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From cultural populism to cool capitalism

ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, cultural studies in Britain – and elsewhere – took an uncritical populist turn. The field of study had hitherto focused, with a distinctly oppositional orientation, upon the arts, popular and mass culture as sites of ideological contestation. Yet, increasing concern with describing and indeed celebrating processes of cultural consumption – the active audience, resistance through rituals etc. – lost sight of economic and political struggle over the circulation of culture in society. This cultural populist tendency became less concerned with questioning the status quo and unwittingly, in effect, endorsed neo-liberal development over the past thirty years. Mainstream cultural studies thus ceased to be a critical means of analysing the present cultural condition and tended, instead, to identify itself with it. That was possible because the prevailing culture was incorporating the very kind of dissent that cultural studies as a field of research and education had sought to support and foster. The prevailing culture today is characterized in this article as cool capitalism. Tracing the historical transmogrification of the meaning of ‘cool’, the article presents the concept of cool capitalism – the incorporation of disaffection into capitalism itself – and examines its origins in African-American culture, and its incorporation and neutralization over time, in order to characterize the most pronounced features of mainstream culture around the world today. In conclusion, the article calls for a renewal of critique in the public interest that applies multidimensional analysis to a wide range of issues. The analytical purpose is to account adequately for the ontological complexity of cultural circulation in various symbolic, economic, political and ecological contexts under neo-liberal capitalism. In this respect it aims to clarify the object of contestation for critical cultural intervention in the public sphere.

KEYWORDS

cool
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cultural populism
multidimensional
analysis
neo-liberalism
public interest

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago I wrote a book entitled *Cultural Populism* (McGuigan, 1992). This book was essentially methodological in orientation and about core issues and analytical procedure in the study of culture. *Cultural Populism* was intended as a sympathetic critique of developments in cultural studies during the 1980s; developments that had departed from, and possibly distorted, the original aims of the field of study, by which I mean, putting it very summarily, the pioneering work of Raymond Williams and, to a lesser extent, Stuart Hall, which was motivated by a critical sense of the public interest in research.

I always intended to write a more substantive sequel to that book with the provisional title, *Populist Culture*: a book that might have been of greater direct interest to non-specialist readers than the somewhat specialized *Cultural Populism*. For several years, I was distracted by other issues, particularly issues of cultural policy and the public sphere but also problems in social theory concerning disputes over modernity and postmodernism.

A few years ago, however, I noticed certain cultural developments in relation to economics and politics that, in effect, drew me back to the almost-forgotten sequel to *Cultural Populism*. These developments gelled for me around the theme of what I now call 'cool capitalism', a line of research that became a book of that title. First and foremost, *Cool Capitalism* was not written to be read exclusively by students and other academics but, instead, by anyone interested politically in the current state of culture and society. With hindsight *Cool Capitalism* (McGuigan, 2009) is actually the long-delayed sequel to *Cultural Populism*.

CULTURAL POPULISM

Incidentally, I had drawn a cartoon for the cover of *Cultural Populism*, which contained caricatures of some of the leading figures in British cultural studies at that time. It was not used on the cover because the editor doubted that potential readers of the book would recognize these people. He suggested putting it in as a frontispiece but I said not to bother since I was rather upset that he did not want it for the cover. I rather regret that now.

In my book of twenty years ago I gave the following definition:

Cultural populism is the intellectual assumption, made by some students of popular culture, that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than Culture with a Capital C.

'Culture with a capital C' refers to what is otherwise meant by 'high', 'serious', 'legitimate' or 'elite' culture. The definition does not cover all study of, say, 'popular' or rather 'mass-popular' culture, since you do not have to be a cultural populist to study popular or mass-popular culture. The study of such culture is perfectly justifiable on sociological grounds since it is obviously a social phenomenon of great significance.

The problem with cultural populism stems from its function as the simple binary opposite of 'cultural elitism' and the subsequent promotion of hostility to what is, essentially, a straw man today. Cultural elitism is by no means in the ascendancy, not even in the academy. It is no longer at all radical or novel to simply go against cultural elitism. In fact, cultural populism is a mainstream position that is now in the ascendancy, including within the academy.

Defending the study of the much-derided 'serious' culture may now, paradoxically, be more radical than promoting mass-popular culture as a legitimate object of study.

It has to be acknowledged that in using the term 'populism' I was borrowing from political discourse and identifying a problem in cultural analysis that replicates a problem in politics. Historically, populism has been oppositional, even left wing. The major examples would be the Russian Narodniks in the nineteenth century and the American Populists of the early twentieth century, both of whom opposed the dominant interests and power structures in society. However, populism has no necessary class or political belonging (Laclau 1977). It neither necessarily privileges the peasantry or the working class nor is it essentially left wing. In fact, it can be right wing and supportive of the dominant interests and power structures in society, as in successive right-wing movements and indeed fascism, old and new. Towards the end of the 1970s, Stuart Hall ([1979] 1983; 1988) labelled Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal conservatism 'authoritarian populism'. It appealed to 'the people' and promoted the free-market economy *and* the strong state, as Andrew Gamble ([1988] 1994) argued quite rightly.

Cultural populism in cultural analysis certainly came from the Left, initially neo-Marxist socialism, followed by feminism and anti-racist multiculturalism. Yet, the positions it took in the 1980s and since have unwittingly been homologous with neo-liberalism.

There are, of course, notable precursors to cultural populism that still have important lessons to teach and are perhaps less questionable. These precursors derive from and are to some extent critical of the modern split between art and high culture, on one hand, and folk culture and what became known as 'mass culture' on the other. It is manifestly so that the arts have raided and borrowed from popular culture in one respect or another, resulting in what the Russian formalists called 'the canonization of the junior branch'.

Classical music has borrowed from folk music. Serious literature has borrowed from popular genres, such as the crime story. Visual artists have raided mass-commercial culture for imagery. Pop art fused the serious and the popular. And, mass-popular and commercial cultures have incorporated elements from the arts. One meaning of 'postmodernism' is the collapse of cultural hierarchy and the blurring of aesthetic categories; the popular arts have been consecrated, particularly in film studies with, for instance, auteur theory unearthing creative artists among directors in commercial and Hollywood cinema. In cultural criticism, a strong argument still remains the 'good of its kind judgement' that can be applied to the arts, high and low (McGuigan 2008).

It was a progressive move for cultural studies to take popular culture seriously. This began with a trace of folk-art sensibility and the socialistic project of valuing and developing working-class culture. However, it went further. In Britain, an early sign of this trend was encapsulated in a controversial talk given at the Edinburgh Television Festival in 1977. The speakers were Richard Dyer, Terry Lovell and Jean McCrindle ([1977] 1997). They argued that the most popular television soap opera on British television at the time, *Coronation Street*, was especially progressive from a feminist point of view. Similar arguments were made in the USA concerning the much-derided daytime soaps. In a sense, this was transferring the kind of populist arguments that had been made in film studies to television. At that particular Edinburgh Festival, both Raymond Williams (1977), the cultural critic, and Dennis Potter (1977),

the television dramatist, delivered papers on realism and non-naturalism in a strand on progressive television. However, the proponents of progressive soap were going further. They were not interested in authorial artistry but, rather, in undervalued texts and the audience.

Such cultural populism drew upon reader-response and spectatorship theory, as well as Stuart Hall's (1997 [1974]) famous encoding-decoding model of television, which drew on the ideas of the semiotician, Umberto Eco. The argument here was that the encoding of texts did not dictate their decoding. There may be multiple, socially-motivated decodings. Hall had first related this to class ideology, suggesting, for instance, that working-class viewers might decode, say, television news differently from middle-class viewers. The argument was extended to differential decoding according to gender and ethnicity. This opened up a fruitful seam of research that became not only interested in differential decoding but also the social practices of viewing and tended to emphasize the different emplacement and tastes of men and women, drawing upon uses and gratifications theory. In summary, then, the emphasis was on the active audience: what people did with television, not what it did to them. There were comparable lines of work in subcultural theory, particularly in relation to spectacular youth cultures and the notion of 'resistance through rituals' (Jefferson 1975).

Consumption became the focus of attention, drawing on deconstruction to revalue the subordinate term in the binary opposition of production/consumption (McGuigan 2006; 2010). In fact, consumption became the cardinal term of a one-dimensional form of cultural-populist analysis. The audience/consumer was not only active. This remarkable individual was virtually *the* source of meaning-making in cultural exchange, in effect, much more powerful than the agents of authorship and production.

It is difficult not to see a correspondence here between the active audience member and the sovereign consumer of neo-liberalism a figure originally invented by neo-classical or marginalist economics in the late-nineteenth century (McGuigan 1997). In this scheme of things the sovereign consumer is a necessary fiction, the construction of an all-rational, calculating subject, forever seeking to maximize marginal utility in consumption choices. Rational consumer decisions, aggregated as demand, are said to trigger supply and result in success or failure on the supply side in the freely operating market. The sovereign consumer is invoked explicitly in rational-choice theory today and this figment of the imagination performs a totemic function in everyday commercial culture: the customer as king or queen of the marketplace.

There are two basic faults with the conception of the sovereign consumer that should be mentioned. First, sovereign consumption ideally depends upon perfect knowledge of what is actually or potentially available to consume, since rational choice exercised by the consumer is said to determine production. The fact is, however, that perfect knowledge of what could be consumed is impossible and demand is not simply aggregated from the sum of rational consumer decisions but is at least partly cultivated by suppliers through advertising and marketing. Thus, production has some determinacy over consumption and the consumer may not be very knowledgeable about how the process actually works in practice. That is well understood by advertisers and marketers, who realize that a purely rational appeal to consumers is inadequate. Irrational impulses need to be tapped.

Second, moreover, there is a false equalization in the claim that we are all sovereign consumers. Some consumers are more sovereign than others. In

effect, it is still a minority of people in the world, according to any universal standard of comparison, who are in a privileged position, by sheer virtue of material advantage, to exercise their freedom of choice in consumption and to consume exactly what they want or even need. The ideological figure of the sovereign consumer is an isolated and utterly de-socialized individual.

Of course, the capitulation to what is, in actuality, a dominant ideology did not stop cultural populists from continuing to speak a radical, ostensibly left-wing rhetoric. The chief exponent of such a position was John Fiske, a British academic who only became significant and influential when he went to Australia. Some of the arguments he made were quite absurd. For instance, he likened young people's pilfering from clothes stores to the guerrilla tactics of the Vietcong during the Vietnam War – 'The young are shopping mall guerrillas par excellence' (Fiske 1989: 37).

Critics of cultural studies were becoming reasonably justified in dismissing the field of study – with which I had, to my growing alarm, associated myself – for regarding shopping as a revolutionary act, in what was, to be sure, a typically exaggerated and to a large extent inaccurate critical judgement. Even the great Pierre Bourdieu, in association with Loic Wacquant (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999), was later to attack cultural studies as merely a publishing plot rather than a serious research agenda.

There is a yet more serious criticism to be made of such cultural populism from the point of view of cultural analysis, and that is it is one dimensional, utterly fixated exclusively on the meaning and practices of consumption – that is consumerism – to the neglect of other moments in the cultural circuit and, in consequence, it is devoid of a critical understanding of the political economy of culture. In effect, one-dimensional cultural populism fails to analyse the ontological complexity of culture in circulation. Still, however, we need some grasp of the general drift in the meanings of contemporary culture, that is, symbolically and ideologically as well as in terms of neo-liberal political economy. This is the analytical rationale of the cool capitalism thesis, to try to make a general interpretation of the semiological framing of cultural meaning, in the Barthesian sense, under neo-liberal conditions.

COOL CAPITALISM

On the question of cool capitalism, I shall begin with a definition, on the Brechtian principle that there is no need to withhold the denouement of a complicated narrative until its bitter end: *Cool capitalism is the incorporation of disaffection into capitalism itself.*

'Cool' is the front region (Goffman [1959] 1971) of capitalism today for those who are seduced by its cultural appeal and especially for those who aspire, mostly in frustration, to the greatest fruits of a capitalist civilization. For capitalism to command hearts and minds, it is necessary to cover up its much less appealing back region, manifestations of which are perpetual sources of disaffection. For the sake of capitalist legitimacy, such disaffection must be assuaged: hence, the role of 'cool' in translating disaffection into acceptance and compliance. What is 'cool'?

A few years ago, around the turn of the millennium, two American TV ads suggested the idea of cool capitalism. The first ad involved a young man seeking to persuade his boss, an older man, of the virtues of a new computer system that he wants him to buy for the office. He described the system repeatedly as 'cool'. The expression on the boss's face was of deep scepticism concerning

the young man's peroration. Eventually, however, the young man observed that the new system would save the company money, whereupon the older man replied, 'Cool'. The second ad features Dennis Hopper as a middle-aged business executive driving a sleek automobile across an American wilderness. This footage is inter-cut with footage of Hopper's younger, hippy self, riding a motorcycle from the 1969 movie, *Easy Rider*.

In both cases, the ads featured the relationship between a younger and an older man. The first ad showed the younger man convincing the older man that a new computer system was 'cool'. The older man was persuaded when he learned that it would be of financial benefit to the company. At the end of the second ad, Hopper burns off his younger self when he accelerates past him, bringing to mind the old adage that if you are not a socialist at twenty you do not have a heart, but if you are still a socialist at thirty then you do not have a brain. It was a fitting ideological coda to the twentieth century.

Since the early 2000s similar references to 'cool' have emerged, either in the actual use of the word or in signs somehow redolent of sentiments associated with it. For instance, in 2001, Switzerland's ambassador to Britain became concerned over the negative impact of aspersions cast upon his country's reputation, such as stories about the banking of Nazi gold. In order to demonstrate that Switzerland was cool he decided to invite graffiti artists to adorn the underground car park walls in the London embassy. One of these graffiti artists was to become highly renowned and indeed bankable, the elusive, Bristol-born artist who calls himself Banksy. His principal graffiti for the Swiss embassy, which remains on the wall next to the car park's exit, is a montage of twenty-one copies of a picture of Lenin with a Mohican haircut and the legend, 'Vulture Capitalists'. This and other examples of Banksy's work at the embassy are now said to be worth a million pounds (Brown 2008: 3).

In 2004, Hill & Knowlton (China) Public Relations Co. Ltd. conducted a 'China Cool Hunt' survey of students in Beijing and Shanghai (Smyth and Wylie 2008). The market research evidence showed that Chinese students value 'cool', whatever that means, and they associate it with leading western or westernized brand companies, most notably Nike, Sony, Adidas, BMW, Microsoft, Coca-Cola, IBM, Nokia, Samsung, Ferrari and Christian Dior. 'Cool' has travelled a long way, from the west coast of Africa to the Americas and around the whole wide world, as far, in fact, as 'communist' China.

It is generally agreed among commentators that 'cool' came out of Africa. The American art historian Robert Farris Thompson traces the sources of cool to the Yorubaland coastal region of modern-day Nigeria. The word *itutu* means 'composure', an important quality in battle, especially in a hot climate (Thompson [1971] 1976: 1). The denotation may refer to 'composure' but there is a broader set of connotations best summed up by the term 'cool'.

In studying Yoruban art and ritual, Thompson argues that 'coolness' is a 'trait which grants a person the power to incarnate the destiny of his tradition' (Thompson 1974: 43). He studied 'cool' in 35 Niger-Zaire languages, from Woloff of Senegal to the Zulu of South Africa, and noted that it is 'an all-embracing positive attribute which combines notions of composure, silence, vitality, healing, and social purification' (Thompson 1974: 43). Coolness is associated with personal power and courage: 'A cool person does not hide' (1974: 44). Cool is enacted in the dance and in the clarity of the singing voice. Thompson talks of 'the striking African custom of dancing "hot" with a "cool" unsmiling face' (1974: 45).

Thompson drew connections between the ancient tradition of cool and a modern vernacular, the performance of the young Yoruba warrior and the expressive lifestyle of the cool cat on the city streets of the United States. The slave trade in Africans, abducted from the West coast and the hinterland, transported across the perilous sea in appalling conditions to the Americas, is a shameful episode of early capitalism with a complex historical legacy that has been described as 'the Black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993). It is a history of suffering and abuse, which has left a deep and abiding trace, not only in terms of injustice but in the response of African dignity under pressure: the culture of American cool.

Since the abolition of slavery, but long before the flowering of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the most evident site of cool in the USA – not only in the past but to a significant extent still – is in black music and style, most notably in mid-twentieth century jazz culture. This was focused intensely around the bebop maestros and their sullen rebellion, where the word 'cool' figured as part of an in-group lexicon (MacAdams [2001] 2002) that was to develop into a popular argot that would be adopted increasingly by whites, eventually spreading from the dissident margins into the mainstream of youth culture by the late-twentieth century.

The site of African-American culture is crucial but not exclusively so for the sentiments associated with cool, if not always the word. The word and its associations are not fixed in meaning and, in any event, it is frequently said to be uncool, not to say impossible, to try and pin down a definition.

Dick Pountain and the late David Robins (2000) have identified three essential traits of the 'cool' persona: narcissism, ironic detachment and hedonism. These traits can certainly be found in a succession of youthful subcultures since World War II.

Take narcissism, for instance. Self-regard, fastidious concern with style and what could readily be construed as offensive deportment are typical of young men who may otherwise have had little to show off about. There was a Gallic version in the post-war Parisian existentialists, dressed in black, Gauloise cigarettes hanging languidly from their lips, obliged to act out anti-bourgeois nonconformity in every free choice, condemned to freedom in an inauthentic world. It was not very cool to become too heated about politics, however, like some decidedly uncool Stalinist. The *Zazou* subculture of French youth during the occupation of the early-1940s was a related, though less intellectual, manifestation of petit-bourgeois narcissism with an edge of cool irony (Savage [2007] 2008). Incidentally, the term *Zazou* derived from Cab Calloway's jazz slang, which was further embellished by Slim Gaillard's scat singing.

Ironic detachment, the second cool trait identified by Pountain and Robins, is the appropriate stance, i.e., a 'don't care attitude' in conjunction with disgust at the system; 'whatever', with its sneer and feigned indifference. Punks and their progeny constituted an extreme branch of the ironic tendency.

A subterranean lifestyle, hedonistic pleasure seeking – the third trait – and illicit drug taking are all manifestations of cool. Some dropped out but the hippies of the late-1960s and early-1970s were usually weekenders, harbingers of the present-day hedonistic mainstream – a recent constituent being unruliness and binge-drinking among teenaged girls and young women, as well as youthful males, deemed cool too. The adoption of black style, demeanour and sentiment by whites goes back a long way, at least as far as Norman Mailer's ([1957] 1970) 'white negro' and hipster style of the 1950s.

There is, of course, a downside to cool, particularly for young black males, as documented by Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson in their sociological study, *Cool Pose – The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*: ‘coolness may be a survival strategy that has cost the black male – and society – an enormous price’ (Majors and Bilson [1992] 1993: xi). Although not confined to black men in urban poverty, cool is very prominent in that context. It expresses black masculine identity and pride in the ghetto. It enables the black man to manage anger in oppressive circumstances, facilitating ‘poise under pressure’. A core element of the downside is a sense of ‘compulsive masculinity’, damaging to both male and female relationships. Cool pose is creative but also destructive, representing a peculiar homology with the driving force of capitalism itself, although black American men, with a few notable exceptions, are not great successes in capitalist America. The problems of gang culture, druggie lifestyle and disorganized sociality figure much larger than the realization of the American Dream in the lives of young working-class black men – and, indeed, women too – characterized by an incipient nihilism. Comparable problems exist among young whites enthralled by the cult of cool in disorganized working-class neighbourhoods of de-industrialized inner cities and outer suburbs as well.

Shorn of its black context, however, cool floats free, available for the articulation of both resistance and incorporation; and, over time, traversing from one to the other. Today, the word ‘cool’ seems to be on the lips of every youngster in western and westernized culture, signifying very little – not much more than ‘good’ or ‘okay’ – and adopted with insouciance by their parents. While that may be an innocent end point, it is not the whole story, which is about how a culture of disaffection crossed the political landscape arriving at the opposite side, having neutralized dissent along the way.

According to Thomas Frank (1997), the 1960s in the USA went down in history as a decade of rebellion when the counter-culture challenged the dominant culture at its very heart. Yet, in truth, the counter-cultural challenge effectively – and ironically – refreshed the culture and political economy of corporate America, thereby contributing to its survival and flourishing. Seen in retrospect, the 1960s’ rebels were the saviours, turning over redundant shibboleths, instead of gravediggers of corporate America. Frank remarks, ‘rebel youth remains the cultural mode of the corporate moment, used to promote not only specific products but the general idea of life in the cyber-revolution’ (Frank 1997: 4).

Incidentally, Peter Biskind (1998) has made a similar argument specifically concerning the ‘movie brats’ who came to prominence in the 1970s, an offshoot of the 1960s, in saving Hollywood. The Francis Ford Coppolas, Peter Fondas, Dennis Hoppers, Bob Rafelsons and Bert Schneiders presented themselves as dangerous rebels but wound up giving Hollywood a cool makeover, hence, boosting long-term profitability.

From the 1950s, American business was eager to integrate rebel ideology into its corporate practices, to ‘revolutionize’ management. Entrepreneurs welcomed the counter-cultural challenge into the corporation since it accorded with their own thinking on the deficiencies of organized capitalism. This involved breaking with the conformity of the 1950s, the robotic American way of life that critics – humanistic and social-scientific – attacked incessantly: ‘organization man’, ‘one-dimensional man’ and so on. Business needed a shot of daring imagination that broke with the old ways.

During the 1950s and 1960s, there was increasing disquiet in management circles about the organization man’s lack of creative flair. A key tool of the

newer management philosophy was to become 'market segmentation', which differentiated between taste and lifestyle categories, assuming social heterogeneity rather than homogeneity in a diverse population. Consumer subjectivity became the object of attention for this new school of management. It was assumed that the customer had become 'hip', in a quaint old term, to what was going on in this forerunner of cool business discourse.

Although such language made an early appearance in the story related by Frank, for stretches of time it lay fairly dormant until revived triumphantly in the 1990s. In the longer historical view, then, the counter-culture turns out to have been a moment in the rejuvenation of middle-class and corporate America. The 1990s saw, 'the consolidation of a new species of hip consumerism', in Frank's words, 'a cultural perpetual motion regime in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheel of consumption' (Frank 1997: 31). And, at the same time, business became 'funky', having shed its reputation for bureaucratic conformity (Ridderstrale and Nordstrum [2000] 2002).

Longing for another world has simultaneously diminished for the young, replaced by the longing for cool commodities and their fetishistic properties. The recent period has witnessed the transition from mid-twentieth century organized capitalism to neo-liberal capitalism on a global scale. At the same time, communism collapsed and social democracy was eclipsed. The Protestant ethic of earlier capitalism was superseded by a much more hedonistic ethic (Boltanski and Chiapello [1999] 2005).

The transformation was greatly aided by cultural opposition to capitalism. Incorporation of that opposition is markedly illustrated by the absorption of 'the great refusal' of art in general by capitalist ideology, as in 'Young British Art'. This is further exemplified by the market practices that are connected to the alleged panacea of 'creative industries' as the solution to the problems arising from the decline of manufacturing and heavy industry in what used to be 'advanced' industrial-capitalist nations and the devolution of such work to cheap labour markets around the world.

The attendant shift from production to consumption in culture and economy has seen the 'democratization' of consumerism in wealthy countries and the growth of immense consumer aspiration in poorer countries. These developments are facilitated by processes of cool seduction and enhanced commodity fetishism in a privatized way of life where communication technologies play a vital role. The all-purpose, mobile communication device, for instance, is a perfect symbol and, indeed, practical facilitator for an individualized existence, isolated from public space in a consumerist cocoon, in spite of all the extravagant marketing claims concerning communicative empowerment. Apple is the cool capitalist company par excellence.

It is important not to complain about the cultural aspects of capitalism in separation from critical analysis of economic and political process generally and in the particular operations of the culture industry; and, furthermore, specifically how neo-liberal ideology has exerted market reasoning over all practices and colonized everyday life in every corner of the world. The effects on working lives and well-being through the lifecycle are, for many, severe in an insecure and excessively individualistic culture, which is spreading like a virus. Whether or not there are strong sources of genuine resistance in a renewal of anti-capitalism and oppositional practice may, unfortunately, prove tragically irrelevant if capitalism is permitted to continue on its perilous course of putting

life on this planet at risk in pursuit of exploitative profit, which is aided by a short-sighted memory loss and an ultimately self-defeating public complacency. We need a steady-state economy (Daly 1977; 2008) that is universally redistributive, equitable and ecologically responsible. By definition, that would not resemble capitalism as we have come to know it over recent years.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL CULTURAL ANALYSIS

To conclude on a more immediately research-oriented note, the great failure of populist cultural analysis is that it is one-dimensional. It is fixated exclusively upon the meanings and modes of consuming activity. This is by no means qualified significantly by producerly consumption and the use of interactive technologies, blogging and the like, which may merely foster a delusion of genuine participation in the public sphere and, as presently constituted, is arguably nothing like what Brecht and Benjamin actually had in mind.

A one-dimensional consumerism is also the prevailing feature of much research today that might otherwise be considered to be interrogating what I am calling cool capitalism. This is characteristic of much that is said about mobile communications, which tends to focus exclusively on the activities of users and fails to address the actual making of mobile technology in sweatshops in places like Shenzhen, where the conditions of work are appalling. These are unhealthy places for often mainly young female workers to labour long hours on low wages with no rights at all.

Douglas Kellner (1997) advocates a multidimensional framework for research, whereby culture is always treated in circulation, recognizing distinct moments of production, textuality, consumption and reception, for which there are many viable particular methods of analysis. These methods, however, typically deal with partial aspects of what are, in reality, ontologically complex and intricately related issues. Of course, in practice, it is often difficult or even impossible always to produce fully rounded analyses. However, we still need a general framework of analysis that does not necessarily specify in detail what should be done exactly in each case of enquiry, like some primer on research methods. What is at stake is the possibility of a paradigm shift that questions the way things are critically, rather than simply endorsing and, thereby, apologizing for cool capitalist civilization.

It remains vital to appreciate that there is always a constant interplay of forces in a complex whole, seen from a critical-realist point of view. From such a perspective, it is impossible to conduct satisfactory cultural analysis that is neglectful of related economic, political and, indeed, ecological processes. And, from such a multidimensional analytical perspective, there are potentially many varied and urgent issues to research concerning the phenomenon of cool capitalism, some of which I explore in the book of that title.

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