Cultural studies has an even more complicated relation to history than it does to literary studies, sociology or anthropology. Officially, it focuses on contemporary culture, unlike cultural history. Yet if that distinction were solid then it would limit cultural studies' interest in history to the way in which traces and representations of the past enter contemporary culture. Not an interest in witches as they were for instance, but in the way in which witchcraft circulates and is treated today and especially in today's popular culture. While cultural studies often does focus on the past in these terms, such an understanding is a little simplistic. After all, as soon as we want to explain the current state of things we are going to be tempted to tell stories about the past which might reveal how the contemporary came to be the way it is. Such stories (of which there are many in this book) promise more than they can deliver since history never does quite explain the contemporary: it is always too selective and partial for that. But historical narratives and explanations, however redactive, are much better than no sense of the past at all.

Then too, the 'contemporary' is not an unambiguous concept, as we shall see in more detail in section 2.7. Where precisely does the past (cultural history) end and the present (cultural studies) begin? That's a sneakily difficult question, which undoes cultural studies' borders. Furthermore, the various categories that we use to organise academic and non-academic thought about, and representations of, the past are always arbitrary, often implicitly political and cannot be taken as given for critical thought - least of all the concept of 'progress' which overhangs all modern thought about history. Thus this section is concerned to help clarify conceptualisations of the past as well as to provide a brief overview of the past's life in the present.
At one level the present is nothing except an expression of the past – nothing comes from nothing after all, and once we rule God and chance out of our conceptual framework, everything is enabled by, and a realisation of, past structures. Ordinary life is saturated in the past: to take one example, think of cooking and food and the ways they are entangled in memory. A recipe is handed down across generations, indebtedly associated with a grandmother maybe; table manners structure intergenerational continuities too; a restaurant chain is associated with a particular phase of a life – a work lunch break at an old job says; a food you dislike recalls a time you were forced to eat it by your parents; an ex-lover’s favourite the food reminds you of him; a Smarties (M&M) takes you back to when you were a kid and it was your most favourite thing in the world; the chocolate in that sweet (or candy) is produced in a blood-soaked industry that has helped shape the world and in particular the history of colonisation.

And so on.

Every action carries a trace of the past – an unconscious memory of it even. A great deal of contemporary theory analyses the way that the past is carried forward unknowingly into the present. With individuals, one word we use to talk about the unreflective determination of the present by the past is 'habit', and there exist embedded social habits as well. Sometimes too it seems as if old formations suddenly reappear, uncannily, the past flaring into life. Isn’t contemporary anti-Islamic paranoia a strange repetition of medieval Christian prejudice, something that once seemed obsolete, and for that reason crammed with unconscious memories?

Yet at least for academic study, the past does not mainly exist as repetitions, social habits or unconscious causal chains, but precisely as history. It is important to understand from the first that 'history' is just one way of conceiving the past. As is often pointed out, the word itself is ambiguous: it refers both to knowledge about the past (and hence to an academic discipline) and to the past as such, and especially to the past as it continues to exist for the present. Indeed there is a sense in which all history belongs to the present. What has no presence in the present has no history; it has simply been forgotten. That ambiguity between history-as-knowledge and history-as-event is a sign that history is a disciplined way of figuring the past. And it is a relatively recent concept of a particular problem, which is to say that while history is not a construct of European modernity, the kind of history that was constructed in European modernity has come to dominate our understanding of the past.

There is something paradoxical in saying this since modernity is itself a historical – and contested – notion. It usually names the transformation of society and ideology whose roots lie in the Renaissance and the consequent embrace of commerce and technological development. Modernity emerged in full force around the time of the French Revolution when it became clear that, in certain regions of the West, the traditional society of ‘time immemorial’ was coming to an end (see Koselleck 1985). History constructed in the spirit of modernity was an enlightened history based on certain techniques (searching the archives) and certain ethics (aiming at truth and providing evidence for one’s proposition, rationalising myths and legends). No less importantly it was based on a conceptual framework in which particular histories were treated as temporally ordered in which human beings are gradually coming to order society and nature for their own benefit. This is history as progress. Non-progressive views of history (for instance, that it is static and so best understood as supplying a stock of applicable lessons; that it is gradually undergoing degradation and will end exchatologically in the Day of Judgement; that it moves in cyclical fashions and so on) fall under empirics fell by the wayside. So did the ‘presidential’ view of history in which God took an active interest in human affairs, constantly intervening in them. Although in the last decades (as we shall see in sections 2.3 on the future) progressivism has come under considerable theoretical attack, modern academic knowledge remains under its spell in its future-directedness and its hope to contribute to social and cultural improvement.

The progressive understanding of history is itself rather ambiguous: it aggravates humanity as the agent of historical change at the same time as it aggravates history, which now becomes an ethical standard as well as the basis for social existence. It was by comparison with this kind of temporal order that other, colonisable societies were regarded as lacking ‘history’ and as belonging fundamentally to the past rather than to the present. History in this sense is haunted by that fundamental break between societies in which inherited models determine practices and those that innovate and invent their own futures. It was in relation to the temporal order of modernity that what (from the historians’ perspective) did not change in society, or what did not change in ways that could be related to progressive time, was 'ineffable', 'traditional', 'archaistic'. And it was in relation to that temporal order that institutions and practices (such as hanging, drawing and quartering) which have ceased to exist in the modern world belong to history in yet another sense: as the repository of dead things.

Societies that continually change, that make their own history, leap up history in this sense too: the ruined and the dated are as characteristic of modernity as the dawn of the new. Dead history is hence a particular problem – the past becomes other – as other as other cultures. This poses a methodological challenge. How can we understand the past except in its own terms, terms which we moderns no longer share and which are more or less lost. This way of thinking about the past as fundamentally other is called ‘historicism’ and is the intimate flip side of progressivism.

In historism the past help us understand our lives primarily through the seduction of narrative and the pleasures of deconstruction since the forces which structure the present save only a tenuous relation to the past, even though they necessarily come out of it. The past can teach us most not because we share its world, but because it reminds us that there are other ways of doing things. Thus even where the past would
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been built on a history of inhumane and violent, and particularly on the systematic slaughters of colonisation and the horrors of African slavery. Critical history of this kind was based on a new postcolonial understanding of imperialism that followed the break-up of the old formal empires in the fifties and sixties, but has also been popularised in the West, in particular as part of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' so-called 'discovery' of America in books such as Kirkpatrick Sale's bestselling The Conquest of Paradise (whose title, interestingly, was mimicked in Ridley Scott's more ambiguously revisionary hit movie, 1992: The Conquest of Paradise). In the USA the African American civil rights movement also played a key role in developing new political understandings of the role of slavery and racism in American society. Such critical histories stand in stark opposition to accounts that emphasised, for instance, the West's self-liberation from superstition and tyranny, its invention of a mode of production - capitalism - that allowed new levels of mass affluence or its global 'civilising mission'. Postcolonial histories radically intensified self-doubt about the historical underpinnings of Occidental modernity already set in play by the Holocaust. The resistance to 'black armagedon' history was an important spur to the conservative attack on 'multiculturalism' after the eighties. At the time of writing it seems that the rift between academic understandings of the past which remain based on revisionary and critical accounts of imperialism and racism, and popular understandings which marginalise those formations, is anything increasing, and not only in the West.

Let us turn to the ways in which the past is represented and used in contemporary leisure culture. We live in a society in which the present is said to dominate the past to an unprecedented degree, and yet in which the past is everywhere. At the most abstract level this turn to the past in everyday life can be read in two main ways: reactively, as a retreat from the difficult, uncertain present; or positively, as an investment of large resources of time and money in preserving the past, primarily in the interests of the society, and did so by thinking of culture as the site of national continuity and order which needed to be preserved from economic and egalitarian political forces. Burke's opposition may seem no longer to play a key role in Western politics but his logic remains fundamental to the concept of culture. The sense that national identity is intimately bound to a high cultural heritage still so important in Europe and increasingly taking hold in Asia is fundamentally Burkean. One of the important features of the USA is that - recognising itself as comprised of various diasporic groups and as found intersecting needs and interests, for some it is a hobby defining something like a taste-community or subculture. Different groups of history fans, however, have been commanding interests in different periods or genres (military history being especially popular, particularly among men, as is the history of Nazi Germany). Others become involved more actively and performatively. They undertake forms of practical antiquarianism in local history societies or...
help with archaeological digs. Or they play re-enactment games in the genre often called 'living history'. In the UK the fashion for re-enactment, for instance, can be dated to a 1968 event organized by a group of Civil War fans called the Sealed Knot, which today remains Britain's largest re-enactment society. In the USA the Civil War provides the most popular re-enactment events too, although these re-enactments have a conservative, not to say, racist edge since they tend to drip with nostalgia for the confederate (Southern slave-owning) side. And re-enactments have their hard-core fans who undergo amazing privations to live in the past just as it was, without any modern conveniences at all.

For others history is a form of more passive entertainment, in particular as is provided by television documentaries. These have become increasingly commercialized - see the A&E cable network's History Channel which (like the similar Biography Channel) is disseminated internationally and which is able to produce what the company itself markets as 'global programming events' such as 2000's pathbreaking Modern Marvels Bayes Year Time, a ten-hour programme on the history of gadgets and toys designed specifically for men who are still boys at heart. History and especially historical biography is a core genre for the publishing industry too, books on such topics being especially popular as gifts for men who aren't really 'book people'. In Britain the periodical History Today has been a surprising success. As entertainment, history is of course often fictionalized: the era of historical fiction, which was inaugurated by the Scottish novelist Walter Scott at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is by no means over. Scott's project was to reconcile progressive historicism with Burckan conservation by developing fiction's 'capacity for rewarding characters, shaped by historical forces, who reconciled themselves to the iron will of modernity'.

Nowadays historical fictions, whether in print or as audio-recorded novels, rarely have such focussed ideological objectives. They tend to circulate received ideas about particular epochs within fine-tuned generic conventions: set Barbara Cartland's best-selling romances, which have contributed massively to the image of the dashing, rakish English Regency period (the very period during which Sir Walter Scott wrote), stand as one such example. Recently, however, a new kind of writing, which indeliberately mingles history and fiction, has emerged within art literature. Such writing resurfaces streams of underground history that are deemed valuable because they fall outside widely disseminated public memories, and which, for that very reason, cannot be referenced without being placed at risk. In two of the most noted practitioners of this genre, the English writer train Sinclair and the German W.G. Sebald, the mood is melancholic. Horror of the present is only warding off by a virtuosic literary style. In Sebald especially an older sense of temporality seems to be reappearing: the Baroque sense of history as graveyard. Despite historicism and progressivism, the past also continues to function as a ground of identity at various levels. At the level of the family, genealogy begins its rise to

popularity in the late seventies, on the threshold of the 'postmodern' moment. These days, in the West, many libraries and archives seem to be dedicated primarily to helping people uncover their family lives - a sign less of a seismic shift in the culture's relation to the past, I suspect, than of an ageing and dislocated population with time and money on their hands.

At a more social level, historical narratives continue to form a basis of identity for ethnicities and nations. This can take the form of a straightforward identification of certain events (generally traumatic ones) as defining current ways of life and structures of feeling: slavery for African Americans, colonisation for many colonised communities or even the Blitz for Londoners. French identity is still articulated around its sense that France brought modern civility and rationality to the world, a piece of ideology that is much more powerful than foreigners recognise (they tend to see France through other historical moments, especially the late nineteenth-century belle époque). In the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party has attempted to deflect the socially unsettling consequences of its turn to state capitalism by encouraging pride in China's ancient civilisation. The feminist movement of the late sixties and early seventies gained a great deal of its energy from its highly successful efforts at historical retrieval, rescuing women's contributions from abysmal forgetfulness to create a transhistorical gendered community under new terms.

Identity through history can also take a weaker form, through the deployment of nostalgia, as in nostalgia for imperial and traditional class-based society so apparent in middle-class Britain today, which, for many, seems to represent an essential tradition which defines Britishness. Critics such as Fredric Jameson theorise current 'nostalgia' as a sign of the lack of real History in the present (that is, a materialist History which will gnaw revolutionary action). But it makes more sense to see such nostalgia (like the fad for genealogy) as a consequence of the weakening of the role of the past and of inheritance in the construction of social identities. Nostalgia and genealogy are the weak histories of a post-historical age, which means not just an age that knows history increasingly as entertainment, but also an age that is increasingly buried by the past.

Amateur relations to history emerge into which is often called at the level of official institutions 'the heritage industry' and, at the level of the community itself, 'cultural memory'. These terms are linked because they both refer to those elements of the past that remain current beyond formal and specialised scholarship. Furthermore, cultural memories have become increasingly bureaucratised and commercialised, that is drawn into the heritage industry. After all, the past that we remember is, to a large degree, the past that organised, and mainly commercial, interests present to us to be remembered. Indeed history as taught in non-research educational institutions is entering into increasingly close relations with the heritage industry too, at schools in particular seek to interest students in history via its commercialised modes of presentation. The
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self-understandings of the present: the notion of the conformist fitted (a particularly grotesque simplification albeit one based on the popular sociology of the time) allows later generations to congratulate themselves on their liberation and adventure; the affectionately presented figure of praiseworthy masculinity during the seventies à la Austin Powers, although (like the seventies itself) a joke, expresses a certain resentment against the feminisms that also emerged during that decade.

Another set of public-cultural memories able to resist the heritage industry are those firmly based in the local, and especially in communities with a strong sense of unity and roots. Such memories can become historised through oral histories, memoirs, 'local history' research and writing. Upon occasion cultural studies academics have helped to historicise and preserve cultural memories of beleaguered communities. The Butetown History and Arts Centre, founded by Glenn Jordan in Cardiff, for instance, organised a museum and archives, and published oral histories of the old multicultural, working-class port community of Cardiff's Tiger Bay which had often been demonised, or, in complete contrast, romantically praised, by outsiders (see Jordan and Wheeler 2000). This kind of history has various functions and effects: it provides a resource for the children and the children's children of community members, those who feel attached to the community for familial reasons but who may no longer retain any lived connection to it. It confers a certain visibility, status and solidity on a community. It becomes, in sum, a grounded of identity. In cases such as Tiger Bay, organised cultural memories may help resist and correct the false representations of outsiders, and in communities of the poor and marginalised, the formalisation of cultural memory may have political resonances. This is especially true for communities that remain the object of prejudice and oppression, and trust of all in colonial contexts, where memories and myths of a pre-colonial past may be the most valuable asset of indigenous peoples. During the nineties the relation between history-as-injury and contemporary life underwent something of a shift. It did so along two interconnected fronts: one public, one private. In the public arena it became increasingly possible for victims of past injustices to call for reparations now, in the present; in the private sphere, historical horrors were increasingly diagnosed as traumatic, in a semi-psychodynamic sense, for those who lived through them. At the heart of this new relation between the past and the present lay the Holocaust, which became a defining event for European modernity, symbolising Enlightenment's supposed failure, man's inhumanity to man and the ferocity of European anti-Semitism af at once. By the same stroke efforts to repair the Holocaust's horror become representative of current society's claim to civility. The concept of trauma both recognises the Holocaust's damage but also contains the promise of a certain recuperation from it.

Although historical trauma was focussed on the Holocaust, it is worth noting that the uncovering of history as trauma occurred at the same time that child abuse and
other forms of familial and social persecution were becoming increasingly open to media discussion and drawn into the ambit of the judicial and therapeutic professions. Trauma became a popular paradigm for thinking about the past after US military personnel returning from Vietnam and suffering flashbacks, hallucinations, rage and depression were diagnosed with a new syndrome — Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Somewhat later, organised collective injustices such as the 'stolen generation' among Australian Aborigines (the governmental sanctioned uprooting of children born into Aboriginal communities) or the enforced prostitution of Korean women by the Japanese during World War II were also recognised as traumatic and simultaneously received increased publicity and demands for apology and repatriation (see Froh 2001).

Trauma is a contested concept (see Ley 2000), but at its heart lies the notion that some events are too damaging to be able to be dealt with consciously. Trauma victims repress their pain and displace it into symptoms, many of which involve more or less distorted repetitions of the traumatic events themselves. In them the past lives on, but not in the form of conscious, or at least controlled, memory or representation. The crucial question that confronts thinking about trauma psychologically is: to what degree is it a performance in which strategy and suggestion mingle with pain and pathology? Can, for instance, the Holocaust be regarded as a trauma for modernity or just for (some) survivors? Is Australian cultural identity in part a collectivist response to the trauma of Gallipoli, the disastrous World War I campaign that cost over 8000 lives for almost no military gain and which has become an official icon of Australian (Anglo) character. The problem with trauma theory once it is applied to groups rather than individuals is that it tends to overemphasise the unity and shared experience of groups and, indeed, to grant past experience too great an influence on present realities. After all, if there is one thing that sustained reflection on the past from a cultural studies perspective teaches us it is that the past we have today is not, in any clear way, the past as it was once variously experienced. Which nonetheless does not mean that it is, as historicism supposes, simply other.

Further reading

The present

2.2

The contemporary

As we have seen, cultural studies is marked off from disciplines such as literary studies, film studies and art history partly through its focus on the contemporary. In this section I want to examine what the contemporary means, first by analysing it as a concept and then by offering a summary of postmodernism, which has been the most influential category used to frame it. And we should remind ourselves at once that the contemporary looms larger in the West today than it has ever done. After all, it seems as if we are today more interested in time now than in time past compared to earlier generations — the emergence of cultural studies being itself an expression of that. Cultural studies' commitment to the contemporary orientates it towards what in critical terms is called 'presentism', which means both seeing the past through the light of the present in ways that lose sight of the past's otherness and being narcomaniacally historically speaking, that is, being overconfident that historical trends are reaching their apogee now (even though, as we know from section 2.1, anti-presentism also has its costs).

So what is the contemporary? At one level, it connotes the present. But to say that is to say very little since the present is an elusive category: simultaneously, the zero, through which the future becomes the past, and the plenitude in which our lives occur. As sensation teaches us, the present acquires meaning only by virtue of its place in an ordered array which contains elements different to itself, that is, in relation to the past and, though much less so, to the future. The present means something in terms of its perceived differences and similarities to the past, where the past is figured as a jumble of (debates over) events, images, tendencies, thresholds, repetitions and dead ends. Thus (in the West) the present means what it means in relation to events such as the
French Revolution and the Holocaust, which define it as a moment in modernity, or for instance in relation to a supposedly more tranquil past as imaged by a more or less mythical traditional English village without media or consumerism and with an environment. Or, alternatively, the present means something in terms of its relation to the future, to predictions of an era when China will become more powerful than the USA, or when human beings will be synthesised with machines. Say the present is strictly meaningless without imagined and narrativised pasts and futures, images and narratives constituted by tropes of events and processes. And the greater the will to make the present meaningful (perhaps because we are losing our confidence in history as a concept), the more likely that the pasts and futures which it grants its meaning will be represented over-simplistically. It follows from this that academic historiography, which sets itself against the past's over-simplification, is, to the degree that it is successful, robbing the present of meaning.

But the contemporary is not simply the present. Some of what is happening now seems more contemporary from other things that are also happening now. The contemporary is that parcel of past time that we recognise as belonging to us now, that which seems not to have reached closure in a narrative sense. Raymond Williams famously divided the present into three: the residual (current formations which were inherited from the past but had little future); the dominant (formations that control the present); and the emergent (which had not yet attained their full development and influence). However, it is not easy to categorise social formations as these terms today: where does religious fundamentalism belong for instance? And in its unremarkable progressivism, Williams' schema does not really address the category of the 'contemporary' since the dominant at a particular historical moment need not be dominant at all. Indeed there is a sense in which commitment to the contemporary is a commitment to the ephemeral (in the sense that the latest movie hit for instance is an ephemeral phenomenon), even if cultural studies makes the ephemeral less ephemeral by bringing it into a disciplinary archive, and, in some instances, by allowing ephemeral cases to become reference points for future analysis and case studies. Let us not forget that academic disciplines and institutions play an important part in bringing pasts into presents and presents into futures. They are also memory banks - cultural studies, and especially as it ages.

There is also an important sense of relationships between the concept of the contemporary, youth, fashion and cultural studies. Youth culture seems more contemporary than the other cultural niches. And cultural studies has a particularly strong connection to the young (a certain sector of youth at any rate) since it's they who mainly crowd the classrooms which remains its most important institutional site. Because it is a discipline that does not take its own authority or the authority of those who belong to it for granted, it has a different relation to its students than had older disciplines. Ideally at least, it listens to its students; it takes on board their interests and knowledge. The student is figured not as an empty subject to be filled with scholarship, a capability to be trained, but as an interlocutor with whom certain modes of thought and perspectives on the world are to be presented and with whom teachers are in dialogue. Because of this, generational differences between students and teachers loom large: after all, and especially in Anglophone cultures, the interest of the middle-aged in the young is often considered voyeuristic, slightly improper. Furthermore the logic by which styles pass from cool to boring and uncool to half-forgotten and laughable to cool and retro is inexorable. Which in the classrooms means that the teacher who remains true to the cultural loves of his or her youth (ethnically, the Clash circa 1977) as a teacher who valiantly tries to keep up year after year with what's latest risk looking equally ridiculous to their students. And in the parade of generationally innitiated styles the contemporary lapses into the fashion; the present into the 'trend'.

At a more abstract level, the contemporary is often said to be particularly difficult to grasp, and not for philosophical reasons. One argument that seems to be made in this direction contends that the contemporary is changing faster than it used to, so fast in fact that it is difficult for intellectual analysis to grasp it (see Grossberg 2000, 149). But it is difficult to know whether history is moving faster now than previously since there are no clear criteria by which to make such a comparison and, at the level of perception, it seems pretty unlikely. To take a couple of admittedly extreme examples, what would the British in 1939 have thought of such an assertion, or the Americans in 1862 in the midst of the Civil War? And, on the other hand, didn't we hear, only a few years ago, a great deal about the end of history (meaning that democratic capitalism had triumphed as a global system and no alternatives looked plausible)?

The contemporary is also said to be difficult to grasp because we no longer have a unified and generally agreed set of terms by which to analyse it. Knowledge and value have fragmented, so the argument goes, and the 'master narrative' of human progress and liberation have lost coherence (see Lyotard 1984). In a word, as Fredric Jameson (1993) puts it, the contemporary is 'unthinkable'. Whether or not this is the case, there has never been a society that has possessed more detailed information about itself than ours today. To take just a few examples: market research companies have rich and detailed descriptions of consumption patterns spread across space, social maps of desire' as Dick Hebdige (1989, 51) in his important set of interrelated campaigns, product launches, the establishment of retail outlets. Law enforcement agencies have rich descriptions of the geography of crime; economic geographies have an extremely detailed sense of the spatio-temporal of economic activity across space; politicians and journalists draw on electoral boundaries to map pollution and poverty, much to the street on history of voting patterns; plant and animal habitats (although much less well mapped than human society and culture) are better and better described and known - for some very endangered species every surviving individual has a name. In fact, in a networked consumer society, to act is to be mapped: a purchase on a credit card leaves a trace on a
map of consumption immediately. The problem is not that contemporary societies and cultures aren’t mapped, but that there is an increasing discrepancy between the amount of information we have about them and the normative frameworks we have to evaluate and ‘make sense of’ that information.

One thing is clear: we tend to see the contemporary more in terms of processes and tendencies than in terms of fixed traits. It is mobile in this as well as in other senses. How then do we periodise it?

The postmodern

Future cultural historians will, no doubt, think of the eighties and nineties as the age of postmodernism. Postmodernism, that is, belongs to that specific moment — the last decades of the twentieth century. It then emerges as a concept after some intellectuals (the most influential being the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson) concluded that it was no longer possible to tell coherent stories about society. That conclusion was entwined into a complex diagnosis of the contemporary, including the judgement that emotional life was being deadened (as in a so-called ‘wasting of effect’); that the past was being endlessly and meaninglessly recycled; that modernity and everyday life was being experienced ironically, as if in quotation marks, and more and more superficially (in so-called ‘depthlessness’); that secular faith in progress was evaporating, and that itself was vanishing as it became more and more intertwined with the imaginary and the actual disappeared into its own reproduction (or ‘autodissensus’) (Jameson 1991).

Yet in the new century, ‘postmodernism’ looks less and less like a convincing diagnosis of an epoch or a cultural totality than like the name of a style that covered a number of genres at a particular moment. It may seem as if postmodernism has been replaced by globalisation as a diagnosis of the contemporary, yet, finally, globalisation is not the name of a cultural mode but a set of economic, social and political processes. So we are in the rather strange situation in which culture has an unprecedented presence but lacks a generally agreed conceptual and critical frame of reference. This is not to say that the insights articulated within postmodern theory and criticism are all obsolete. What, then, if anything, remains useful in postmodernism? It answers that we need to delve more deeply into the reasoning that produced postmodernism as a concept.

Virginia Woolf famously remarked that human nature changed on or around 1910. Today this may seem puzzling — were people in 1900 really so different to those in 1920? How many people did this difference really affect? If we try to understand what made Woolf’s exaggeration possible, then some quite profound shifts occurring around the turn of the nineteenth century do come into view. These we now group together under the name ‘modernism’. They include, in the arts, a break with realism towards utopian experimentation; in the domain of social values, a markedly less moralistic attitude towards sexuality — especially non-heterosexual sexuality — as well as a new relation between the classes in which the workers ceased to be absolutely different from the bourgeoisie; a new mode of economic production and consumption in which consumer durables flooded a marketplace which was less and less confined to the rich; and an increasing tolerance for state intervention in the welfare of the people.

Those who use the term ‘postmodernism’ (as in ‘we now live in the postmodern era’) are making a big claim which updates that of Woolf. Around 1980, or so the argument goes, society changed again, in the terms I have begun to outline. Can we locate a set of social conditions underpinning postmodernism similar to those that underpin the diagnosis of modernism? The answer to this is a qualified ‘yes’ — qualified because, in the end, postmodernism is not just a break with modernism but also represents its intensification. Many (but not all) of the processes at work during the early twentieth century were still operating in the seventies and eighties, although their cultural effects may have been different.

Still, it is clear that some important social settings have changed. Among the various events that underlie postmodernism we can identify: the rise of neo-liberalism and image politics, especially but not only in the West; the amazing (if not total) success of the women’s movement, again mainly in the West; the 1989 fall of the Cold War and the effective collapse of socialist ideals globally; the further decline of class as a marker of identity and cultural difference; the emergence of television as a core media; the extension of tertiary education into the population in many developed states; and the acceleration of migrant flows around the world, leading to pressures for the implementation of multiculturalist policies.

And I would draw special attention to a couple of other factors: postmodernism seems to be intimately related to the collapse of the utopian ideals of the sixties. The critical account of contemporary life as ‘postmodern’ has strange affinities with a bad acid trip (all that incoherence, repetition, affectlessness, schizophrenia [another word much favoured by postmodernist theorists]), and that is an accident. It is as if the revolutionary hopes of that decade turned sour, modernity had been destroyed and nothing remained to take its place. At a more ‘world historical’ level, I also would point to the withdrawal of Western powers from their old colonies, or what can be called the triumph of formal decolonisation (‘formal’ because the decolonisation of the period involved giving up governmental and legal control but not necessarily economic and cultural domination). The reason why this was so important was that the West’s sense of itself as a world historical agent of progress and enlightenment was so deeply entwined with its belief in its colonial ‘civilising mission’. Once the old colonies became (in theory at least) equal nation-states, and enlightened civilisation was not confined to the West, then everything changed. It is hard not to resist the conclusion that behind postmodernist theorists’ sense that modern progressivism and rationality are in jeopardy lies a concealed (and unthought) response to the passing away of official Western — white male — global hegemony (see Morley and Robins 1995). And once
that hegemony ended, ‘relativism’ became a standard world view — that is the notion that all cultures, peoples, faiths are equal, none being more advanced than others — or at least standard for the liberal rich.

And yet these shifts can also be interpreted differently: not in terms of a sense of jeopardy and threat but of overwhelming confidence. Perhaps most of all, postmodernism represents that shift in our understanding of the past that I have already gestured at in section 2.1. Instead of history appearing to be the story of progress — the story of a parallel of various social structures and ways of living. That way of thinking is now associated with relativism, since, if no mode of life is more advanced than any other, then how can history be told as progress? And paradoxically it appears as if the capacity to think in those terms is a sign of the first world’s immense sense of security and finally, that in so far as its confidence that history will not move past capitalism, the form of social organization nurtured in the West that is now, nominally at least, in force it could be jettisoned because progress has reached its apogee.

Modern democratic capitalism’s legitimacy and aura, in tune, largely rely on its capacity to co-opt all resistance to it. In broad terms, democracy and the market’s joint power of co-option can also be interpreted in two ways. One can either say that democratic capitalism provides its victims and dissidents with no effective language or power base with which to contest it. And one crucial reason for this is that the media — representation and even wants to such a degree that those who lose out under the current system cannot express or represent their loss. Today democratic capitalism is also a postmodern image capitalism: as I say, it looks more as if the media constructs and constrains as opposed to reflecting our reality.

From the other side, one can say that mediatised democratic capitalism has reached the point at which it can play host to an extraordinary and positive proliferation of identities. by enabling empowerment it has enabled people to live as ‘gays’, ‘feminist separatists’, ‘new agers’, ‘greenies’, ‘right to lives’, ‘fuzzy people’, even radical Muslims. Such groups belong less to a public sphere in which national communities or indeed other geographically defined communities are involved than to de-essentialised communication and consumer networks of an economic system increasingly directed at increasing consumption and networks above material production.

In this situation — and this is also a defining feature of the postmodern — politics, as we saw in Part I, becomes a scene of debates over economic management played out within an increasingly exploited technological information retrieval and image construction; it is no longer the context of the left, the party of equality and social justice, against the right, the party of individual freedoms. In postmodem formal politics one does not vote for what is just or for what represents one’s interests. For these interests can barely be represented politically in a conventional sense at all (gay or feminist interests for instance). But the most characteristic postmodern effects of all emerge from the way in which the choices available within representative democracy are designed to appeal to desires and needs that are themselves largely media constructs. Politicians reveal that voters often vote for candidates who stand against the legislation that they would most like to see enacted. An ex-actor whose fictional roles in war movies are recycled as part of his own biography was elected as President of the USA. And when these lies are pointed out, no one really cares. It doesn’t really matter. More than anything, it was the shock of this that allowed postmodernists to claim that there was no reality any longer, and that afecklessness reigned. Where communities or nations resist democratic capitalism the persuasiveness of the postmodern diagnosis breaks down. If one thing has been responsible for postmodernism losing its credibility as a concept it has been 9/11 — which forced democratic capitalism to confront its enemies.

But, you might object, isn’t postmodernism a political rather than a cultural or economic phenomena? It is true that the term first became popular in the arts (and in architectural criticism in particular), yet the cultural aspects of postmodernism have increasingly come to look like the manifestation of the kinds of transformations and events described above. Take architecture as an example. In this context, once again, ‘postmodernism’ means two things. First, it can refer to the movement famously represented in Britain by Prince Charles. This movement rejects modernism in the name of local communities and identities. Old-style modernist architecture, associated with large scale, high-rise housing blocks, represented a utopian vision and confidence in social planning. Such architecture emerged from a vision of an urban, classless, anonymous, comfortable citizenry, brought into being by a benevolent state and made concrete by designers whose taste would have no truck with popular kitsch or any kind of ornamentation. Architectural postmodernism (of this kind) rejects modernist hopes and the designs expressed those hopes, at best aiming to provide environments for a proliferation of identities. But, in the end, it seems to restrict architectural styles to those inspired from the past.

The second type of architectural postmodernism would replace the modernist vision with slogans that express no grand social or aesthetic programme. Externally, such buildings characteristically quote previous styles without regard for bath — old notions of harmony or coherence, or they express a zaniness marked by a disjunction between interiors and exteriors. Internally, they provide spaces which offer as little guidance for activities as possible. And their exteriors symbolise non-progressive liberation by indulging or riffing on pretty much anything at all. This kind of postmodernism has its analogues in other arts, literature and painting in particular. There the notion that art should reflect some stable reality or express a set of stable values (beauty, harmony), or strive for a radically different mode of reading, seeing or being, is considered, if not impossible, at least utopian. Instead, such cultural postmodernism deals in ‘parodies’
the arbitrary borrowing of old codes and styles. And, for them, the difference between high culture and mass or popular culture no longer works—that is to say, high cultural forms cannot be considered to have any more worth (more ‘profundity’ or ‘maturity’) than popular cultural forms. (In this sense, cultural studies is itself a form of postmodern knowledge.) This is partly because features such as self-referentiality and ironic intertextuality, which were once confined mainly to experimental and high art, have become commonplace in commercial culture also (Collins 1995, 2-3). And, finally, postmodern art and literature has come to terms with the market. The idea that great artworks can be something more than commodities has become difficult to sustain—and, again from the point of view of affirmative postmodernism, this is to be construed more as a gain than as a loss.

To draw together the threads of this discussion: postmodernism’s power as a concept is that it compels us to pay attention to the ways in which the contemporary world has changed, maybe beginning in the eighties, maybe earlier. But we also need to recognize that postmodern theory only uncertainly grasped these changes. Some particularly urgent questions and doubts remain unanswered. For instance, not everyone lives under postmodern conditions: not an Indonesian making clothes for the US market at 70 cents an hour for instance. Basically, postmodernity only covered the world’s urbanized rich, wherever they may live. And that was why the world it described was unprepared for the geopolitics of the war on terror.

However, the greatest intellectual difficulty with the idea of postmodernity is that it is internally incoherent. If postmodernity did dominate our society in the terms that its critics claimed, we would never really know it. For the idea of the postmodern is put forward not just as another marketed image of society but as an objective description of what society really and truly is. Yet, to put it very briefly, there is supposed to be no space for truth and reality in postmodernity. Perhaps in the end the category finds its strength in this contradiction. At least ‘postmodernity’ indicates that the present is to be thought of historically—that ‘past’ is a temporal notion after all, which allows for the likelihood that the social-economic regime of the post-modern belonged only to late-twentieth-century history. To put this critique of postmodernism somewhat differently: the self-contradictory image of a postmodern world presented by progressive critics expressed their various fears at least as much as it formed an accurate picture of the world. Yet it may be that the expression of those fears can help us commit to an order where they are indeed baseless—and therein might lie the very usefulness of the diagnosis.

Further reading

2.3

The future: policies and prophesies

For all their progressivism, the humanities have always, at least consciously, been more part- than future-directed. When they have been oriented towards what it is to come, they have mainly been driven by a philosophy of abstract humanism. Theoretically at least, there has been the idealist project of developing the full and balanced potentialities of individuals so as to help secure a more civilised and unified society for the next generation. Nineteenth-century cultural critics such as Matthew Arnold added to this traditional humanism the notion that culture could be a needful for social change. And around the same time, idealist thinkers such as T.H. Green argued that culture was where our ‘best selves’ could be imagined, if not actually lived. Culture acquired a utopian dimension. For Raymond Williams, as we have seen, ordinary culture could provide a space for forms of collective experience capable of undoing the social status quo, in whose context the critic’s role was to nurture such culture.

For Raymond Williams cultural studies can be understood as the last gasp of a traditional progressive socialist view of the future—the future offers the promise of the community taking control of its conditions of production. Since his time, of course, that view of the future, and indeed any linearly progressive view on the grand scale, has become all but impossible. As has the notion that the humanities are important agents in shaping the future. Contemporary academic knowledge in the liberal arts, as I have suggested above, remains progressive in its hopes for improvement, but it does not hold widely acknowledged hopes for new forms of society and culture, and it is increasingly unconfident about its own role in helping prepare for the future. Leaving the postmodern theorists aside, Michel Foucault’s work has been especially influential in this downgrading of progressivism. For Foucault, history is a passage of punctures and abrupt transitions, rather than a continuous flow (see Foucault 1972). His contribution was
liberating as progressive theories of history were profoundly judgmental. As we see, they approved of what was on the side of progress (as they conceived it), but everything else, it is no exaggeration to say, was on the side of death. Moreover, Forstall argued that social policies were founded on a progressive theory of history (such as the replacement of old forms of cruel punishment by imprisonment) could increase the regulation of social and individual action in ways that did not so much lead to liberation as to the increased doleful of populations. But his dismantling of linear history also helped undercut a primary legitimation of his own institutional site: the academic humanities.

Perhaps most powerfully of all — although this is not a line of thought that Forstall himself pursued — it has become clear that the harnessing of a rhetoric of progress by authorities, especially in so-called 'under-developed' regions, may encourage practices that are often not in the best interests of the environment and of the poor. A classic case of this is dams building in China and South Asia, which has been the object of devastating critique by activists, the most famous of whom is the novelist Anand防火 (see Roy 1999) and also Sen 2004 for a strong liberal defence of developmentalism). To these cases, in a profound inversion of values, progressive politics becomes an insistence on sustainability or conservation. The critique of developmentalism emerges with a wider scope, tinged with guilt, that today's population is consuming more than its fair share of finite resources and is jeopardising the responsibility of the present generations to deliver a safe and sustainable future to its heirs. (See p. 211-2 for Andrew Ross's rather different approach to this topic.)

The question is: what is the place of the future in cultural studies (which to assume degree means 'in the culture', after progressives)? As was the case for the past, this question leads us in two bread directions: the future exists in representations or images of the future (images which may contain an element of prophecy or course), it also exists in the planning which attempts to prepare for the future. Most of this section will deal with the latter instance; since cultural studies have become deeply involved with planning processes under the rubric 'cultural policy', but it is important to have a broad understanding of how the future is imagined today.

We know that the futility of progress has not led to a return to the old established of history as cyclical, provisional, as awaiting messianic redemption or as undergoing continual degradation, at least in any sustained form. And even though chairsvoyance, palmyria, satir card reading and so on have had a 'new age' revival since the seventies, the filtering of progressivist has not led, in the West, to a major reification of the magical forms of projection that characterised our earlier expectation episode. In fact the decline of the concept of progress seems linked to an increase in confidence in rational prediction (based in part on probability calulation). Prediction has become what is, the fities came to be called forecasting, which thought of the future not as a domain to be imagined or to be speculated about but as the result of present actions, whether intended or unintended (Boede 2001, 94). Forecasting is not just an expression of a confidence that we can, to a some degree, control the future and calculate the probabilities, but that knowing the future first (whether we can control or not) accords material advantage. At any rate, it relies on a confidence that we have enough information about both the present and to extrapolate beyond them. The extraordinary panic in the USA about an event such as 9/11 can also be understood as a response to the disruption of forecasts and forethoughted risks. It was unforeseen in an epoch when more and more is, at least officially, unforeseen at least at the macro (large-scale) level. (This, of course, goes right against the grain of pandemic thought.) And the fear of the institutional site: the academic humanities.

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both as more powerful and secure than ever before but also as exposed to massive risks and total disasters simply because the system is both so complex and so unified.

Cultural policy

As we have begun to see, cultural critique within the humanities has not felt the responsibility to spell out, in any detail, the means by which contemporary conditions might be changed. It was the social sciences, born in the age of planning, which contributed concrete attempts to order the future ever since early sociologists such as Auguste Comte and Henri de Saint-Simon developed blueprints for future societies and, in doing so, provided the ethos for French state governance. (In Britain a somewhat similar, if much less statist, role was played by the followers of Jeremy Bentham.) But a branch of cultural studies has developed a planning rather than a humanist relation to the future through embracing the study of the processes and norms of policy making.

Cultural policy itself has a history. Jim McGuigan has sketched various moments in its development in Britain since the mid-nineteenth century, a scheme that (albeit with some important variations) is applicable to other Western European nations. He singles out four moments, each dominated by a particular paradigm legitimising social support for cultural activities: social control (in which culture was supported to counter the supposed levelling and anarchical tendencies of democracy from about 1850 to 1940); national prestige (from the early forties to the early sixties); social access, which emphasised the need for neglected communities to participate in the wider culture (from the mid-sixties to the late seventies); and the market-oriented policies of the present (McGuigan 1996, 54–60).

As a branch of cultural studies, however, cultural policy studies has a narrower range and a narrower history. It began as a strand of analysis, again dependent on Michel Foucault, that questioned whether cultural studies was an effective critical practice. It made the point that cultural studies did not spell out how critique might lead to practical outcomes (see Bennett 1998a). From the cultural policy point of view, in order to achieve practical outcomes one needs to influence the actual governance and organisation of culture, and that is only possible, first, by having a secure place within the social system (i.e. as a discrete, transparent and principled academic discipline), and then by engaging the institutions which do govern 'culture' – which means in effect by becoming involved in the policy-making process.

This means giving up on the scorn of bureaucracy and the idealisation of the intellectual as remote from the messy, corrupting world. At the level of theory, this move was backed by an interpretation of Foucault's theory of modern power, in which flows of power are not to be regarded as instruments of repression or control, but, in principle, as empowering and forming their subjects, typically by processes of government
(which is when power becomes so-called 'governance/malinity'). And importantly, these governmental flows of power are also charactetistically open to reflection and negotiation. It was in these terms that cultural studies also turned to the German sociologist, Max Weber's concept of 'value-rationality', which sanctioned the bureaucratic implemenation of values—Weber drew upon a long Prussian history in which German involvement in policy making and administration circa 1800 (see Hunter 1994, a key effect of making co-operation between culture, theory and government responsible for work with practical outcomes.

From a different perspective, a widespread acknowledgement of culture's economic importance and hence national value has encouraged governments to develop cultural policies. The growing sense of the importance and potential of cultural industries and arts is a point of departure, especially in terms of market potential, potential to add value to the cultural industries, can be articulated, that centred on the cultural industries or the arts organisations themselves; and that centred on local cultural communities. The impulsion towards cultural policy studies is less powerful in the UK, which does not have a co-ordinated cultural policy framework, than it is in the rest of the nations—the old neo-Foucauldian form of cultural policy has been transmitted into support for 'creative industries' and cultural development. The term 'creative industries' is relatively recent, having emerged in the seventies with the English regional councils (especially the Greater London Council) and then the 1990s Australian Commonwealth cultural policy document, CreativeNations, leading the way. The concept of creativity implicit in the term is much older; the notion that ordinary cultural activities are creative and cannot be seconded at high culture is an older notion. In the first chapter of Raymond Williams' The Long Revolution, Creativity for Williams is not a high romantic concept that points to a creator's God-like imaginative powers, but a general human capacity. Today, however, it is used more in the sense that advertising agencies have 'creative directors'. This involves a glossing over of important—arguably crucial—nuances and distinctions.

The future: policies and prophecies

while few would mourn the end of the old idea of privileged aesthetic creative imagination, there remain real differences in the kinds of skills and talents required to write a script for The Simpsons, say, and copy for a marketing catalogue. The concept of 'cultural development' was originally articulated by French foreign policy bureaucrats and UNESCO during the 1960s. As Lissene Gibson and Tom O'Regan put it in a definition that begs a large question: 'cultural development gives priority to the building and enhancing of cultural capacity for the twin purposes of both social and cultural inclusion and industry development' (Gibson and O'Regan 2003, 5). (The question this begs is, of course, do industry development and cultural inclusion routinely work in the same direction?) On the other hand, creative industries discourse emphases cultural activities, based on individual talent with market potential, paying special attention to cultural forms that can produce intellectual property (US economic circles, where the term 'creative industries' is barely less used, such industries are sometimes known simply as the 'copyright industries'). The notion of the creative industry thus draws energy from the sense that contemporary economies are increasingly based on intangibles, including design, style and imagination. It often occurs, however, that 'creative industries' has become a term used mainly by those with a vested interest in talking up the contribution of their particular sector to national economies. At one level, creative industry policy is a form of industrial policy like any other, concentrating on matters such as tax concessions and incubation schemes. More particularly, the aim of much creative industries and cultural development work is to develop synergies and partnerships between the public and private sectors for a wide variety of cultural and creative interests and enterprises in specific locations (O'Regan 2002, 18–20) These might include, to conjure a list at random: swimming pools, art centres, internet cafes, comedy festivals, walking trails, libraries (although public libraries are probably the most popular and least commercialised of publicly subsidised cultural institutions), fashion show, dance companies and public art works. As such, cultural development policy needs to work with town planning, industry-facilitation programmes and the marketing departments of governments at various levels. When we reach this degree of concreteness, that question as to the status of the creative industries returns: to what degree do they have their own particular status and economic structure; to what degree are they a real form of service industry? Some proponents of the term argue for the latter, although in doing so they risk expressing a bias against the aesthetic as such since art and creativity of course have not traditionally seen themselves or been seen in terms (Cunningham 2002, 59–60).

So cultural planning remains primarily focused on the development of specific places (usually nations or cities) and characteristically works hand in hand with other policies designed to encourage local growth, and which are responsive to global flows and the neo-liberal political-economic environment. This is so even though the evidence for the argument that cultural development in cities leads to economic
expansion is ambiguous. Partly because of this, there have been various attempts to present cases for cultural development of urban areas in terms which include concepts such as 'cultural rights' in addition to more narrowly economic ones (see Landry and Bianchini, 1995). 'Cultural rights' traditionally mean an individual's right to participate in and express themselves through a culture of their own choosing, but it can be extended to include the right to cultural respect from others, and cultural policy intersects with cultural rights at the point where one of the objectives of the first is to ensure the second (see http://www.unesco.org/culture/). Cultural studies of course is well placed to demonstrate the importance of cultural rights and the politics of difference to which they belong.

To summarise a large debate, we can itemise the most often discussed problems with the creative industry approach in relation to cultural studies, taking artists, academics and politicians perspectives in turn. From the point of view of producers, policy makers tend to undervalue the importance of their participation in the process, as well as paying insufficient attention to the logics of prestige and innovation which order their activities, especially in the high arts. (What tends to really matter to artists and producers is the quality of their contribution to the genre and recognition of that by peers.) Under cultural policy 'culture' risks becoming official and bland. It has after all been approved and planned for. A form of censorship may also enter in which art must either respect not so much democratic as majoritarian values and interests (in particular as mediated through the market) or become part of official cultural diversity policies. A great deal of strong and/or radical culture cannot survive the politician and bureaucrat's blessing. The differences between different arts and cultural fields also tend to be lost sight of in cultural policy formation. The old high arts especially tend to be individualistic and governed by ideals that stood outside even as esthetic bourgeois and economic values (even if they regularly feed techniques and styles into more commercial modes). Paradoxes abound here since the more programmatically anti-commercial the artist the more subsidy, usually from government, he or she requires to fulfil large-scale projects – as policymakers are likely to point out. The rationalism and commitment to the equivalence of cultural forms that most cultural policy thinking requires means that the question of quality is marginalised. Although arguments about the allocation of funds for highly subsidised, high-status arts such as opera as against more popular forms are endemic, and help show why cultural policy is necessary, that argument is not itself an argument about quality, since, as we shall see in more detail in Part 7, it is tenuous to assume that any form of culture is of itself of higher quality than another.

From the point of view of the politicians, cultural policy creates problems also. They become vulnerable to the question, for instance, of why public money is being spent on any specific project, particularly avant-garde ones whose acceptance is weak in the wider community. They may be compelled to confront the real tensions between the emphasis on multiculturalism (thought of as the encouragement of different cultures within one nation-state) or cultural diversity (thought of as openness to different cultural global flows) on the one side, and the perceived demand for cultural cohesion within nation-states on the other. In most Western states majorities support the latter, whereas cultural policy analysts and cultural studies academics along with minority communities themselves support the former.

From the academic point of view, it is probably the case that cultural policy studies tend to reduce independence. Many cultural policy academics work in centres that are dependent on contracts from governments and large cultural businesses, and have foregone the traditional autonomy of academic research. There are dangers in this model, since academic independence also provides space for scholarship extending beyond the realm of the practically useful: for example detailed research into historical backgrounds or careful reading of texts, films, images and so on which are critical in the sense that they uncover the value assumptions, rhetorical moves, contextual references, etc. of their objects. Certainly cultural policy itself cannot help articulate an analysis of society and culture that will actually inspire, or at any rate provide a point of reference for, artists, writers and other cultural workers. Given all these difficulties, it is still the case that it is important for cultural studies to demonstrate that particular cultural landscapes are not natural or inevitable but are instead shaped by particular policies and modes of production. The study of cultural policy is a powerful aid to such a pedagogy. More than that, as long as resources for cultural production are limited and ordered by some kind of public administration then cultural policy will be necessary, and sensitive cultural policy important. More than that, cultural policy study is also an offspring of cultural studies, the main purpose of which is to contribute towards the training of would-be arts administrators, policy consultants and project managers – it is vocational, which is to its great advantage. Cultural policy's dependence on others (politicians, private-sector patronage, economic planners, philanthropists) may mean that its academic branch will continue to lead status in relation to more autonomous, idealist and critical fields, but I can foresee a future in which cultural studies academics increasingly seek out possibilities of exchange with cultural policy professionals and in which (given the university system's entrepreneurial turn) academics will increasingly need to moonlight as consultants anyway. So for all the difficulties and limits that a cultural policy approach poses for cultural studies, it is clearly one of the discipline's more stable elements. The crucial question that this picture of the future makes us confront is: how precisely should we balance cultural policy against the less instrumental engagements of critique, celebration and scholarship?

Further reading
Barr 2003; Bennett 1998a; Crane 2002; Cunningham 1993; Miller 1993; Ross 1991.