

CHAPTER FOUR

The Art of Rent

The number of workers engaged in cultural activities and production has increased considerably over the past few decades (from some 150,000 artists registered in the New York metropolitan region in the early 1980s to likely more than double that by now), and continues to rise. They form the creative core of what Daniel Bell calls “the cultural mass” (not the creators but the transmitters of culture in the media and elsewhere),¹ and have shifted in their political stances over the years. In the 1960s, the art colleges were hotbeds of radical discussion, but their subsequent pacification and professionalization has seriously diminished agitational politics. Though socialist strategy and thought may need to be reconfigured, revitalizing such institutions as centers of political engagement and mobilizing the political and agitational powers of cultural producers is surely a worthwhile objective for the left. While commercialization and market incentives unquestionably dominate in these times, there are plenty of dissident sub-currents and discontents to be detected among cultural producers to make this a fertile field for critical expression and political agitation for the production of a new kind of commons.

That culture is a form of commons, and that it has become a commodity of some sort, is undeniable. Yet there is also a widespread belief that there is something so special about certain cultural products and events (be they in the arts, theater, music, cinema, architecture, or more broadly

in localized ways of life, heritage, collective memories, and affective communities) as to set them apart from ordinary commodities like shirts and shoes. While the boundary between the two sorts of commodities is highly porous (perhaps increasingly so), there are still grounds for maintaining an analytic separation. It may be, of course, that we distinguish cultural artifacts and events because we cannot bear to think of them as anything other than authentically different, existing on some higher plane of human creativity and meaning than that located in the factories of mass production and consumption. But even when we strip away all residues of wishful thinking (often backed by powerful ideologies), we are still left with something very special about those products designated as "cultural." Art studio and gallery districts, and strips of cafés and bars where musicians meet and play, are not the same as clothing stores simply because they too can only exist if they turn enough profit to pay their rent. How, then, can the commodity status of so many of these phenomena be reconciled with their special character?

MONOPOLY RENT AND COMPETITION

To the cultural producers themselves, usually more interested in affairs of aesthetics (sometimes even dedicated to ideals of art for art's sake), of affective values, of social life and of the heart, a term like "monopoly rent" might appear far too technical and arid to bear much weight beyond the possible calculi of the financier, the developer, the real estate speculator, and the landlord. But I hope to show that it has a much grander purchase: that, properly constructed, it can generate rich interpretations of the many practical and personal dilemmas arising in the nexus between capitalist globalization, local political-economic developments, and the evolution of cultural meanings and aesthetic values.²

All rent is based on the monopoly power of private owners over certain assets. Monopoly rent arises because social actors can realize an enhanced income stream over an extended time by virtue of their exclusive control over some directly or indirectly tradable item which is in some crucial respects unique and non-replicable. There are two situations in which the category of monopoly rent comes to the fore. The

first arises because social actors control some special quality resource, commodity, or location which, in relation to a certain kind of activity, enables them to extract monopoly rents from those desiring to use it. In the realm of production, Marx argues, the most obvious example is the vineyard producing wine of extraordinary quality that can be sold at a monopoly price. In this circumstance "the monopoly price creates the rent."³ The locational version would be centrality (for the commercial capitalist) relative to, say, the transport and communications network, or proximity (for the hotel chain) to some highly concentrated activity (such as a financial center). The commercial capitalist and the hotelier are willing to pay a premium for the land because of its accessibility.

These are the indirect cases of monopoly rent. It is not the land, resource or location of unique qualities which is traded, but the commodity or service produced through their use. In the second case, the land, resource or asset is directly traded upon (as when vineyards or prime real estate sites are sold to multinational capitalists and financiers for speculative purposes). Scarcity can be created by withholding the land, resource, or asset from current uses and speculating on future values. Monopoly rent of this sort can be extended to ownership of works of art, such as a Rodin or a Picasso, which can be (and increasingly are) bought and sold as investments. It is the uniqueness of the Picasso or the site which here forms the basis for the monopoly price.

The two forms of monopoly rent often intersect. A vineyard (with its unique château and beautiful physical setting) renowned for its wines can be traded at a monopoly price directly, as can the uniquely flavored wines produced on its land. A Picasso can be purchased for capital gain and then leased to someone else who puts it on view for a monopoly price. The proximity to a financial center can be traded directly as well as indirectly to, say, the hotel chain that uses it for its own purposes. But the difference between the two rental forms is important. It is unlikely (though not impossible), for example, that Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace will be traded directly (even the most ardent privatizers might balk at that). But they can be and plainly are traded *upon* through the marketing practices of the tourist industry (or, in the case of Buckingham Palace, by the Queen).

Two contradictions attach to the category of monopoly rent. Both of

them are important to the argument that follows. First, while uniqueness and particularity are crucial to the definition of "special qualities," the requirement of tradability means that no item can be so unique or so special as to be entirely outside the monetary calculus. The Picasso has to have a money value, as does the Monet, the Manet, the aboriginal art, the archaeological artifacts, the historic buildings, the ancient monuments, the Buddhist temples, and the experience of rafting down the Colorado, or of being in Istanbul or on top of Everest. There is, as is evident from such a list, a certain difficulty of "market formation" here. For while markets have formed around works of art, and to some degree around archaeological artifacts, there are plainly several items on this list that are hard to incorporate directly into a market (this is the problem with Westminster Abbey). Many items may not even be easy to trade upon indirectly.

The contradiction here is that the more easily marketable such items become, the less unique and special they appear. In some instances the marketing itself tends to destroy the unique qualities (particularly if these depend on qualities such as wilderness, remoteness, the purity of some aesthetic experience, and the like). More generally, to the degree that such items or events are easily marketable (and subject to replication by forgeries, fakes, imitations, or simulacra), the less they provide a basis for monopoly rent. I am put in mind here of the student who complained about how inferior her experience of Europe was compared to Disney World:

At Disney World all the countries are much closer together, and they show you the best of each country. Europe is boring. People talk strange languages and things are dirty. Sometimes you don't see anything interesting in Europe for days, but at Disney World something different happens all the time and people are happy. It's much more fun. It's well designed.⁴

While this sounds a laughable judgment, it is sobering to reflect on how much Europe is attempting to redesign itself to Disney standards (and not only for the benefit of American tourists). But—and here is the heart of the contradiction—the more Europe becomes Disneyfied, the less unique and special it is. The bland homogeneity that goes with pure commodification erases monopoly advantages; cultural products become no

different from commodities in general. "The advanced transformation of consumer goods into corporate products or 'trade mark articles' that hold a monopoly on aesthetic value," writes Wolfgang Haug, "has by and large replaced the elementary or 'generic' products," so that "commodity aesthetics" extends its border "further and further into the realm of cultural industries."⁵ Conversely, every capitalist seeks to persuade consumers of the unique and non-replicable qualities of their commodities (hence name brands, advertising, and the like). Pressures from both sides threaten to squeeze out the unique qualities that underlie monopoly rents. If the latter are to be sustained and realized, therefore, some way has to be found to keep some commodities or places unique and particular *enough* (and I will later reflect on what this might mean) to maintain a monopolistic edge in an otherwise commodified and often fiercely competitive economy.

But why, in a neoliberal world where competitive markets are supposedly dominant, would monopoly of any sort be tolerated, let alone seen as desirable? We here encounter the second contradiction which, at root, turns out to be a mirror image of the first. Competition, as Marx long ago observed, always tends towards monopoly (or oligopoly) simply because the survival of the fittest in the war of all against all eliminates the weaker firms.⁶ The fiercer the competition, the faster the trend towards oligopoly, if not monopoly. It is therefore no accident that the liberalization of markets and the celebration of market competition in recent years have produced incredible centralization of capital (Microsoft, Rupert Murdoch, Bertelsmann, financial services, and a wave of takeovers, mergers and consolidations in airlines, retailing and even in older industries like automobiles, petroleum, and the like). This tendency has long been recognized as a troublesome feature of capitalist dynamics—hence the antitrust legislation in the United States and the work of the Monopolies and Mergers Commissions in Europe. But these are weak defenses against an overwhelming force.

This structural dynamic would not have the importance it does were it not for the fact that capitalists actively cultivate monopoly powers. They thereby realize far-reaching control over production and marketing, and hence stabilize their business environment to allow for rational calculation and long-term planning, the reduction of risk and uncertainty, and

more generally guarantee themselves a relatively peaceful and untroubled existence. The visible hand of the corporation, as Alfred Chandler terms it, has consequently been of far greater importance to capitalist historical geography than the invisible hand of the market made so much of by Adam Smith, and paraded ad nauseam before us in recent years as the guiding power in the neoliberal ideology of contemporary globalization.⁷

But it is here that the mirror image of the first contradiction comes most clearly into view: market processes crucially depend upon the individual monopoly of capitalists (of all sorts) over ownership of the means of production, including finance and land. All rent, recall, is a return to the monopoly power of private ownership of some crucial asset, such as land or a patent. The monopoly power of private property is therefore both the beginning-point and the end-point of all capitalist activity. A non-tradable juridical right exists at the very foundation of all capitalist trade, making the option of non-trading (hoarding, withholding, miserly behavior) an important problem in capitalist markets. Pure market competition, free commodity exchange, and perfect market rationality are therefore rather rare and chronically unstable devices for coordinating production and consumption decisions. The problem is to keep economic relations competitive *enough* while sustaining the individual and class monopoly privileges of private property that are the foundation of capitalism as a political-economic system.

This last point demands one further elaboration to bring us closer to the topic at hand. It is widely but erroneously assumed that monopoly power of the grand and culminating sort is most clearly signaled by the centralization and concentration of capital in mega-corporations. Conversely, small firm size is widely assumed, again erroneously, to be a sign of a competitive market situation. By this measure, a once-competitive capitalism has become increasingly monopolized over time. This error arises in part because of a rather too facile application of Marx's arguments concerning the "law of the tendency for the centralization of capital," which ignores his counter-argument that centralization "would soon bring about the collapse of capitalist production if it were not for counteracting tendencies, which have a continuous decentralizing effect."⁸ But it is also supported by an economic theory of the firm that generally ignores its spatial and locational context, even though

it does accept (on those rare occasions where it deigns to consider the matter) that locational advantage involves “monopolistic competition.”

In the nineteenth century, for example, the brewer, the baker, and the candlestick maker were all protected to considerable degree from competition in local markets by the high cost of transportation. Local monopoly powers were omnipresent (even though firms were small in size), and very hard to break, in everything from energy to food supply. By this measure, small-scale nineteenth-century capitalism was far less competitive than now. It is at this point that the changing conditions of transport and communications enter in as crucial determining variables. As spatial barriers diminished through the capitalist penchant for “the annihilation of space through time,” many local industries and services lost their local protections and monopoly privileges.⁹ They were forced into competition with producers in other locations—at first relatively nearby, but then much farther away.

The historical geography of the brewing trade is very instructive in this regard. In the nineteenth century most people drank local brew because they had no choice. By the end of the nineteenth century beer production and consumption in Britain had been regionalized to a considerable degree, and remained so until the 1960s (foreign imports, with the exception of Guinness, were unheard of). But then the market became national (Newcastle Brown and Scottish Youngers appeared in London and the South), before becoming international (imports suddenly became all the rage). If one drinks local brew now it is by choice, usually out of some mix of principled attachment to locality and some special quality of the beer (based on the technique, the water, or whatever) that differentiates it from others. There are bars in Manhattan where you can drink different local brews from all over the world!

Plainly, the economic space of competition has changed in both form and scale over time. The recent bout of globalization has significantly diminished the monopoly protections given historically by high transport and communications costs, while the removal of institutional barriers to trade (protectionism) has likewise diminished the monopoly rents to be procured by keeping foreign competition out. But capitalism cannot do without monopoly powers, and craves means to assemble them. So the question upon the agenda is how to assemble monopoly

powers in a situation where the protections afforded by the so-called “natural monopolies” of space and location, and the political protections of national boundaries and tariffs, have been seriously diminished, if not eliminated.

The obvious answer is to centralize capital in mega-corporations or set up looser alliances (as in the airline and automobile industries) that dominate markets. And we have seen plenty of that. The second path is to secure ever more firmly the monopoly rights of private property through international commercial laws that regulate all global trade. Patents and so-called “intellectual property rights” have consequently become a major field of struggle through which monopoly powers more generally are asserted. The pharmaceutical industry, to take a paradigmatic example, has acquired extraordinary monopoly powers, in part through massive centralizations of capital and in part through the protection of patents and licensing agreements. And it is hungrily pursuing even more monopoly powers as it seeks to establish property rights over genetic materials of all sorts (including those of rare plants in tropical rainforests traditionally collected by indigenous inhabitants). As monopoly privileges from one source diminish, so we witness a variety of attempts to preserve and assemble them by other means.

I cannot possibly review all of these tendencies here. I do want, however, to look more closely at those aspects of this process that impinge most directly upon the problems of local development and cultural activities. I wish to show, first, that there are continuing struggles over the definition of the monopoly powers that might be accorded to location and localities, and that the idea of “culture” is more and more entangled with attempts to reassert such monopoly powers precisely because claims to uniqueness and authenticity can best be articulated as distinctive and non-replicable cultural claims. I begin with the most obvious example of monopoly rent, given by “the vineyard producing wine of extraordinary quality that can be sold at a monopoly price.”

ADVENTURES IN THE WINE TRADE

The wine trade, like brewing, has become more and more international over the last thirty years, and the stresses of international competition have produced some curious effects. Under pressure from the European Union, for example, international wine producers have agreed (after long legal battles and intense negotiations) to phase out the use of "traditional expressions" on wine labels, which could eventually include terms like "château" and "domaine" as well as generic terms like "champagne," "burgundy," "chablis" or "sauterne." In this way the European wine industry, led by the French, seeks to preserve monopoly rents by insisting upon the unique virtues of land, climate, and tradition (lumped together under the French term "terroir") and the distinctiveness of its product certified by a name. Reinforced by institutional controls like "appellation contrôlée," the French wine trade insists upon the authenticity and originality of its product, which grounds the uniqueness upon which monopoly rent can be based.

Australia is one of the countries that agreed to this move. Chateau Tahbilk in Victoria obliged by dropping the "Chateau" from its label, airily pronouncing that "we are proudly Australian with no need to use terms inherited from other countries and cultures of bygone days." To compensate, they identified two factors which, when combined, "give us a unique position in the world of wine." Theirs is one of only six world-wide wine regions where the meso-climate is dramatically influenced by inland water mass (the numerous lakes and local lagoons moderate and cool the climate). Their soil is of a unique type (found in only one other location in Victoria), described as red/sandy loam colored by a very high ferric oxide content, which "has a positive effect on grape quality and adds a certain distinctive regional character to our wines." These two factors are brought together to define "Nagambie Lakes" as a unique Viticultural Region (to be authenticated, presumably, by the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation's Geographical Indications Committee, set up to identify Viticultural regions throughout Australia). Tahbilk thereby establishes a counter-claim to monopoly rents on the grounds of the unique mix of environmental conditions in the region where it is situated. It does so in a way that parallels and competes with

the uniqueness claims of “terroir” and “domaine” pressed by French wine producers.¹⁰

But we then encounter the first contradiction. All wine is tradable, and therefore in some sense comparable, no matter where it is from. Enter Robert Parker and the *Wine Advocate*, which he publishes regularly. Parker evaluates wines for their taste and pays no particular mind to “terroir” or any other cultural-historical claims. He is notoriously independent (most other guides are supported by influential sectors of the wine industry). He ranks wines on a scale according to his own distinctive taste. He has an extensive following in the United States, a major market. If he rates a Château wine from Bordeaux 65 points and an Australian wine 95 points, then prices are affected. The Bordeaux wine producers are terrified of him. They have sued him, denigrated him, abused him, and even physically assaulted him. He challenges the bases of their monopoly rents.¹¹

Monopoly claims, we can conclude, are as much an “effect of discourse” and an outcome of struggle as they are a reflection of the qualities of the product. But if the language of “terroir” and tradition is to be abandoned, then what kind of discourse can be put in its place? Parker and many others in the wine trade have in recent years invented a language in which wines are described in terms such as “flavor of peach and plum, with a hint of thyme and gooseberry.” The language sounds bizarre, but this discursive shift, which corresponds to rising international competition and globalization in the wine trade, takes on a distinctive role, reflecting the commodification of wine consumption along standardized lines.

But wine consumption has many dimensions that open paths to profitable exploitation. For many it is an aesthetic experience. Beyond the sheer pleasure (for some) of a fine wine with the right food, there lie all sorts of other referents within the Western tradition that track back to mythology (Dionysus and Bacchus), religion (the blood of Jesus and communion rituals), and traditions celebrated in festivals, poetry, song, and literature. Knowledge of wines and “proper” appreciation are often signs of class, and are analyzable as a form of “cultural” capital (as Bourdieu would put it). Getting the wine right may have helped to seal more than a few major business deals. (Would you trust someone who

did not know how to select a wine?) Style of wine is related to regional cuisines, and thereby embedded in those practices that turn regionality into a way of life marked by distinctive structures of feeling (it is hard to imagine Zorba the Greek drinking Mondavi Californian jug wine, even though the latter is sold in Athens airport).

The wine trade is about money and profit, but it is also about culture in all of its senses (from the culture of the product to the cultural practices that surround its consumption and the cultural capital that can evolve alongside it among both producers and consumers). The perpetual search for monopoly rents entails seeking out criteria of specialty, uniqueness, originality, and authenticity in each of these realms. If uniqueness cannot be established by appeal to "terroir" and tradition, or by straight description of flavor, then other modes of distinction must be invoked to establish monopoly claims and discourses devised to guarantee the truth of those claims (the wine that guarantees seduction or the wine that goes with nostalgia and the log fire are current advertising tropes in the United States). In practice, what we find within the wine trade is a host of competing discourses, all with different truth claims about the uniqueness of the product. But, to return to my starting point, all of these discursive shifts and fluxions, as well as many of the shifts and turns that have occurred in the strategies for commanding the international market in wine, have at their root not only the search for profit but also the search for monopoly rents. In this the language of authenticity, originality, uniqueness, and special un-replicable qualities looms large. The generality of a globalized market produces, in a manner consistent with the second contradiction I identified earlier, a powerful force seeking to guarantee not only the continuing monopoly privileges of private property, but the monopoly rents that derive from depicting commodities as incomparable.

URBAN ENTREPRENEURIALISM AND THE SEARCH FOR MONOPOLY RENTS

Recent struggles within the wine trade provide a useful model for understanding a wide range of phenomena within the contemporary phase of

globalization. They have particular relevance for understanding how local cultural developments and traditions become absorbed within the calculi of political economy through attempts to garner monopoly rents. They also pose the question of how much the current interest in local cultural innovation and the resurrection and invention of local traditions attaches to the desire to extract and appropriate such rents. Since capitalists of all sorts (including the most exuberant of international financiers) are easily seduced by the lucrative prospects of monopoly powers, we immediately discern a third contradiction: that the most avid globalizers will support local developments that have the potential to yield monopoly rents even if the effect of such support is to produce a local political climate antagonistic to globalization. Emphasizing the uniqueness and purity of local Balinese culture may be vital to the hotel, airline, and tourist industry, but what happens when this encourages a Balinese movement that violently resists the "impurity" of commercialization? The Basque Country may appear a potentially valuable cultural configuration precisely because of its uniqueness, but ETA, with its demand for autonomy and preparedness from time to time to take violent action, is not easily amenable to commercialization. But the lengths to which commercial interests can go are amazing. After the release of the film *City of God*, which depicted the violence and drug wars of Rio's favelas in monstrously (and, some would say, misleading) graphic detail, an enterprising tourist industry started to market favela tours in some of the more dangerous neighborhoods (you could choose your own preferred level of tour risk). Let us probe a little more deeply into this contradiction as it impinges upon urban development politics. In order to do so, however, we must briefly situate those politics in relation to globalization.

Urban entrepreneurialism has become important both nationally and internationally in recent decades. By this I mean that pattern of behavior within urban governance that mixes together state powers (local, metropolitan, regional, national, or supranational) with a wide array of organizational forms in civil society (chambers of commerce, unions, churches, educational and research institutions, community groups, NGOs, and so on) and private interests (corporate and individual) to form coalitions to promote or manage urban or regional development of one sort or another. There is now an extensive literature on this topic

which shows that the forms, activities, and goals of these governance systems (variously known as “urban regimes,” “growth machines” or “regional growth coalitions”) vary widely depending upon local conditions and the mix of forces at work within them.¹² The role of this urban entrepreneurialism in relation to the neoliberal form of globalization has also been scrutinized at length, most usually under the rubric of local-global relations and the so-called “space-place dialectic.” Most geographers who have looked into the problem have rightly concluded that it is a categorical error to view globalization as a causal force in relation to local development. What is at stake here, they rightly argue, is a rather more complicated relationship across scales in which local initiatives can percolate upwards to a global scale and vice versa, at the same time as processes within a particular definition of scale—interurban and interregional competition being the most obvious examples—can rework the local and regional configurations of what globalization is about.

Globalization should not be seen, therefore, as an undifferentiated unity, but as a geographically articulated patterning of global capitalist activities and relations.¹³ But what, exactly, does it mean to speak of a “geographically articulated patterning”? There is, of course, plenty of evidence of uneven geographical development (at a variety of scales), and at least some cogent theorizing to understand its capitalistic logic. Some of it can be understood in conventional terms as a search on the part of mobile capitals (with financial, commercial, and production capital having different capacities in this regard) to gain advantages in the production and appropriation of surplus values by moving around. Trends can indeed be identified that fit with simple models of a “race to the bottom” in which the cheapest and most easily exploited labor-power becomes the guiding beacon for capital mobility and investment decisions. But there is plenty of countervailing evidence to suggest that this is a gross oversimplification when projected as a monocausal explanation of the dynamics of uneven geographical development. Capital in general just as easily flows into high-wage regions as into low-wage ones, and often seems to be geographically guided by quite different criteria to those conventionally set out in both bourgeois and Marxist political economy.

The problem derives partly from the habit of ignoring the category of landed capital and the considerable importance of long-term investments in the built environment, which are by definition geographically immobile. Such investments, particularly when they are of a speculative sort, invariably invite even further waves of investment if the first wave proves profitable (to fill the convention center we need the hotels, which require better transport and communications, which create the possibility of expanding the capacity of the convention center ...). So there is an element of circular and cumulative causation at work in the dynamics of metropolitan area investments (look, for example, at the whole Docklands redevelopment in London and the financial viability of Canary Wharf, which pivots on further investments, both public and private, in the area). This is what so-called "urban growth machines" are often all about: the orchestration of investment process dynamics and the provision of key public investments at the right place and time to promote success in inter-urban and inter-regional competition.¹⁴

But this would not be as attractive as it is were it not for the ways in which monopoly rents might also be captured. A well-known strategy of developers, for example, is to reserve the choicest and most rentable piece of land in some development in order to extract monopoly rent from it after the rest of the project is realized. Savvy governments with the requisite powers can engage in the same practices. The government of Hong Kong, as I understand it, is largely financed by controlled sales of public domain land for development at very high monopoly prices. This converts, in turn, into monopoly rents on properties, which makes Hong Kong very attractive to international financial investment capital working through property markets. Of course, Hong Kong has other uniqueness claims, given its location, upon which it can also trade very vigorously in offering monopoly advantages. Singapore, incidentally, set out to capture monopoly rents, and was highly successful in so doing in somewhat similar fashion, though by very different political-economic means.

Urban governance of this sort is mostly oriented to constructing patterns of local investments not only in physical infrastructures such as transport and communications, port facilities, sewage, and water, but also in the social infrastructures of education, technology and science, social

control, culture, and living quality. The aim is to create sufficient synergy within the urbanization process for monopoly rents to be created and realized by both private interests and state powers. Not all such efforts are successful, of course, but even the unsuccessful examples can partly or largely be understood in terms of their failure to realize monopoly rents. But the search for monopoly rents is not confined to the practices of real estate development, economic initiatives, and government finance. It has a far wider application.

COLLECTIVE SYMBOLIC CAPITAL, MARKS OF DISTINCTION, AND MONOPOLY RENTS

If claims to uniqueness, authenticity, particularity, and specialty underlie the ability to capture monopoly rents, then on what better terrain is it possible to make such claims than in the field of historically constituted cultural artifacts and practices and special environmental characteristics (including, of course, the built, social, and cultural environments)? As in the wine trade, all such claims are as much an outcome of discursive constructions and struggles as they are grounded in material fact. Many rest upon historical narratives, interpretations and meanings of collective memories, significations of cultural practices, and the like: there is always a strong social and discursive element at work in the construction of such causes for extracting monopoly rents, since there will be, at least in many people's minds, no other place than London, Cairo, Barcelona, Milan, Istanbul, San Francisco, or wherever, in which to gain access to whatever it is that is supposedly unique to such places.

The most obvious example is contemporary tourism, but I think it would be a mistake to let the matter rest there. For what is at stake here is the power of collective symbolic capital, of special marks of distinction that attach to some place, which have a significant drawing power upon the flows of capital more generally. Bourdieu, to whom we owe the general usage of these terms, unfortunately restricts them to individuals (rather like atoms floating in a sea of structured aesthetic judgments), when it seems to me that the collective forms (and the relation of individuals to those collective forms) might be of even greater interest.¹⁵

The collective symbolic capital which attaches to names and places like Paris, Athens, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin, and Rome is of great import and gives such places great economic advantages relative to, say, Baltimore, Liverpool, Essen, Lille, and Glasgow. The problem for these latter places is to raise their quotient of symbolic capital and to increase their marks of distinction so as to better ground their claims to the uniqueness that yields monopoly rent. The "branding" of cities becomes big business.¹⁶ Given the general loss of other monopoly powers through easier transport and communications and the reduction of other barriers to trade, this struggle for collective symbolic capital has become even more important as a basis for monopoly rents. How else can we explain the splash made by the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, with its signature Gehry architecture? And how else can we explain the willingness of major financial institutions, with considerable international interests, to finance such a signature project?

The rise to prominence of Barcelona within the European system of cities, to take another example, has in part been based on its steady amassing of symbolic capital and its accumulation of marks of distinction. In this the excavation of a distinctively Catalan history and tradition, the marketing of its strong artistic accomplishments and architectural heritage (Gaudí, of course), and its distinctive marks of lifestyle and literary traditions, have loomed large, backed by a deluge of books, exhibitions, and cultural events that celebrate its distinctiveness. This has all been showcased with new signature architectural embellishments (Norman Foster's radio communications tower and Meier's gleaming white Museum of Modern Art in the midst of the somewhat degraded fabric of the old city) and a whole host of investments to open up the harbor and the beach, reclaim derelict lands for the Olympic Village (with cute reference to the utopianism of the Icarians), and turn what was once a rather murky and even dangerous nightlife into an open panorama of urban spectacle. All of this was helped on by the Olympic Games, which opened up huge opportunities to garner monopoly rents (Samaranch, president of the International Olympic Committee, just happened to have large real estate interests in Barcelona).¹⁷

But Barcelona's initial success appears to be headed deep into the first contradiction. As opportunities to pocket monopoly rents galore present

themselves on the basis of the collective symbolic capital of Barcelona as a city (property prices have skyrocketed since the Royal Institute of British Architects awarded the whole city its medal for architectural accomplishments), so their irresistible lure draws more and more homogenizing multinational commodification in its wake. The later phases of waterfront development look exactly like every other in the western world: the stupefying congestion of the traffic leads to pressures to put boulevards through parts of the old city, multinational stores replace local shops, gentrification removes long-term residential populations and destroys older urban fabric, and Barcelona loses some of its marks of distinction. There are even unsubtle signs of Disneyfication.

This contradiction is marked by questions and resistance. Whose collective memory is to be celebrated here—the anarchists, like the Icarians, who played such an important role in Barcelona's history; the republicans who fought so fiercely against Franco; the Catalan nationalists, immigrants from Andalusia; or a long-time Franco ally like Samaranch? Whose aesthetics really count—the famously powerful architects of Barcelona, like Bohigas? Why accept Disneyfication of any sort? Debates of this sort cannot easily be stilled precisely because it is clear to all that the collective symbolic capital that Barcelona has accumulated depends upon values of authenticity, uniqueness, and particular non-replicable qualities. Such marks of local distinction are hard to accumulate without raising the issue of local empowerment, even of popular and oppositional movements. At that point, of course, the guardians of collective symbolic and cultural capital—the museums, the universities, the class of benefactors, and the state apparatus—typically close their doors and insist upon keeping the riff-raff out (though in Barcelona the Museum of Modern Art, unlike most institutions of its kind, has remained amazingly and constructively open to popular sensibilities). And if that fails, then the state can step in with anything from something like the “decency committee” set up by Mayor Giuliani to monitor cultural taste in New York City to outright police repression. Nevertheless, the stakes here are significant. It is a matter of determining which segments of the population are to benefit most from the collective symbolic capital to which everyone has, in their own distinctive ways, contributed both now and in the past. Why let the monopoly rent attached to that symbolic capital be

captured only by the multinationals, or by a small, powerful segment of the local bourgeoisie? Even Singapore, which created and appropriated monopoly rents so ruthlessly and so successfully over the years (mainly out of its locational and positional advantage), saw to it that the benefits were widely distributed through housing, health care and education.

For the sorts of reasons that the recent history of Barcelona exemplifies, the knowledge and heritage industries, the vitality and ferment of cultural production, signature architecture and the cultivation of distinctive aesthetic judgments have become powerful constitutive elements in the politics of urban entrepreneurialism in many places (particularly Europe). The struggle is on to accumulate marks of distinction and collective symbolic capital in a highly competitive world. But this brings in its wake all of the localized questions about whose collective memory, whose aesthetics, and whose benefits are to be prioritized. Neighborhood movements in Barcelona make claims for recognition and empowerment on the basis of symbolic capital, and can assert a political presence in the city as a result. It is their urban commons that are appropriated all too often not only by developers, but by the tourist trade. But the selective nature of such appropriations can mobilize further new avenues of political struggle. The initial erasure of all mention of the slave trade in the reconstruction of Albert Dock in Liverpool generated protests on the part of the excluded population of Caribbean background, and produced new political solidarities among a marginalized population. The holocaust memorial in Berlin has sparked long-drawn-out controversies. Even ancient monuments such as the Acropolis, whose meaning one would have thought by now would be well-settled, are subject to contestation.¹⁸ Such contestations can have widespread, even if indirect, political implications. The popular production of a new urban commons, the amassing of collective symbolic capital, the mobilization of collective memories and mythologies, and appeals to specific cultural traditions are important facets of all forms of political action, of both left and right.

Consider, for example, the arguments that swirled around the reconstruction of Berlin after German reunification. All manner of divergent forces collided there as the struggle to define Berlin's symbolic capital unfolded. Berlin, rather obviously, can stake a claim to uniqueness on the basis of its potential to mediate between east and west. Its strategic

position in relation to the uneven geographical development of contemporary capitalism (with the opening up of the former Soviet Union) confers obvious advantages. But there is also another kind of battle for identity being waged which invokes collective memories, mythologies, history, culture, aesthetics, and tradition. I take up just one particularly troubling dimension of this struggle—one that is not necessarily dominant, and whose capacity to ground claims to monopoly rent under global competition is not at all clear or certain. A faction of local architects and planners (with the support of certain parts of the local state apparatus) sought to revalidate the architectural forms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Berlin, and in particular to highlight the architectural tradition of Schinkel, to the exclusion of much else. This might be seen as a simple matter of elitist aesthetic preference, but it is freighted with a whole range of meanings that have to do with collective memories, monumentality, the power of history, and political identity in the city. It is also associated with that climate of opinion (articulated in a variety of discourses) which defines who is or is not a Berliner, and who has a right to the city in narrowly defined terms of pedigree or adherence to particular values and beliefs. It excavates a local history and an architectural heritage that is charged with nationalist and romanticist connotations. In a context where the ill-treatment of and violence against immigrants is widespread, it may even offer tacit legitimation to such actions. The Turkish population, many of whom are now Berlin-born, have suffered many indignities, and have largely been forced out from the city center. Their contribution to Berlin as a city is ignored. Furthermore, the romanticist/nationalist architectural style fits with a traditional approach to monumentality that broadly replicates in contemporary plans (though without specific reference, and maybe even unknowingly) Albert Speer's plans, drawn up for Hitler in the 1930s, for a monumental foreground to the Reichstag.

This is not, fortunately, all that is going on in the search for collective symbolic capital in Berlin. Norman Foster's reconstruction of the Reichstag, for example, or the collection of international modernist architects brought in by the multinationals (largely in opposition to local architects) to dominate the Potsdamer Platz, are hardly consistent with it. And the local romanticist response to the threat of multinational

domination could, of course, merely end up being an innocent element of interest in a complex achievement of diverse marks of distinction for the city (Schinkel, after all, has considerable architectural merit, and a rebuilt eighteenth-century castle could easily lend itself to Disneyfication).

But the potential downside of the story is of interest because it highlights how the contradictions of monopoly rent can all too easily play out. Were these narrower plans and exclusionary aesthetics and discursive practices to become dominant, then the collective symbolic capital created would be hard to trade freely upon, because its very special qualities would position it largely outside globalization and inside an exclusionary political culture that rejects much of what globalization is about, turning inward towards a parochial nationalism at best and a virulent rejection of foreigners and immigrants at worst. The collective monopoly powers that urban governance can command can be directed towards opposition to the banal cosmopolitanism of multinational globalization, but thereby ground localized nationalism. The cultural terms in which aid to the Greeks to deal with their indebtedness was widely rejected in the court of German public opinion suggests that the fostering of such localist nationalism can have serious global consequences. The successful branding of a city may require the expulsion or eradication of everyone or everything else that does not fit the brand.

The dilemma—between veering so close to pure commercialization as to lose the marks of distinction that underlie monopoly rents, or constructing marks of distinction that are so special as to be very hard to trade upon—is perpetually present. But, as in the wine trade, there are always strong discursive gambits involved in defining what is or is not so special about a product, a place, a cultural form, a tradition, an architectural heritage. Discursive battles become part of the game, and advocates (in the media and academia, for example) gain their audience as well as their financial support in relation to these processes. There is much to achieve, for example, by appeals to fashion (interestingly, being a center of fashion is one way for cities to accumulate considerable collective symbolic capital). Capitalists are well aware of this, and must therefore wade into the culture wars, as well as into the thickets of multiculturalism, fashion, and aesthetics, because it is precisely through such means that monopoly rents stand to be gained, if only for a while. And if, as I

claim, monopoly rent is always an object of capitalist desire, then the means of gaining it through interventions in the field of culture, history, heritage, aesthetics, and meanings must necessarily be of great import for capitalists of any sort. The question then arises as to how these cultural interventions can themselves become a potent weapon of class struggle.

MONOPOLY RENT AND SPACES OF HOPE

By now critics will complain at the seeming economic reductionism of the argument. I make it seem, they will say, as if capitalism produces local cultures, shapes aesthetic meanings, and so dominates local initiatives as to preclude the development of any kind of difference that is not directly subsumed within the circulation of capital. I cannot prevent such a reading, but this would be a perversion of my message. For what I hope to have shown by invoking the concept of monopoly rent within the logic of capital accumulation is that capital has ways to appropriate and extract surpluses from local differences, local cultural variations, and aesthetic meanings of no matter what origin. European tourists can now enjoy commercialized tours of New York's Harlem (with a gospel choir thrown in), just as "poverty tourism" touts trips to zones of intense poverty in the shanty-towns of South Africa, Dharavi in Mumbai, and the favelas of Rio. The music industry in the United States succeeds brilliantly in appropriating the incredible grassroots and localized creativity of musicians of all stripes (almost invariably to the benefit of the industry rather than the musicians). Even politically explicit music which speaks to the long history of oppression (including some forms of rap, Jamaican reggae, and Kingston Dance Hall music) becomes commodified. The commodification and commercialization of everything is, after all, one of the hallmarks of our times.

But monopoly rent is a contradictory form. The search for it leads global capital to value distinctive local initiatives—indeed, in certain respects, the more distinctive and, in these times, the more transgressive the initiative, the better. It also leads to the valuation of uniqueness, authenticity, particularity, originality, and all manner of other dimensions to social life that are inconsistent with the homogeneity presupposed by commodity

production. And if capital is not to totally destroy the uniqueness that is the basis for the appropriation of monopoly rents (and there are many circumstances where it has done just that and been roundly condemned for so doing), then it must support a form of differentiation and allow of divergent and to some degree uncontrollable local cultural developments that can be antagonistic to its own smooth functioning. It can even support (though cautiously and often nervously) transgressive cultural practices precisely because this is one way in which to be original, creative, and authentic, as well as unique.

It is within such spaces that oppositional movements can form, even presupposing, as is often the case, that oppositional movements are not already firmly entrenched there. The problem for capital is to find ways to co-opt, subsume, commodify, and monetize such cultural differences and cultural commons just enough to be able to appropriate monopoly rents from them. In so doing, capital often produces widespread alienation and resentment among the cultural producers who experience first-hand the appropriation and exploitation of their creativity and their political commitments for the economic benefit of others, in much the same way that whole populations can resent having their histories and cultures exploited through commodification. The problem for oppositional movements is to speak to this widespread appropriation of their cultural commons and to use the validation of particularity, uniqueness, authenticity, culture, and aesthetic meanings in ways that open up new possibilities and alternatives.

At the very minimum, this means resistance to the idea that authenticity, creativity, and originality are an exclusive product of bourgeois rather than working-class, peasant, or other non-capitalistic historical geographies. It also entails trying to persuade contemporary cultural producers to redirect their anger towards commodification, market domination, and the capitalistic system more generally. It is, for example, one thing to be transgressive about sexuality, religion, social mores, and artistic and architectural conventions, but quite another to be transgressive in relation to the institutions and practices of capitalist domination that actually penetrate deeply into cultural institutions. The widespread though usually fragmented struggles that exist between capitalistic appropriation and past and present cultural creativity can lead a segment

of the community concerned with cultural matters to side with a politics opposed to multinational capitalism and in favor of some more compelling alternative based on different kinds of social and ecological relations.

This does not mean that attachment to “pure” values of authenticity, originality, and an aesthetic of particularity of culture is an adequate foundation for a progressive oppositional politics. It can all too easily veer into local, regional, or nationalist identity politics of the neofascist sort, of which there are already far too many troubling signs throughout much of Europe, as well as elsewhere. This is a central contradiction with which the left must wrestle. The spaces for transformational politics are there because capital can never afford to close them down. They provide opportunities for socialist opposition. They can be the locus of exploration of alternative lifestyles, or even of social philosophies (much as Curitiba in Brazil has pioneered ideas of urban ecological sustainability to the point of reaping considerable fame from its initiatives). They can, like the Paris Commune of 1871 or the numerous urban-based political movements around the world in 1968, be a central element in that revolutionary ferment that Lenin long ago called “the festival of the people.” The fragmented oppositional movements to neoliberal globalization, as manifest in Seattle, Prague, Melbourne, Bangkok, and Nice, and then more constructively as the 2001 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, indicate such an alternative politics. It is not wholly antagonistic to globalization, but wants it on very different terms. The striving for a certain kind of cultural autonomy and support for cultural creativity and differentiation is a powerful constitutive element in these political movements.

It is no accident, of course, that it is Porto Alegre rather than Barcelona, Berlin, San Francisco, or Milan, that has opened itself to such oppositional initiatives.¹⁹ For in that city the forces of culture and of history are being mobilized by a political movement (led by the Brazilian Workers’ Party) in a quite different way, seeking a different kind of collective symbolic capital to that flaunted in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the extension to the Tate Gallery in London. The marks of distinction being accumulated in Porto Alegre derive from its struggle to fashion an alternative to globalization that does not trade on monopoly rents in particular or cave in to multinational capitalism in general. In focusing on popular mobilization, it is actively constructing new cultural forms and

new definitions of authenticity, originality, and tradition. That is a hard path to follow, as was shown by previous examples, such as the remarkable experiments in Red Bologna in the 1960s and 1970s. Socialism in one city is not a viable concept, but it is in the cities that the conditions for both the production and appropriation of monopoly rents are most highly concentrated, in terms of both physical investments and cultural movements. No alternative to the contemporary form of globalization will be delivered to us from on high. It will have to come from within multiple local spaces—urban spaces in particular—conjoining into a broader movement. It is here that the contradictions faced by capitalists as they search for monopoly rent assume a certain structural significance. By seeking to trade on values of authenticity, locality, history, culture, collective memories, and tradition they open a space for political thought and action within which socialist alternatives can be both devised and pursued. The space of that commons deserves intense exploration and cultivation by oppositional movements that embrace cultural producers and cultural production as a key element in their political strategy. There are abundant historical precedents for mobilizing the forces of high culture in this way (the role of constructivism in the creative years of the Russian Revolution from 1918 to 1926 is just one of many instructive historical examples). But popular culture as produced through the common relationships of daily life is also crucial. Here lies one of the key spaces of hope for the construction of an alternative kind of globalization and a vibrant anti-commodification politics: one in which the progressive forces of cultural production and transformation can seek to appropriate and undermine the forces of capital rather than the other way round.