Associations was also created. The greater devolution of funding and the twentieth century. This included the splitting off of Arts Councils of Scotland and Wales from the Arts Council of Great Britain, leaving it the Arts Council of England (ACE).

In the 1960s, there was a drive to make secondary education more comprehensive, and there was relatively generous funding for the expansion of higher education. Such public policies, educational and cultural, were enacted in the name of ‘access’ to opportunities and pleasures that were previously denied to most people. But, as Williams had already noted back in the 1950s, in his discussion of Tawney, what would be disseminated more widely was bound to change with the dissemination. Trouble occurred around the meaning of ‘access’. Was it confined to creating the conditions for more people down the social hierarchy and in the regions to consume established art forms? Or, did it mean popular control over the means of cultural production, redefining what counts as ‘culture’ and participation for groups hitherto excluded by the established structures of public patronage? — to facilitate ethnic minority arts, proletarian theatre, feminist film-making, and so on.

Much of the trouble around ‘access’ was concentrated upon alternative theatre and community arts. By the 1970s, the Arts Council was supporting both the National Theatre in its then newly palatial premises on the South Bank of the Thames and a range of practices throughout the country variously called ‘community’, ‘fringe’ and ‘political’ theatre. There was considerable variation within the field of alternative theatre but few were aiming to widen audiences for the theatrical culture of the National. Many were trying to challenge what it represented aesthetically and socially, for instance in the work of John McGrath (1981) and the 7.84 Theatre Company. Although in retrospect such opposition practices are often seen to characterize the cultural action of that period, it should be remembered just how marginal they really were. In 1978, thirty travelling theatre companies received just less than £1 million between them in Arts Council grants, while the National and the Royal Shakespeare Company shared more than £4 million (Itzin 1980). The Arts Council was also spending about £1 million a year on community arts. That same year, Su Braden provoked a bitter counter-attack against community arts when she denounced the Arts Council’s support for ‘bourgeois’ culture in her book, Artists and People. The following passage in Braden’s book particularly incensed the guardians of ‘serious culture’:

[The so-called cultural heritage which made Europe great — the Bachs and the Beethovens, the Shakespeare and the Dantes, the Constables and the Titians — is no longer communicating to the vast majority of Europe’s population. That the relevance of even art forms that were widely popular at the time of their creation are now only easily accessible to those already convinced that such culture is their heritage. It is not that these cultural forms are ‘above people’s heads’ but that it is a bourgeois culture and therefore only immediately meaningful to the people that live beneath their culture. The Arts Council of Great Britain was established on this premise. And it is on the basis of the concept that if you educate people by constantly placing the art you wish them to ‘appreciate’ in front of them, that ballet, symphony orchestras, theatre and paintings have been toured around towns and villages throughout the country.

(1978: 153–4)

Braden went on to claim that the policy of cultural dissemination was based on faulty assumptions. First, it mistakenly assumed that lack of appreciation for the traditional arts is due to educational failure and could be rectified, therefore, by better education. Second, it assumed that the mass-popular culture generally appreciated by most people is inherently inferior to the traditional arts, which is an assumption that can no longer be taken for granted. Cultural democracy populists like Braden were in an embattled position. Social-democratic agents of cultural policy were running out of patience with the young Turks. In fact, this time, grants to explicitly Leftist theatre groups were already being cut off and community arts were soon to be devolved to the Regional Arts Associations. It was eventually argued from within the cultural democracy movement (Kelly 1984) that community arts should never have become so dependent upon state subsidy. In retrospect, however, it is now quite striking how typically the cultural campaigning of the ’68 Generation was couched within the terms of the social-democratic discourse of extension, access and inclusion which assumed that the state was the principal actor in the cultural field. That discourse ran contrary to the manifest powers of capital and commodity culture. To a considerable extent, then, the opposition movements were about taking such discourse seriously by redirecting resources and control to ‘the people’, that is, reforming rather than revolutionizing the state’s mode of cultural intervention. In effect, the cultural democracy movement led unwittingly to the erosion of the social-democratic project from inside. It contributed ironically to social democracy’s vulnerability to the populist assault coming from the New Right, both in general politics and in the politics of culture (for discussion of debates and developments in this period, see Baldry 1981).

Marketizing

The Senior Finance Officer at the Arts Council of Great Britain, Anthony Field, said in 1982:

It is difficult to persuade people in control of funds that the most difficult time is that involving a real expansion of activity consequent upon a growth of funds. In the period from 1970 to 1980 the Arts Council experienced such a growth and gave priority to the growth of drama groups. [...] The great achievement of the Arts Council subsidies is that they have made the best theatre available so widely. [...]
In the last resort, the Arts Council has to hang on to the very best—that it will survive (or not?) without public subsidy—the drags of theatre, the mediocre, the work that is up-and-coming or on the way out. What needs subsidy is the forum in which the very best can develop and there are indications that it will have taken the Arts Council a decade to come to terms with how best to utilise new monies.

(1983: 89, 95)

This is the voice of an accountant and, subsequently, an educator of arts administrators at the City University in London. It was not yet the authentic voice of the British New Right in cultural policy since it was still engaged primarily in dispute over cultural value according to the elitist/populist divide, the struggle between ‘the best’ and ‘the drags’ that was said to have flourished under social democracy. But, what Field is saying here already hints at the increasingly powerful language of money and efficiency whereby all value would be reduced to exchange value, the discourse of the market in cultural policy as in everything else.

Soon afterwards, in a position paper for the 1983 Greater London Council (GLC) conference on cultural policy, Nicholas Garnham said

while this tradition [of public cultural policy] has been rejecting the market most people’s cultural needs and aspirations are being, for better or worse, supplied by the market as goods and services. If one turns one’s back on an analysis of that dominant cultural process, one cannot understand the culture of our time or the challenges and opportunities which that dominant culture offers to public policy-makers.

(reprinted in Garnham 1990: 155)

When Garnham said that, the Labour-controlled GLC was, in fact, already doomed by Margaret Thatcher’s 1983 General Election pledge to abolish it and thus rid Britain’s capital city of socialist government. This concentrated minds at the GLC, which in its remaining years initiated an influential if only modestly realized policy of investment in ‘the cultural industries’. It also showed how public-sector culture could be popular fun, with its festivals, and how exclusion could be countered, for instance in its encouragement of black film-making and positive discrimination/affirmative action in training.

Garnham was merely pointing to the glaring fact that state-subsidized and government-sponsored culture is not the means of cultural provision that captures the attention of most people most of the time, as Geoff Mulgan and Ken Worpole (1986) also later insisted in their very influential book, Saturday Night or Sunday Morning?, which signalled a new economic realism and managerialism on the Left of cultural policy debate in Britain. Public cultural policy was indeed small beer, and remains so, in comparison with the economic power of cultural and media businesses and the popular appeal of commodity culture. Here, two general and qualifying points need to be made, however, the second more fully than the first. First, to take a major example, that the British government permitted Rupert Murdoch to buy up a very large segment of the national press, and allowed his Sky TV to seize command over satellite broadcasting in Britain, were policy decisions with long-term consequences (Curran and Seaton 1991 [1981]; Chippindale and Franks 1991). Decisions were taken self-consciously by government in circumstances where alternative options were available. Such events in the history of what Bernard Miege (1989) has called ‘the capitalization of cultural production’ are not just ‘trends that cannot be bucked’, a favourite phrase of the 1980s. They are trends that were actively promoted in Britain and elsewhere from the 1970s onwards. Second, it is now acutely evident in Britain, and in many other countries around the world, that the apparent political hue of the party in government does not seem to matter a great deal when dealing with international operators in global and national media markets like Murdoch. Whether this represents an ineluctable combination of economic and technological determinism resulting in inevitable governmental capitulation to the power of transnational cultural and media corporations or a pervasive abrogation of public responsibility by national governments is open to debate.

We are plunged, then, into a discourse where it is indeed ‘virtually impossible to think outside of’. It is difficult to overestimate how pervasive it became throughout politics and practice. GLC-inspired policies of public cultural investment, for instance to achieve economic regeneration and urban renewal, were pursued enthusiastically by a number of local Labour administrations from the 1980s onwards, with variable results. The point of the argument here is not to evaluate the practical outcomes of such policies in their specific contexts but, rather, to note how the language of cultural policy changed in relation to these and other practices. Simon Frith (1991: 136) posed the question, ‘How have local Labour parties come to deploy terms like “market niche” and “corporate image” in their cultural arguments?’ Evidently, and putting it very summarily, because of the reality-generating power of market reasoning and the new management thinking that was functioning ubiquitously across the institutions of British society and, for that matter, the world at large.

Perhaps this is ‘reality’ and, undoubtedly, it is wise to be ‘realistic’. No reality, however, is given once and for all in social and cultural affairs. It is always a construction, the product of multiple determinations, an historical and changeable phenomenon, which is an elementary enough observation for social and cultural analysis. Yet, processes like the ‘de-regulation’ and ‘privatization’ of communicational and cultural resources are often said to be inevitable and ineluctable; and, being inevitable and ineluctable, therefore, desirable. There is a denial of agency, an abject determinism, a naturalization of contingency, in such ideological discourse. This underpins the widespread assumption that the free play of market forces and private-sector management are inherently superior, on efficiency grounds, to political deliberation and public-sector administration. It is not only a belief held in the private sector but also in the public sector. The conventional wisdom is that there is an inexorable drift of history: so it makes sense to go with the flow.
Major cultural businesses operate increasingly on an awesomely global scale and, in many respects, transcend the powers of any nation-state, with the exception of the USA. Yet, the rhetorics of 'globalization' and of 'rolling back the state', which rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, should not be taken too literally at face value. In Britain, the state was not only rolled back with the official aim of returning its powers to 'the people'; it was also rolled forward and centralized (Gamble 1994a [1988]). That is why it is necessary to remark upon the colonization of the public sector by market reasoning and to identify some illustrative examples of the discourse in play.

First, there is the former chair of the British Arts Council and right-wing journalist William Rees-Mogg's at-one-time famous and dubious syllogism on the economic utility of 'investing' in the arts, delivered in his 1985 lecture, 'The Political Economy of Art' at IBM's British headquarters on the South Bank in London. It went like this: in 1984-85, the £1 million of 'taxpayer's money' spent by the Arts Council resulted in £250 million of turnover, creating 25,000 jobs. This produced £75 million of revenue for the Exchequer that was made up of National Insurance contributions and income tax paid by arts workers and VAT on box-office receipts. Some £50 million was saved in unemployment benefits. For an outlay of £100 million, then, £125 million was returned to the public coffers, a very healthy profit. The quality of Rees-Mogg's reasoning is not primarily what is at stake: it is the discourse of such reasoning itself which is of interest. The justification for public expenditure on the arts is given as making money and, moreover, 'the taxpayer', so beloved of neo-liberal discourse, is simultaneously redefined as a shareholder in Yookay PLC.

That same year (1985), the Arts Council issued its *A Great British Success Story*, subtitled 'An Invitation to the Nation to Invest in the Arts'. The significance of this particular report was not so much its substantive content as the rhetorical form. A Great British Success Story presented the case for continuing public expenditure on the arts in the format of a glossy and colourfully illustrated company prospectus, addressing an ideal investor who is seeking a good return on share capital. This was enunciated in the same discursive space as the selling-off of public utilities by the Thatcher government and the much-vaunted 'spread' of share-ownership and 'popular capitalism' during the 1980s. It is hard to recall and appreciate just how novel and controversial it was, in the 1980s, for the state to deploy the techniques of business promotion in such a brash manner, because it has become so customary and normal a feature of public-sector discourse since then. It exemplifies what Andrew Wernick (1991) has called 'promotional culture'.

There are three ideal subjects of such discourse: 'the taxpayer', 'the shareholder' and 'the customer'. The taxpayer does not want his or her money wasted by government. The shareholder wants a return on investment. The customer wants choice and to be served well. His or Her Majesty the Customer, the mythical sovereign consumer, must be obeyed in market discourse. This is not only an assumption of neo-liberal economics, private enterprise and recent management theory; it is also a marked feature now of public service. So, for example, there has been an increasing use of marketing techniques in the publicly subsidized arts.

Marketing is never simply about giving the customer what he or she is said to want spontaneously but, rather, it is a means of increasing sales through a careful profiling of consumers and putting in the effort where it counts. Subscription marketing schemes in the arts (Diggle 1984), for instance, are now ubiquitous, targeted upon increasing attendance by 'attenders' and encouraging 'intenders' to actually attend, and not wasting time, effort and money on attracting 'non-attenders', as social-democratic cultural policy was supposed to do.

A good deal of time and effort is also expended on attracting business sponsorship to the arts in Britain. The situation there is rather different from the USA, which in the twentieth century developed a much greater corporate and private benefactor involvement in the arts than was so in the welfare states of Europe. Business sponsorship in the British case is often a fractional supplement to public subsidy and box-office takings. Although that fraction may be seen as vital to survival for many arts organizations, other effects also come into play. There is a strong case for arguing that the actual effects of business sponsorship in Britain, at least, have been more ideological than material. Business sponsorship exerts influence implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, over programme-planning and by giving the impression that an arts event or venue has been subsidized solely by the business corporation, which may, in fact, have contributed only marginally to its production and maintenance. In addition to functioning as an ostentatious leisure perk for managers and cheap promotional advertising, there is the further problem of rapid turnover in business sponsorship for the arts. However, much public subsidy today has been tagged to the willingness and capacity of arts and cultural organizations generally to attract private funding and to having a properly worked-out business plan.

Business sponsorship, not only in the arts but also in sport, education and broadcasting, invokes all sorts of problems concerning the relationship between the primary activity and the business motives of the sponsor (Shaw 1993). Sponsorship is never innocent or disinterested: it is done for purposes of advertising and public relations. Chin-tao Wu (1998 and 2002) studied the growth of arts sponsorship in the USA and Britain over the closing decades of the twentieth century which led to 'the unprecedented intervention of business in contemporary culture' (1998: 28). Such sponsorship is aimed at increasing sales by reaching the right kind of consumer, especially the highly educated and comparatively well-off audiences for classical music concerts and opera, who also form the majority of visitors to art museums. More diffusely, arts sponsorship is concerned with fostering an 'enlightened' corporate image for political purposes, particularly if the corporation is vulnerable to criticism. This has been especially so for tobacco manufacturers, most notably Philip Morris in the USA. Art bestows a sense of distinction upon the corporate sponsor and perhaps its products as well, even including cigarettes. Corporate involvement has affected the very ambience of public art museums in which the logos of sponsors are displayed.
prominently, where galleries are named after a sponsoring company and ‘exclusive’ events are held for executives, corporate friends, celebrities, opinion leaders and politicians. As Wu notes, ‘The “PR-ization of art museums” by corporate capital is clearly articulated in the language they now speak’ (1998: 43). So, the Institute for Contemporary Arts on the Mall in London acknowledges the generosity of Toshiba, and Tate Britain has a Nomura Room named after the Japanese investment bank that put up £1.5 million to refurbish it. Figures like the Tate’s director, Nicholas Serota, are not just curators of the public’s art but cultural entrepreneurs fusing together art and business in order to make ends meet when state funding is deemed insufficient to maintain standards and expand operations. On the opening of Tate Modern in May 2000, Serota expressed ‘our deepest gratitude for supporting our vision’ to ‘public and private donors’ (Blazwick and Wilson 2000).

In his 1993 McTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh Television Festival, the late Dennis Potter (1994) – who in his day was Britain’s leading television dramatist – attacked the ‘new managerialism’ at the BBC. He entitled the lecture, ‘Occupying Powers’. This sense of the public sector being occupied by alien power had become intense and widespread by the early 1990s. Potter virtually spat out the following words at Marmaduke Hussey, then chair of the BBC governors, and his director general, John Birt: ‘You pretend to be the commercial business that you cannot be’. Such ‘pretence’ was not confined to the public sector of arts and broadcasting. It is there in education, health and in the offices of national and local government. This is ‘the new public management’, described by Andrew Gamble (1994a [1988]; 135) as ‘a set of ideas for managing all institutions in the public sector and involving devices such as internal markets, contracting out, tendering and financial incentives’. By the 1990s, such devices had become very familiar and were regarded as necessary for the effective management of everyday life in British society. The new public management was not established, however, without controversy, most particularly with regard to the National Health Service (NHS). On changes in the administration of the NHS, John Clarke and Janet Newman (1993: 428) identify ‘managerialization’ as an ideological discourse ‘which aims to make management the driving force of a successful society’. Managerialization was not confined to the NHS. It spread rapidly across the public sector, including public-sector arts and media, the underlying assumption being that public agencies should function like private businesses. Clarke and Newman (1997) argue that the managerialization of the British state and public sector is not only an organizational phenomenon but also a linguistic phenomenon, an ideological discourse. It is all-encompassing yet contradictory: ‘What is most striking about the processes of change around the welfare state is the pervasive importance – and elusiveness – of the language used to describe, explain and justify them’ (1997: vii). For instance, ‘demand’ for healthcare replaced medical ‘need’.

The ur-text for the managerialization of the public sector is the American book, Re-inventing Government, by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (1992), which British as well as American politicians, not only on the Right, took to quoting approvingly. It is said to have been hugely influential at the higher echelons of both the Democratic and Labour parties (Painter 1994). Osborne and Gaebler are disciples of the renowned management gurus Peter Drucker and Tom Peters. They claim, however, that their managerial principles are inferred primarily from the practical experiments of US city governments in response to the ‘tax revolts’ of the late 1970s and, more generally, derive from the structural transformations that were brought about by the transition to a ‘post-industrial’ society. Under tight budgetary constraints and faced with radically changed economic circumstances, governments have had to become much more ‘enterprising’ than they were during what Osborne and Gaebler call the ‘bureaucratic-industrial’ era. Their book is typical of the rhetoric of management texts. It presents a set of simple and supposedly irrefutable propositions that are driven home through didactic repetition and to each of which a chapter is devoted. The ‘ten principles’ that ‘entrepreneurial governments’ focus upon are, according to Osborne and Gaebler (1992: 19–20):

1. Competition between service providers;
2. empowerment of citizens;
3. outputs – not inputs;
4. missions – not rules and regulations;
5. customer choice;
6. prevention of problems before they emerge;
7. earning money;
8. decentralization of authority and participatory management;
9. market mechanisms;
10. catalyzing all sectors – public, private, and voluntary.

Osborne and Gaebler denied they were asking for government to be ‘run like a business’. It is difficult, though, to see quite how they could justify such a denial. Their ideas were clearly formed by the practical discourses of the most dynamic business corporations in the USA: theirs is a capitalist Utopia in which the techniques of upbeat and ‘postmodern’ capitalism hold sway. The affinity of the American ‘re-invention of government’ with the marketization policies of successive Conservative governments in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s was plainly evident. Just as notable is the affinity with the policies of the New Labour government that came to power in 1997. The suits with their management bibles did not go away, whether at the level of elected government or anywhere else throughout the public or private sectors of British governance.

Market reasoning and public-sector marketization represent a pervasive neoliberal ideology that frames the policies of social-democratic governments just as much as – and sometimes more than – conservative administrations. ‘The myth of the market’ casts a magical spell over the contemporary imagination, producing the dominant narrative and, indeed, drama of the social world. As Jeremy Seabrook notes:

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Like all profound faiths, it is so widespread and unshakeable that it remains blind to all the noxious and baleful side-effects of its workings in the world: it does not see that the most basic human needs remain unanswered, and it coexists with the most grotesque excesses. Humanity continues to be ravaged, either by pitiful insufficiency or by deliberate superfluity. We have only to glance at the financial pages of the newspapers and examine the language in which the money or commodities markets are described, to see at once to what degree these have been endowed with human, even superhuman characteristics. Markets are nervous or jittery, they are capricious or fickle, or they are more settled, calm. They are sensitive, hesitant or expectant. Market sentiment is anxiously sought; its verdict awaited. Its response eagerly anticipated. Sometimes it sounds as though the language of chivalry was being deployed; at least, we are in the presence of patriarchal representations of women. We learn that the pound sterling has had a good day, the dollar is ailing, the French franc is sinking fast – bulletins issued on the state of health of a dying monarch. If the markets have taken on human attributes, this is not simply an attempt to make comprehensible what are seen as unbidable processes, but a mode of assimilating these to a force of nature, even a reflection of the divine will on earth.

(1990: 11-12)

Seabrook alerts us to an irrational faith in the market, representing not so much the proven laws of economics, a fully rational and scientific worldview, but hopes and illusions. That is not the view, of course, of those who assert – and try to substantiate – the truth of market forces.

Tyler Cowen’s (1998) In Praise of Commercial Culture makes out a powerfully optimistic case for the positive effects of market relations and the profit motive in specifically cultural fields, and against a long line of ‘cultural pessimists’ from Left and Right who believe that authentic culture is undermined by commercialization. It is not only mass-popular culture that has flourished in the marketplace but also high art itself, most tellingly, according to Cowen. Capitalism is good for culture, providing markets for the products of the imagination and bringing about technological innovations that are used by creative agents. Modern state intervention and public patronage on the European model, however, have been rationalized as a means of making up for market failure. On the contrary, Cowen argues, the market has not failed culture.

Music and the arts have been moving away from government funding since the Middle Ages. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the nineteenth century romantic movement, and twentieth century modernism all brought art further into the market sphere. Today, most of the important work in film, music, literature, painting and sculpture is sold as a commodity. Contemporary art is capitalist art, and the history of art has been a history of struggle to establish markets. These trends will not be reversed in any foreseeable course for the current world, regard-

less of our opinion of government funding for the arts. Most countries in the world are not contemplating revocations to socialism.

(1998: 36)

For Cowen, it is a serious question whether or not government funding for the arts should continue at all, particularly in view of the American ‘culture wars’ when right-wing moralists attacked what they thought of as publicly funded obscenity. Major targets were the homo-erotic photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and the apparent blasphemy of Andres Serrano’s photograph of a cheap crucifix immersed in the artist’s own urine, Piss Christ. In fact, the money disbursed by the National Endowment for the Arts in the USA is relatively insignificant and much less consequential than tax deductions for contributing to not-for-profit cultural organizations and the effective subsidy for art and artists provided by the university system. Cowen himself is comparatively liberal in aesthetic taste – not wishing to censor – and he is neo-liberal in economics. In his view, ‘The state does best in promoting the arts when it acts as simply another customer, patron, or employer, rather than as a bureaucracy with a public mandate’ (1998: 37).

Such reasoning has increasingly framed public cultural policy in Europe itself, where the state has played a much greater role in arts and media provision than in the USA. In the late 1990s the French neologism, déstatisation, was translated into English as ‘privatisation’. At a Circle Round Table in Amsterdam in 1997, connected to the Council of Europe, seven types of ‘privatisation’ relevant to public-sector culture were identified:

1. divestiture – selling off public property;
2. free transfer of property rights – giving it away;
3. change of the state organization into a more independent organization – that is, autonomization;
4. the agency model of giving internally more discrete power to the public manager;
5. contracting out – tendering by private companies for parts of the work such as catering and cleaning;
6. use of volunteers – the deployment of free labour;
7. private funding – individual patronage and corporate sponsorship of public bodies and activities.

(McGuigan 1997b: 227)

The problem here is that not all of these forms of organizational change are, strictly speaking, ‘privatization’. The first two – divestiture and free transfer of property rights – are quite definitely so, and the fifth – contracting out – is partial privatization. Arguably, the rest are not accurately described as privatization at all. Instead, in the main, they represent mechanisms for achieving greater managerial efficiency, public-private partnership, relative autonomy from the state and, perhaps, increased civic democracy and accountability. What, for instance, did the ‘privatization’ of
Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum in the 1990s actually mean? The state did not sell off
the art collection or the building. It set up an independent foundation funded by
public money. Employees were no longer classified civil servants and a new style of
management influenced, no doubt, by the modus operandi of private business was
established. A more accurate term than ‘privatization’ for naming such a development
is ‘autonomization’, bringing about a constitutional arrangement similar to Britain’s
‘intermediary bodies’ in public arts and media. The intention may well have been to
make the Rijksmuseum operate more efficiently according to market principles and
less inefficiently according to the tradition of state bureaucracy in the Netherlands,
but it did not cease to be a public body. It could just as well be argued that organiza-
tional change at the Rijksmuseum might have brought it closer to civil society:
devolving power and enabling better opportunities for public participation in the
policy-making arena, rather than delivering it to the free play of market forces in
the cultural field.

As Oliver Bennett (1995) has argued, there is indeed a genuine problem in justifying
public cultural policy and subsidy today, particularly in face of the claims made for the
beneficence of the cultural market which, in many cases, are difficult to counter. The
rationale for public cultural policy has to be reconstructed, in Bennett’s view. This
cannot be achieved, however, by simply mimicking the market. Yet, it may just be too
late, if Jeremy Rifkin’s (2000) argument concerning the rise of ‘cultural capitalism’ is
right. Following critics such as Herbert Schiller (1989), Rifkin suggests that culture has
become entirely incorporated into capitalism and the cultural commons have been
enclosed. It is one thing to observe how the public sector has been overcome by market
reasoning: it is quite another and yet more consequential thing to note that cultural
production and consumption in general are at the leading edge of ‘post-industrial’
capitalism, as does Rifkin.

Communicating

Inspired by Jürgen Habermas, Nicholas Garnham has remarked,

the question of the Public Sphere now occupies a central position on the media
studies agenda. In the face of the demonstrable crisis in the forms and practices of
democracy in Western capitalist polities, and of attempts to reconstruct forms of
democratic politics in the ex-socialist countries, it has taken over the central role
previously occupied by the dominant ideology or hegemony.

(1995: 376)

From this point of view, then, cultural analysis becomes less about the critique of
ideological distortion and hegemonic struggle and becomes more concerned with ques-
tioning undemocratic arrangements and figuring out the conditions for democratic
communications, culture and policy.

Interest in the theory and practice of the public sphere – the political space
for rational-critical debate that, in principle, has consequences for policy – is closely
connected to the revived notion of civil society – the social space of freedom and
solidarity. They are both ideal types: the public sphere referring to the conditions of
argumentation and representation; civil society, contrasted with the state but not
reducible to the market, being somewhere in between. As John Keane (1998: 31) defines
its, ‘civil society . . . is a community of actors whose legally inscribed patterns of
association are voluntary, which means that its members are equipped with the power
to interpret and to transform the social and political structures within which they
interact’. In fact, a great many arts and cultural organizations, even in the USA, are in
this civil-society space, ‘the third sector’, which is neither of the state nor of the market
and where goals are sought that are ‘not for profit’.

On a broader front, the best hope, according to theorists of radical democracy, is the
reconstruction and further development of what was a progressive bourgeois but
extremely contradictory discursive formation, in the sense that it did not measure up to
its own principles, dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The public
sphere, so defined, declined in the twentieth century, but there are recent signs of
revival (Habermas 1992; McGuigan 2002). A revived public sphere, despite arguments
to the contrary, would seem a long way from the anarchistic delight in the liberating
powers of ‘virtual community’ on the Net (Rheingold 1995). Yet, when Wired put
Tom Paine (1985 [1791, 1792]), the eighteenth-century theorist of human rights and
democratic republicanism, on the cover of its first British edition, the connection was
there to be seen. The British version of Wired failed because its American agenda
was only thinly veiled. That does not, however, alter general claims concerning the
virtualization of radical democracy, the way in which political aspirations thus
engendered have been so much associated with the magical powers of computer
networking and new media developments in ‘the information age’.

There is a perennial issue in dispute concerning Habermas’s (1989 [1962]) original
account of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere and its present-day mani-
festations: is the public sphere actual or ideal? (Callhoun 1992). For Habermas, it is
both. There is evidence that the public sphere has existed in the past. Rational-critical
debate among acknowledged equals – the public sphere myth – was a constitutive
feature of emergent modernity in Western Europe and North America from the
eighteenth century, mediating the bourgeois revolution and subsequent political
emancipation – including of the working class, women and eventually colonial
subjects. So, the public sphere mediated the emergence of the liberal-democratic polity
of capitalism. The original public sphere of the European and American middle
classes may have been undermined subsequently by increasingly manipulative com-
munications, heavily commercialized media entertainment and news, advertising and
public relations. Habermas was, however, to revise the pessimistic conclusion he
reached over forty years ago in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.
From a Habermasian perspective on contemporary culture and politics, the public