatility — and what this might say about the interests and identities of members. If, as Jordan and Maloney say, a substantial proportion of the members of groups like Friends of the Earth and Amnesty International's British Section take out subscriptions as a kind of "experiential search," for meaning, truth, love, or to satisfy the current fad, then we are probably being offered an acute insight into the nature of participation and perhaps into political identity formation too. It is of course a considerable jump from the idea of a politics (of human rights or anything else) based on ideological grand narratives and lasting allegiances, to one that involves the expression and management of differences that are just convenient summaries of shifting identities which are neither authentic nor inauthentic, but just are, or rather, are just "made" (Axford 1995) but what Lipow and Seyd label anti-politics is perhaps more profitably seen as part of the postmodern turn in politics, where identities and the representational forms to which they attach themselves are increasingly labile, and in which ambivalence rather than coherence of political identities is the characteristic stance (Johnston and Pattie 1997; Kaase, Newton, and Scarborough 1997).

In fact, data on partisan identification show some interesting variations across different countries, to the extent that countries like Britain, France, Italy, Luxembourg and Ireland demonstrate quite long-term weakening of party attachments in the post war years, as does the United States. Others, like the Netherlands and Norway show little fluctuation, while data from Greece, Spain and Portugal, all with relatively new democracies, reveal a slight strengthening in partisan commitment (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995; Norris 1997). These variations suggest cultural-specific and political factors may be more significant than the generic structural changes attributable to trends in all post-industrial societies. Having said this, the qualitative impact of better education, and the accessibility of television as a popular medium of information and entertainment (infotainment) on both the stability and intensity of party commitment, and (perhaps more significantly) on the meaning that party attachments have for voters, may well be crucial aspects of a less visible reworking of political identities. So that while the direction of party attachments remains more stable than either an anti-political or a postmodern interpretation might predict, the bases of attachment may well have undergone more substantial change (Norris 1997). As Johnston and Pattie say, on the UK data available, it is very hard to tell (1997). It is in this more shadowy realm that the issue of a mediatised politics and its contribution to the construction of self-identities and to the transformation of political conflict and publicness, becomes central.

These are all important considerations, but perhaps the idea of an anti-politics is most conveniently summarised in what Lipow and Seyd refer to as "techno-populism," which comes complete with electronic plebiscites, cyber-networks of citizens and activists and a heavily marketised style of politics reliant upon image management and the marketing of political brands. Whereas commentators like Geoff Mulgan (1994), Mark Poster (1995) and of course Howard Rheingold (1994) are much more at ease with the immanent promise of the "technologies of miracles and dreams," not least in their application to the political realm, Lipow and Seyd offer some cautionary remarks on the extent of and (they say) the dangers in a politics of techno-populism. For them techno-populism is not in fact a major feature of the politics of late 20th-century societies, because these are still riven by some of the fundamental (read class) cleavages of modern politics which in fact have been exacerbated by the rapid transformation of national economies and by technological change. However, where it has appeared, its effects have been to damage more authentic forms and processes of representation and thus to suborn civil society and the public sphere

Now, as we have noted above, the whole debate over the extent of anti-politics suffers from the problem of establishing sound empirical evidence and from a tendency to interpret what evidence there is as being either good or bad depending upon your political or aesthetic inclination. So Berlusconi, already a cultural populist before he "entered the field" of Italian politics in 1994 (Statham 1996) attracted both praise and contumely for his brash commercial populism and for his ambition to substitute party government with rule through the media — videocracy (von Beyme 1996). And where Mulgan applauds the demise of usual politics, or at least sees in its wrack the promise of alternative forms of political participation and the prospects for a "wired" democracy, Taguieff (1996), quite aware of his own cultural pessimism, finds in video-populism and promotional cultures a "new mode of operating" to be sure, but, echoing the familiar **geistgesicht** of the Frankfurt School, one in which citizens are reduced

to consumers and politics to a "mere spectacle." In the next section of the paper we explore these issues before turning to the idea of postmodern populism directly.

Media Cultures, the Public Sphere and Politics

 In promotional cultures the art of promotion rests upon the pervasiveness of different forms of media as purveyors of cultural capital, arbiters of lifestyle and contexts for new forms of interaction. When we speak about media cultures, the burden of the argument is not only that culture is made up of communication processes, but that, as Castells says, all cultural expressions and many of those involving power relationships are now mediated by electronic communications (1996, 476; see also Skøvmand and Schrøder 1992; Fiske 1993; 1995; Kellner 1995; Castells 1996). Of course the development of mass media systems has been a feature of advanced societies for the last one hundred and fifty years or so, with the emergence of the mass circulation novel in the mid-nineteenth century, "popular" newspapers later in the 1800s and the invention of radio and television in the twentieth century. So the mediatisation of culture has a long history. Indeed, so central have different forms of print and broadcast media become to definitions of society and societal values, that in the twentieth century at any rate, the scope of popular media actually gives substance to the very idea of the public and of the public sphere (Hartley 1992).

For all this, the received version of the public sphere also suggests a monological or at best an unequal dialogical relationship between media and the public, while the very idea of the public is itself a highly modern notion, implying a set of mass tastes, experiences and identities. But the cultural contexts (and the media order) on which such modernist universalisms were founded has to a marked degree collapsed (Axford and Huggins 1996a) with the public fragmenting into a welter of polylogical "masses," and where publicness is just a variable phenomenon rather than an absolute moral state. This transformation, sometimes labelled "postmodern," has been mapped by a host of cultural commentators. For Vattimo (1992) the "grand narrative" of modernity has been eroded through a "giddy proliferation of communication" in which "more and more subcultures have their say." Unlike some accounts, Vattimo's work is not redolent with nostalgia for a pre-mass media age, but asserts that the proliferation and diversity of media actually allow for the emancipation of identities, as a growing plurality of voices and life-styles are expressed through the various channels of communication.

Baudrillard's contribution to this debate also offers a number of challenging and sometimes enlightening approaches to contemporary social, economic and political developments. The key texts are ***Symbolic Exchange and Death*** (1976) and ***Simulations*** (1983) in which Baudrillard outlines his vision of an emerging society, the society of the sign. He too argues that we are witnessing the emergence of a new stage of history, a new type of society and a new realm of experience, due to the proliferation of media and the sheer speed of communication. This new society is characterised above all by the centrality of the sign, rather than the spoken or written word, which brings about a substantive change in the nature of representation and therefore in the social and political landscape. For Baudrillard this shift entails a move from modernity — characterised by the production of "things"— to postmodernity, which is characterised by a radical semiurgy and the production of signs. Critically, these signs are not reference points for an extant or a given reality, but are themselves reality.

There now occurs an aestheticisation of everyday life because of the saturation of even the most routine experience by a constant and rapid flow of signs and images. The medium of advertising along with broadcast and other performance media, all conjure a "postmodern carnival" of communications wherein desire and social experience are constantly reworked through images (Featherstone 1991). Baudrillard says that the density and proliferation of images has led to an effacement of the real and the image, or as he puts it, an implosion of the two, leading to a state of "hyper-reality." This process results in a lessening of the distance between subject and object and between image and reality, and eventually to a breakdown of these cardinal modernist reference points. Though Baudrillard is profoundly ambivalent about the effects of these developments, others, Vattimo included, see them as precipitating a welcome fragmentation in the dominant "truths" of the modern era, to be embraced and celebrated as the expression of the contingent quality of life and life-choices.

Nevertheless, it is clear that these ideas can and do cause disquiet, particularly over the potential for the manipulation of consciousness which resides in a media-brokered hyper-real. And even if one accepts the general thrust of Baudrillard's arguments, the gap between such abstractions and the rough and tumble of everyday politics may seem too wide to bridge. We believe that there are important and generally emancipatory implications here for politics, especially for ideas about publicness and forms of political participation. To address these, we will look more closely at some of the qualities of a mediatised politics, emphasising (1) the changing character of publicness and the shifting boundaries of the public sphere, and (2) the question of visibility and the consequences for actors who conduct politics fully in the frame of media.

The notion of a (bourgeois) public sphere, no matter how constructed, is only an heuristic device for understanding and analysing one element of the organisation of societies, and not a neat model of the scope for all action and interaction, organisation and communication. Yet much discussion of the concept treats it as an ideal which defines the discursive and the moral spaces of any healthy civil society (Keane 1991; Habermas 1974; 1989). Such prescriptions are understandable, but their effect has been to assign universal qualities to particular forms of publicness (Keane 1981; Habermas 1989). As a consequence there is not only a reluctance to accept the democratic potential which may (or may not) follow from the application of information technology to political life, but also an unwillingness to acknowledge the democratic authenticity of many sorts of politics which traffic on or beyond the boundaries of democratic elitism, preferring to dismiss them with epithets such as "postmodern" or "anti-politics."

At least part of the problem here is that critics see new communications technologies and the spaces created by them as extensions of existing and familiar institutions and practices, even where they are viewed as dangerous instrumentalities. The idea that new media and the spaces of interaction created by them may be fashioning new contexts for interaction, sociality and even identity formation is rarely canvassed, save by enthusiasts. To some extent this is a result of the paucity of empirical evidence on the impact of information and communications technologies on political life, but in large measure it is a problem of imagination. Critics have difficulties imagining a democratic politics, or a vision of the public sphere which is not configured by the exigencies of usual politics, despite the fact that this narrowing of the limits of politics has received a good deal of criticism from those already marginalised by particularistic definitions of the public sphere, such as feminists (Fraser 1989; Calhoun 1993).

Although it is now commonplace to talk about the transformation of democracy (McGrew 1997) due to a variety of forces, even fairly radical formulations work within quite narrow conceptual parameters. In a recent exegesis on democratising the European Union, James Goodman (1997) points to the ways in which transnational social movements are challenging both territorial definitions of the European polity and the model of elite governance which has been characteristic of the EU. Rightly, he says that the processes of regionalisation and globalisation are contributing to the creation of a "post-Westphalian" polity in Europe and that the prospects for a non-statist, cosmopolitan and participative democracy are enhanced as a result. All this constitutes a re-imagination of Europe, but very few commentators are prepared to entertain the more radical idea of a European ecumene which is constituted out of the networks and communities of interest and sustained by communications technology (Axford 1995; Axford and Huggins 1996b). At the moment this sort of conception is quite unconventional, and might even be construed as anti-political, modifying, perhaps dispensing with received wisdom about the processes driving European integration and about the nature of Europeanising and democratising forces.

The same could be said about attempts during recent election campaigns in the United States and the United Kingdom to encourage first time voters and young people generally to register and vote, and to raise their consciousness of political and social issues. The Rock the Vote campaign, which included national tours by well-known comedians, television personalities and rock musicians (hence the name) was heir to a history of show business involvement with politics and political causes. However, neither the pedigree of the campaign nor the motives of its framers, are the most significant things about it. The significance of Rock the Vote lies in its calculated eliding of the realms of politics and culture in new and primarily cultural milieu — the rock concert, the record store (the Virgin Megastore stocked voter registration cards during the run up to the general election in the UK) and the club, where the stock-in-trade is image and style. At one level the technique is pure lifestyle marketing — if these people and organisations think its acceptable to vote, then it must be cool, rather like buying into a political version of the Pepsi-Max experience. At another level the decision to register or not to register becomes an aesthetic judgement of the degree to which the acts of registration and of voting sync with perceived standards of taste and style. In fact the Rock the Vote pitch was deliberately non-partisan and low-key, recognising that it would have been distinctly un-cool to do other than point out to young people that voting is a good thing to do. But during the general election campaign the Ministry of Sound (a British music co-operative) produced a series of shocking poster ads depicting, among other things, a public urinal with the words "piss on niggers" sprayed on to the walls, and the injunction to "use your vote, you can be sure he'll use his." Their intent was to engage young people by dealing with issues of concern to them, such as racism, rather than through the issues which dominated the official and indeed the media campaign agendas. Members of focus groups of young people, run by the authors during the British General Election 1997, were ambivalent about this campaign. They saw it as a piece of targeted political marketing with an underlying political bias. At the same time they were excited by the production values employed and moved by the sheer power of the visual images of homophobes, racists and field sports enthusiasts. This was a politics with which they could engage, partly because it was untainted by the usual partisan knockabout, partly because of the issues espoused, and partly because it was presented in such a dramatic and "honest" fashion.

Now, it may be possible to dismiss these things as mere flummery, rather than as harbingers of a new style of politics, or as indicators of real discontent. For example, the young people in our groups were low on partisan commitment, but where they voted, they voted conventionally. Overall it is difficult to say what this tells us about the nature of commitment and about the motivation to vote for one party rather than another, and any such speculation is outside the scope of this paper. At all events in a mediatised political culture the effects of particular media and media messages are perhaps of less long-term interest than the extent to which the media now frame all political discourses and open up new spaces for what is, in effect, political communication. Rock the Vote, party and group Web sites, even the Virgin Megastore can be seen as part of the transformation of the public sphere and of the forums in which political discourse can legitimately take place. They can also be seen as part of what John Thompson (1995) calls the "transformation of visibility "which is afforded by the accessibility of new forms of electronic communication and by the speed with which information is traded. The ease with which even peripheral political forces and issues can become visible using electronic communications may itself be a proper rejoinder to those who see in these developments no more than techno-populism, the dumbing of political discourse, or the opportunity for clever politicians to manage their image. But the transformation of visibility also has the potential to discommode even the slickest of politicians, because in mediatised cultures, visibility is a two-edged sword. During the 1996 US Presidential elections individuals could register on their PCs to receive the Bob Dole "gaffe-line" which gave a daily record of any gaffes made by the prospective presidential candidate and his entourage. In this way Dole's political opponents were able to turn his tribulations over support for the tobacco industry into a caricature of Dole as "Butt-Man" and flood the images around the global information superhighway. An extended illustration will help to underline the point about the advantages and dangers of visibility in promotional cultures and introduce some preliminary thoughts on the ways in which media literate voters might "read" political messages.

On a recent cover of the popular football fanzine ***WSC: When Saturday Comes*** (June 1996) was a picture of Tony Blair and the sometime manager of Newcastle United Football Club, Kevin Keegan. This picture and others showing the Labour leader with Keegan had appeared in all the national dailies and on television news. It is instructive to deconstruct this image. The leader of the New Labour Party engineers a photo-opportunity with the popular Kevin Keegan — great player, great "bloke" and a footballing, business and style success. Having enjoyed a successful playing career for Liverpool, Hamburg and England, Keegan, returning to his roots, became the "new messiah" of Newcastle United Football Club, taking them from near relegation from the British first division to challenge for the Premiership title and European honours in the space of a few years. Furthermore, Keegan did this by buying expensive, "flair" players and encouraging skilful, exciting attacking football. In a heavily marketed and promoted sport Keegan's team was the trumpeted as reclaiming its place in the pantheon of great northern football clubs along with Liverpool and Manchester United.

So, the cover of When Saturday Comes is rich in symbolism and implied connections. Keegan the popular hero returns to lift faded Newcastle to its former glories, and his success is a paradigm case of being able to make it in a meritocratic (not to say a classless) Britain, and a paradigm too for the resurrection of the North. Football provides the link to the past-signifying the true value of locality and the deep roots of

working class culture — and to the future, which is now bright with promise. There are other messages too. Clearly, Keegan is adept at functioning in both worlds. He is true to his past, but has recognised the importance of tapping into the rich vein of capital, business sense and experience which (in the shape of the Newcastle Chairman, Sir John Hall) are the acceptable legacy of the Thatcher years. Hall was a commercial success, Keegan sought to emulate that success on the field with the same panache. Here was no Gradgrind of the football world.

The parallels with an ambitious Tony Blair and New Labour are obvious, and for Blair the association with football in general and Keegan in particular was very seductive. Keegan's progress to the status of a 1990's football icon, his habit of winning and his ability to seem credible to both terraces culture and the world of big business, were all attractive to Blair, who was faced with his own struggle to balance the pull of nostalgia against the shock of the new, and look the part of a future prime minister to a still sceptical British public. Also attractive was the fact that after the doldrums of the 1980's, when football was a metaphor for many of the ills of British society, the game in the 1990's had become the new style signifier, the acme of cool and a marketing executive's dream. Football (like New Labour) has reinvented itself, to the extent that the Euro-96 competition held in England in the summer of 1996, saw a flowering of patriotism as a sort of populist chic, exemplified most obviously in the success of the song "Football's Coming Home." For politicians the game is no longer a cause of hand-wringing, but celebration and an opportunity to parade their street-cred.

So far, so predictable, since positive image management — through manipulation of the news media as well as through direct forms of marketing — is now a central part of any electoral contest. But the Keegan-Blair motif, while redolent with imagery which is seemingly advantageous for New Labour, also carries a number of hidden charges, which nicely demonstrate Thompson's ideas on visibility. First, it runs the risk of being de-coded by professional journalists as part of their own intensely reflexive view of the world and of their professional status in it. Indeed, WSC's picture has Keegan saying "I've been giving Tony some tips on how to keep a big lead" and goes some way to subvert the positive image and its ostensible meanings. Television journalists, talking over shots of Blair playing "head tennis" with Keegan also resorted to what is by now the standard journalistic ploy when faced with blatant attempts at news management; that is they pointed out that this was exactly what was going on. Second, a season is a long time in football, just as a week is a long time in politics, and Keegans's star, so high in June had waned by December, all in the media spotlight. This downturn in fortunes is, of course, the whole point of the WSC picture. Third, the impact of this highly self-referential and media intensive world on the public is hard to judge. Certainly we can say that despite serious or frivolous deconstruction of campaign imagery by voters, Blair won the general election by several lengths. But while this is true, again it is not the most significant point for this discussion. Contra Baudrillard, high levels of media literacy, fluency and access, coupled with the polylogical nature of the electronic communications, at least allow for the possibility of subversive interventions, for counter-cultural and oppositional views and for the scurrilous or non-standard reading of texts. A mediatised politics enhances these possibilities rather than the opposite.

In this world of the political hyper-real, the role of style, performance, pastiche and inter-textuality are increasingly central, sometimes with unsettling consequences.

For example, the British Channel 4 television programme, Brass Eye plays on the coding and encoding of material in television news and current affairs programmes in the United Kingdom. But while employing the techniques used by broadcast professionals, it also tries to subvert them by undermining their self-assigned status as experts and mediators of reality. The programme uses interviews with actual politicians, professional experts and other "legislators," having fed them a self-incriminating and often preposterous story line. In one edition the then Conservative MP for Basildon was encouraged to join an anti-drugs campaign for a fictitious new designer drug called "cake." Through a clever use of style, image and pastiche the programme creates a situation in which media hungry politicians and pundits become the agents of their downfall. So akin to the delivery of actual news and current affairs television is Brass Eye, that viewers are often left unsure of the authenticity of the item. Reality becomes hyper-realilty and the medium becomes the message, but through a parody of its own pretensions. Now clearly what we think of such developments will depend very much from where we write within the present cultural milieu and on where we stand on the interpretation of anti-political phenomena.

The Triumph of Postmodern Populism?

Much of what we have said above seems to us to intimate and in some measure to realise what might be called a postmodern populism, in which visibility, image and designer pastiche, as well as redefinitions of the public sphere are all significant features. Of course it is relatively easy to cull a range of evidence — survey data on popular attitudes to politicians, anecdotes about leading politicians' love of football, membership figures for political parties, or anecdotes about Bill Clinton's preferences in underwear as told on MTV during the 1992 presidential campaign — but much more difficult to effect a convincing or unequivocal argument about the changing nature of a media-saturated politics. Below we offer some elaboration of the concept of postmodern populism (with apologies to Paul Piccone for taking some licence with his original idea) and look to tie the Idea to both phenomenal aspects of contemporary politics, and to sentiments.

First, and at its most general, the idea of a postmodern politics trades upon the sense that contemporary politics is undergoing radical changes. For example, in a recent polemic, Martin Jacques (1993) talks about the "meltdown" of the formal boundaries of politics and political discourses as part of the crisis of the nation-state and of modernity itself. Jaques is particularly concerned with the seismic tremors in Italian politics during the 1990's, but his vision of epochal change is more widely applicable. In this scenario, the world of conventional political parties and the state is being invaded by the growing clamour of groups, movements and institutions from civil society — to produce a heady cultural brew — whose perception and experience of reality is increasingly mediated by what Vattimo calls "the giddy proliferation of communications" (1992).

Of course, it is possible to cavil at Jaques's description of current trends in these terms. In Italy, for example, the scale of anti-party populism may be less profound than Berlusconi's success in 1994 suggested (Bardi 1996). Forza Italia was and probably still is a distillation of the television and communications revolution served up in digestible populist form, but of late there are signs that it is attempting to clothe itself in the style of more conventional, modernist, mass parties (Newell and Bull 1997). Of

course even this "retraditionalisation" may itself be no more than a marketing ploy, or a pragmatic response to difficult times, rather than a demonstration of the powerful inertia in Italian politics or of the enduring qualities of modern organisational forms. Either way, Berlusconi has still to be understood as a tele-phenomenon. But as a description of popular attitudes to parties and governments, Jaques's apocalyptic thesis also requires some modification when applied outside Italy. In Britain, as Paul Webb notes (1997), party penetration of society (though not the state) has become shallower since the early 1960's, but anti-party manifestations are still lower than might be expected, although the basis for this judgement is unclear. Even if true, it might simply be due to the well-documented gap between attitudes and behaviour, or could reflect the fact that apparent continuities hide more complex and confused sentiments which are producing ambivalence and not coherence of identity (Poguntke and Scarrow 1996).

On this the Italian case may still be instructive, since it is hard not to agree with Statham (1996, 545) that politics there has undergone a substantive and qualitative change between the First and (putative) Second Republics. To repeat, this is not just a matter of political parties fighting each other through the media, or of using the media as a strategic resource, as Statham properly argues. The very fact that politics has now to be framed by and, pace Castells, in the idiom of electronically based media, itself "has profound consequences for the characteristics, organization and even the goals of political processes, political actors and political institutions" (1996, 476). This is not quite the determinism it might first appear, since, as we shall argue later, the growing sophistication and availability of technology provides resources for an increased reflexivity, although it goes without saying that there are critics of this position. Postmodern politics, in Italy, as elsewhere, is preoccupied by mediation, image, simulation, network and spectacle (Morley and Robins 1994). Most critically of all, postmodern populism emerges as an implicit challenge to the very idea of transcendental meanings and forms. To that extent it is undoubtedly a form of anti-(usual)-politics.

Second, postmodern populism surfaces as an expression of a growing frustration with usual politics and usual politicians. Perceptions of a growing democratic deficit, the inadequacy of systems of accountability, accusations of endemic sleaze and systematic negativity during campaigns, may all point to an actual crisis of motivation on the part of sections of the voting public, and maybe a nascent legitimation crisis too. This conclusion may be somewhat premature, given the paucity of empirical research in the field, but some evidence reveals what may be a profound ambivalence. For example, a recent survey among students in the UK conducted for the Sunday Times and a more qualitative investigation of the general population by the market intelligence agency FCB, showed that people are disenchanted with politicians in general, but not necessarily with politics. Research conducted by the authors during the 1997 general election campaign in the UK, found that although young people professed themselves detached from the routines of adversarial politics and frequently from the issues which so dominated the headlines during the campaign, they were moved by advertising and by issues which centred on racism, environmentalism, homophobia and sexism, all still very much on the sidelines of usual politics.

Of course youth apart, cynicism sits more easily with some audiences than with others. Sentimentality and personal revelations, which featured prominently in speeches to both the Republican and Democratic Conventions in the USA in the 1996

campaign, still play to a full house in American elections. Such apparent candour may have had European observers reaching for the vomit bag, but in the United States, at least, strategists remain convinced of the need to appeal directly to the public, and of the value of linking political platforms to personal experience in ways that seem to break down the perceived distance between the politician on the podium and the public at home. Yet the revelatory style of the platform address, larded with **aperçu** about little Joe's accident, a favourite sister's problems with drugs, or a parent's illness as formative event, and the mock intimacy of the leader biopic, do carry with them potentially lethal charges for the protagonists. Attempts to humanise politics in this way may breed familiarity and possibly contempt. At such a pass, the threat to democratic procedures lies less in the ability of cleverly marketed politicians to gull voters and more in the cynicism engendered in the public. For all this, Bill Clinton was able to secure re-election despite the charges of sleaze and the scent of scandal rising from the Whitewater affair, even without the soft-focus appeal to his Arkansas-Kennedy boyhood which struck so many responsive chords in 1992. Tony Blair too, less than wholeheartedly received with sections of the electorate, notably women voters and the young, still managed to bring his party home to a landslide win in 1997.

But the problem for any new (tele) populist broom, messianic figure or country-cousin populist in the Ross Perot style, hoping to pick up the emotional slack in the system, is to fashion a platform that goes beyond mere nationalist rhetoric, anti-governmentalism, revivalist or redemptionist tub-thumping and obsequies to the free-market, to fashion a new sort of politics. Now it may be no more than a datum, but the most publicised versions of this sort of thing (if we were to exclude the brands on offer during the contest for the Russian presidency in 1996) do tend to occupy ground marked out by the New Right — local autonomy, economic individualism and cultural particularity. Berlusconi's platform, especially in 1994, was marked by a clear neo-conservative agenda — limiting welfare provision, reducing income taxes and letting the market into many more areas of life. But some strains with a New Left provenance also surface, echoing grass-roots populism or communitarianism of the American variety, rather than discredited European variants linked to fascism. Very often, the message and the style of such movements is confused. Umberto Bossi's pilgrimage along the valley of the Po in September 1996, to publicise his plans for an independent Padania was (as it turned out) an unhappy blend of showbiz-derived nationalist rhetoric (he likened himself to the Scottish hero William Wallace, but in a form invented by movie star Mel Gibson in the film "Braveheart") and green fascism (his bodyguards wore green shirts to symbolise, they said, the fertility of the Po valley). By and large the public were unmoved. The message here is that tele-tribunes have to be credible as well as telegenic. In the UK general election of 1997, a critically ill James Goldsmith of the Referendum Party, appeared to the members of focus groups run by the authors, as manic and his message as apocalyptic and therefore unconvincing.

Third, postmodern populism is often linked to the demise or transcendence of left-right politics (Giddens 1994) and, depending on the pathological image employed, its replacement with either a politics founded on the reconstruction of palpable communities and identities, or, more usually a politics in which all sorts of identities are relatives under the impact of electronic media. However, the point here is not to suggest that all politics can be reduced to media effects, or that people have become detached

from, or indifferent to values and interests. Rather, it is to note the extent to which the multiplication and diversification of lived worlds has shifted (note shifted, not eclipsed) the basis of political conflict in old-style class divisions to what is often called a politics of identity (Albrow 1996; Axford 1995). The relativisation of identities under, for example, globalising pressures, is already a datum for those style consultants, therapists and pollsters whose task it is to understand and anticipate public sentiments. As a result activities in many areas of life are becoming decontextualised. New and more labile forms of sociality either coexist with, overlay, or replace older ones. Lifestyles and maybe identities too become more a matter of style and fashion to suit changing circumstances, than an enduring expression of habits of the heart (Bellah et al. 1985). Not for everyone of course. Doreen Massey (1995) has written convincingly of the "power geometry" involved in social and cultural relationships, which effectively inhibits choice and this is a pertinent reminder not to overstate the extent of a fluid postmodern socioscape. Still, these shifts need to be canvassed and their import for usual politics more fully understood. Multiple configurations (Albrow 1996) — and we still need more information on a politics thus configured — make conventional politicians uneasy because they are less amenable to mobilisation and less disposed to appeals couched in terms of overarching values or whole identities. Diversity of culture and of identity, challenges (though not always at the level of organised political forms) any claims to complete authenticity and any attempt to amorphise experience.

Now it will be obvious that this sort of reasoning runs up against the usual objections to the idea of a postmodern politics, namely that 1) it augurs no more than a rabid pluralism, which is discriminating of neither demand nor method, and 2) that it reduces big issues to language games and morality to entertainment values and questions of style. But in promotional cultures, the conventional separation of form from content is increasingly meaningless, as we have argued above. In such a milieu (nowhere fully realised in the political realm) style as an expression of life choices is a way (perhaps the way) of telling people who they are. As Dick Hebdige (1989) has argued, style has become the distinctive life expression of a culture or sub-culture, in which performance, preparation, and credibility replace "rational" signifiers of worth and status. This is not just a matter of people being seduced by images of morally and aesthetically pleasing lifestyles to which they can aspire, or which are embodied in some product promoter (handsome young men and women in toothpaste ads, party leaders with cuddly families) and none of it makes social relations "hopelessly plural," or turns life into a supermarket of meanings, each as bland as the next (Bauman 1992). The proliferation of information supplies resources for increased reflexivity and control, although in the nature of the argument it is not possible to be entirely sanguine about this prospect. Our focus groups of young people veered between an almost nostalgic desire for more hard information about party platforms at election times and a dismissive attitude to the volume of "boring" material conveyed through the print and broadcast media.

Fourth, under postmodern populist conditions it is useful to see the mediatisation of politics as facilitating the spread of cultural capital to wider sections of the population. For example, Forza Italia's televisualist brand of politics might be taken as a sort of hermeneutic, rather than (or as well as) a product of a cynical attention to the power of television. Too whimsical, possibly, and certainly such a view contrasts sharply with what Morley and Robins (1994, 224) call the "hypodermic effect" of television. But

empirical work on media influence shows not so much the direct effects of media outputs, as the capacity of different audiences to interpret and reinterpret material depending on local circumstances and other contingencies. Much more work has to be done on the reception of political communications, but unlike the anti-politics thesis, this argument does not leave the individual at sea in an ocean of Baudrillardian hyper-technology. Of course just how far electronic communications can function as a "life-good" requires more investigation. While it is hard to treat the antics of the "shock-jocks" of American radio (Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh, etc.) as part of a postmodern hermeneutic, we should perhaps suspend disbelief given our insistence on the scope for new manifestations of publicness in a postmodern populism. In the same vein, the more critical and constructivist view of audience reception of messages, syncs with the media-wise and laid-back responses to advertising of the untargetable under 30's. Today's under 30's are happy with the idea of advertising as a cultural form, they have grown up with it. It is trashy and throwaway and not something to be taken too seriously. Neither is it particularly life enhancing or identity threatening — it is just there. This is an important insight to carry against the anti-politics thesis. Warnings of the dangers in a televisual politics, the tendency of advertising to turn concerned citizens into victims of the three minute culture, often ignore the fact that people seem perfectly able to attach meanings to and detach them from potent visual symbols. Young people today do not have a reverence for the medium of television, it is simply part of the cultural furniture of living, and not a deviation from more authentic verbal and written cultures.

However, evidence from focus groups run by Kathleen Hall-Jamieson during the 1988 presidential election campaign in the USA, paints a less sanguine picture. Writing about the use of the William "Willie" Horton ads by the Bush campaign, she argues that they encouraged, almost demanded, a visceral response from viewers, in which the cognitive processing and evaluation of the message were overridden by the drama of the storyline, the stark visual images, by emotion and, in this case, by the Eloi's underlying fear of the Morlocks (1992). Among Hall-Jamieson's own focus groups some participants, even some of those previously inclined to support Dukakis, renounced their allegiance after extensive showing and coverage of the advertisements. Our own data on the 1997 general election in the UK suggest that uncommitted young voters may be moved by certain types of political advertising, but that they were often responding to the production values in party election broadcasts, behaving as critics rather than consumers.

Which brings us, fifth, to the notion that a postmodern populism is closely tied to the activities and style of the burgeoning culture industries. Wernick, echoing the generally critical response to this development, says that politics has been subsumed (suborned) by advertising. The result is that the art of promotion is placed at the heart of the political process. As a consequence individual politicians are transformed into "personalities" and "product presenters." In particular, the leaders of political parties increasingly occupy centre stage as far as marketing strategies and media coverage is concerned (Axford and Madgwick 1989) and at its most developed, what a party or political movement stands for is reported through the prism of the leader and his or her personal attributes. Here politics really does become about personality, and political journalism transmutes to a form of iconography. Where leadership is personalised, as Castells notes (1996, 476) image-making and breaking are themselves key forms of

power making. There are different ways to interpret such developments. Adatto, writing in the late 1980's deplores the emergence of what she calls "sound-bite democracy" and the "Warholisation" of political reporting (1988). The campaign focus and, by implication the conduct of more routine politics, through leaks, smears, pre-buttals and re-buttals, becomes the media event. During campaigns, media and marketing professionals are dedicated to packaging (a term having entirely pejorative connotations) non-rhetorical, visually powerful symbolic political messages. Now leaving aside the usefulness of talking about "packaging" politics in what are now thoroughly mediatised contexts, rather too much emphasis may have been put on the cynical intent of politicians and professionals and rather too little on the ways in which messages are received and interpreted by audiences. As we have noted earlier in the paper, the process of self-formation is increasingly reliant upon access to mediatised forms of communication (Thompson 1995), therefore hand-wringing about or nostalgia for some golden age of dialogical politics is misplaced. Moreover, while print and broadcast media are, as Thompson says, non-dialogical, the same is not true of computer-mediated forms, which in principle and in some cases in practice, offer scope for intense interconnectedness. On the whole, people are able to handle the "delirium of communication" reflexively, as part of a critical and self-conscious construction of lifestyle, morality and identity. As we have noted above, our own data suggest that ambivalence is the characteristic response of young voters to political advertising. Young people remain nostalgic for what they have been taught is a more authentic form of dialogical politics, while being thoroughly at home in mediatised cultures.

So that sixth, a postmodern populism carried on-line, does not, or need not dilute the idea of a public sphere, but it does as Thompson suggests, transform the very idea of publicness (1995). The main features of a postmodern public space are that it is non-localised and open-ended, where the latter refers to the visibility of information which is made available on communications networks and the relative ease with which it is now possible to become visible using these same resources. Networks of anti-roads protesters in the UK and animal-rights activists across Europe are already wired, while what Dominic Anderson calls "long-distance nationalism" is practised over the Net. These sorts of political manifestations all have a counter-cultural and sometimes a vaguely disreputable feel about them, but only because modernist politics has narrowed the definition of legitimate democratic forms and practices to a set of rules and expectations under which, to adapt Schumpeter, political parties compete with each other for the votes of the electorate. One further example provides an interesting gloss on the debate about tele-populism. Early in 1997, Carlton, a production company which is part of the ITV network in the UK, ran a studio debate on the future of the monarchy, which was accompanied by a telephone vote by viewers. Entertainment values governed the way in which the actual debate was run and some minor pillars of the British political and cultural establishment (including a few who had taken part in the proceedings) professed themselves shocked and angry at the levity and disorder of the debate and by the dangers inherent in this sort of unbridled and "unrepresentative" populism. What appeared to shock many of those who objected was the not only the temper of the proceedings, but their visibility and the speed with which public sentiments (in this case actually supportive of the institution of the monarchy) could be canvassed and the results reported. For them, rational debate influenced and glossed by "informed" elites played second fiddle to crass production values and knock-about.

Finally then, the very "immediacy" of an electronically mediated postmodern populism and its dalliance with entertainment and performance values is at least discommoding for usual politics and politicians even as they embrace it. For some observers this leaves a such a politics as exhausted of normative values and morally weightless. The creation of reflexive individuals in a mediatised politics is one thing, the dangers of atomised, rootless and narcissistic selves quite another. Undoubtedly there is a tension here. In the risk society (Beck 1992), politicians, even those like Berlusconi, whose identity is closely tied to media created images, consciously try to offer the foundations for some kind of solid referential identity. And this despite the fact that the images of the places and solidaries we have lost are carried through the very media which are dissolving the psychological boundaries of the local imaginary and eroding what Rabinow calls "traditional spaces within a culture" (1993).

Conclusion

So, anti-politics, or the triumph of postmodern populism? Well, because it is still very difficult to tie the concepts down to hard and generally accepted indicators, we would have to answer: possibly both. In order to explore some of the issues we have raised substantial research needs to be done on questions of identity formation and re-formation. A good deal of the study of political communications, at least in the United Kingdom has tended to concentrate upon electoral communications, those "self-consciously theatrical periods" (Corner 1996) whereas much more study of the relationships between politics, political imagery and language and public perceptions and allegiances, needs to be undertaken during the humdrum periods of political life. Our main concern in this paper has been to suggest that a conception of politics and political identities which is informed by modernist assumptions will have increasingly little purchase on political cultures which are thoroughly mediatised. Modernity, as Albow (1996) says has lost its grip on the contemporary imagination, not entirely, but significantly. Because of this, the treatment of what we have labelled postmodern politics as a kind of anti-politics, might be seen as a defiant gesture by those commentators who are not actually waving, but drowning.

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