

Captive creativity: breaking free from the long '90s'

This is the text of a paper I gave at the *Capitalism, Culture and the Media* conference in Leeds last week.

It touches on some themes discussed in a bit more detail in a lecture I gave at Open School East earlier in the summer.

I will write this up into a proper article and get more into the stuff around the global historic bloc of Big Tech and Finance Capital (Wall St + Silicon Valley) when I get around to it. For now I thought I'd better put this online because people like the excellent Aditya are starting to quote me on the long '90s thing...

The Long 90s

I'm going to start with an anecdote which I apologise for having related numerous times already. Not that many people here will have heard it yet - but I apologise anyway. A few months ago I was at meeting of political activists in London being addressed by Robin McAlpine, who is the main instigator and driving force behind the *Common Weal* project. Common weal is a Scottish organisation that calls itself a 'think and do' tank, which both campaigns for, and generates policy aimed at creating a more egalitarian and democratic society in Scotland, and which played a considerable role in the independence campaign last year and in facilitating the upsurge in civic activism that led to the Scottish National Party winning almost every seat in Scotland at the general election in May, following a huge influx of members, an influx which is widely regarded as having moved the political centre of gravity of the party significantly to the Left. They're an impressive organisation and I'd encourage anyone to have a look at their website. McAlpine's opening quip to this gathering of London-based activists was to tell us that just by looking around the room, he had the same impression that he'd had earlier in the day strolling around the city, to the effect that 'we' all

appeared to be stuck in some kind of '90s time-warp. Judging from our clothes, haircuts and demeanours, he had the sense that nothing had fundamentally changed since the 1990s; whereas, he assured us, a new spirit was abroad north of the border, inspired by the radical democratic ferment of the referendum campaign and its aftermath, which was more than anything a popular movement against neoliberal hegemony and the politics of austerity, which could be registered even in the everyday material culture of 'tourist tat' and casual clothing.

I might have taken offence at this remark, had it not in fact so closely echoed one that I seem to have been making regularly to my own students for at least 10 years now: 'If I were to show you photographs of every seminar group I've taught since 2000 or so...the only differences you'd notice, that you'd be able to date the photos from would be me getting older'. This sense of cultural stasis isn't mine alone. My students have been telling for years now that no very formally new music has emerged since around the beginning of the millennium, while the music critic Simon Reynolds had a worldwide success a couple of years ago with his book *Retromania*, reflecting on the absence of real novelty across many fields of contemporary culture. Now before you reflexively dismiss this as just old-man grumpiness, consider for a moment. This isn't the cliché you might think it is. Middle aged people are supposed to be alienated from and suspicious of, the culture - and especially the music - of the young. But they're supposed to find it frighteningly new and therefore beyond aesthetic comprehension. They're not supposed to bemoan its lack of novelty. But here we are.

It was all supposed to be so different. The digital revolution which Justin Lewis spoke about in the first session of the conference was supposed to deliver a new world in the sphere of sound as much as anywhere else. Cheap production and distribution was supposed to free up the creative power of the multitude, finally released from the shackles of the music industry. There was indeed a brief moment, which I've written about before - we might call it the Myspace moment - when it looked like that might be where things were going. But instead it seems fairly safe to say now that the displacement of a certain urban ecology and international economy of commodity circulation by digital substitutes in the music industry has not done anything obviously to facilitate the generation of actual aesthetic creativity or substantial community-building. Instead we've experienced an apparently ceaseless revolution in modes of distribution and circulation accompanied by no evident creative advance at all at the level of content. That's not to say that there isn't lots of great music being made. But for arguably the first time since the beginning of recorded music, there isn't any that

you couldn't have quite easily imagined being made 20 years previously. Everything has changed, but nothing has changed.

The Global Historic Bloc: Wall St + Silicon Valley

So how could we account for this weird condition of stasis-in-transformation? Well, being a good neo-Marxist (or am I a post-post-Marxist ? Recursive neo-Marxist? I can't remember), I think the first question we have to ask is - who benefits? What interests are served by this state of affairs, and where have capital and institutional power been accumulated in the process. I'd suggest that the key agencies who have benefitted from this process and who have indeed come to set the terms for global social and cultural change (and stasis) since the 1990s has been a particular coalition of forces which really emerged in its present form at that time: advanced finance capital, and what I like to call Big Tech: Apple, Google, Facebook, etc. Wall Street and Silicon Vally, if you will. I think it's useful and important to reflect on the ways in which it's these agencies acting in a symbiotic and mutually-supportive fashion who have really shaped the broad context for most of what's happened in the world since the mid 90s, and on the fact that neither of them would have been able to achieve the potency that they have without the others. I mean ask yourself - who has really shaped our everyday lives, our material culture and our mode of interaction more over this period, than Apple, google, Facebook and the venture capitalists who fund them and profit from them? Together, I would suggest that they constitute the first truly global historic bloc. I'm using the term 'historic bloc' here in the Gramscian sense, not to designate an geographical entity, but to refer to a kind of alliance between different fractions of different classes which is able to secure a leading position in relation to all others, broadly determining the direction of travel for the wider social formation. And of course the name for that 'leading position' is 'hegemony'.

We've become used to discussing the social, political and cultural impact of neoliberal hegemony in recent years (well I have anyway), but I think too often such discussions tend to posit neoliberalism as an essentially ideological, philosophical entity which can be reduced to the ideas of Hayek and his followers and the political programmes directly inspired by them. That's all useful but I think it's also important to differentiate the hypothetical neoliberalism of the radical liberal tradition of Hayek, from what we can call 'actually existing neoliberalism': the actual programmes enacted by governments across much of the world, including China, and the various concomitant tendencies in media, culture, and politics, all of which

ultimately serve to secure and enhance the power and prestige of this particular historic bloc (finance + big tech). From this perspective, digitisation and financialisation are processes whose interrelationship is by no means predetermined, but the actuality of which is strongly shaped by their being placed directly in the service of these interests.

Of course, the complexity of this situation produces uneven effects, paradoxes and contradictions. Neoliberalism is normally understood (including by me) to involve the promotion and normalisation of a fiercely competitive individualism, itself an extension of that liberal individualism which has been the normative ideology of the bourgeoisie since the 17th century. We can certainly competitive individualism promoted across a vast range of cultural sites, from reality tv to schools. At the same time, a certain valorisation of networked collaboration, collective creativity and free communication has been central to ideologies of business since the end of the 1970s, particularly in sectors close to or influenced by the IT industry. The kind of network subjectivities which Bev Skeggs spoke about are a key element of the forms of culture promoted by the most dynamic and influential institutions of our time. Are these tendencies in contradiction with each other, or do they exist in a kind of paradoxical symbiosis? Let's come back to that in a minute...

For now, I think it's worth noting that the success of this techno-financial historic bloc in establishing its global hegemony has been the sufficient to produce a sense that in many ways we have never left the epoch of its emergence. You only have to reflect on the likelihood that the next US presidential election may well be a race between a Clinton and a Bush to understand what I mean when I say that it often seems that we have never really left the 1990s. Or it would be perhaps more accurate to say that the moment of the formation of the World Trade Organisation, of the establishment of the 'Washington Consensus' in international economics, of the full emergence of China as an economic superpower, of the emergence of the so-called 'Third Way', which saw formerly social democratic parties in several of the leading capitalist democracies embrace a socially-liberal variant of neoliberalism, and above all the emergence of the world wide web, marked the beginning of a moment we are still inside, a moment I'll call 'the long 1990s'.

I think we can see the persistence of the long 1990s, of a culture in which technological change is accompanied by cultural stasis as a pretty direct expression and effect of the hegemony of the techno-financial historic bloc. In fact I would argue that this bloc, and in particular its most dynamic section, Big

Tech, can be understood as the real historic victors of the 20th century itself. Just ask yourself who actually won the culture wars of the 60s, 70s and 80s. Think back to the early 70s, arguably the last great moment of real struggle between capitalism and its various antagonists (both the Communist states and the whole global wave of democratic struggles and demands which came into full visibility in 1968-9). Who actually came out of those conflicts with the world they had wanted? Not the conservatives by any stretch of the imagination. Not the old or new leftists. Not even really the ideological neoliberals, who never actually had much success in creating the small-state dystopias they dreamed of. The people who really got exactly the world they wanted - with its precise balance of social liberalisation, political demobilisation, globalised production, homogenised cultural content, and universal dependency on consumer electronics - was Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and their cohorts. This has been the truly hegemonic class fraction of our epoch, the people who have directly affected and effectively legislated the nature of our material culture and our ways of life more effectively, and facing less effective opposition or competition, than any other group in the world.

But this is not to say that this situation is going to go on forever, or that it was ever going to be sustainable for very long. If we come back to the question that I parked a moment ago, the question of the potential contradiction between competitive individualism and the promotion of network subjectivities, then maybe we can get a sense of this. I'd suggest that the most useful way to understand the relationship between these two tendencies is in terms of what I see as an perpetual inherent problem for capitalism as such. Capitalism always has to create what I call 'potent collectivities'. From the factory to the web platform, it always has to potentiate populations, finding ways to technologically and organisationally enhance their productive and creative potential. But then it has a problem, of course. As Marx was not even the first to notice - if you give a bunch of people the capacity to produce and creative together, there isn't a lot of reason for them to keep handing you most of the product, unless you find ways to set them against each other. Capital always needs to find ways of ensuring that that productive potential is channelled exclusively in the direction of producing and circulating marketable commodities, and not in the rather predictable direction of producing new and democratic forms of common life. From this perspective, there's no contradiction between a techno-cultural revolution which really does, in principle, enhance our collective creative and organisational capacities beyond the wildest dreams of earlier generations of utopians, and a culture in which are constantly admonished to view each other ultimately as competitors.

The End of the Long 90s

In fact (and we're getting to the good bit now, I promise), I think that we are probably already at the end of that moment that I've called the long 1990s. The political upheaval in Scotland found obvious echoes in Greece and Spain with the rise and electoral success of radical parties there over the past year. In the US Bernie Sanders seems to have emerged as the first truly post-cold-war candidate for the democratic nomination. And here in the UK, Jeremy Corbyn, a lifelong Marxist looks certain next week to be elected leader of the party which Tony Blair led until just 10 years ago. In all of these contexts, so-called social media have clearly played a crucial role in enabling a constituency which is explicitly aware of the extent to which neoliberalism threatens its interests, but which had been disaggregated and disorganised since the 1980s, to assemble itself, to convene, to organise, to develop a sense of itself as a potent collectivity rather than a subject of passive, disaffected, impotent consent to its ongoing and unchallengeable hegemony. In none of these situations has there yet been a breakthrough victory for forces opposed to neoliberalism. It may be that the phase we are about to enter is merely the third phase of a very long period unbroken neoliberal hegemony. But if the key feature of the long 90s was the pervading sense that even on the Left, the normativity of neoliberalism could not be refused, then that moment is clearly now over.

And what of the wider culture, the sense of stasis, the music tedium? Are they all over too? Well, I think it's probably too early to say. Certainly there is a new cultural spirit abroad in Scotland, or at least in Glasgow (where I was this past weekend), and certainly some of our best political commentators in the UK have been comparing the mood at Corbyn's rallies with that at Scottish independence rallies a year ago. Before we hope for too much from music culture in the short term, it's probably worth reflecting in a little more detail on just how crucial the music industry has been as a site at which class relations have been played out and recomposed in recent years. Just consider the history of the MP3 file format. At one stage this classic disruptive technology terrified the music industry, while Napster, peer-to-peer the file-sharing site which did so much to popularise it, pioneered a platform which prefigured everything from bitcoin to bitorrent. It didn't terrify Apple. While the record industry was failing to negotiate a subscription system which would have enabled them to retain control over digital content and distribution, Apple were developing the iPod - the device which would redefine their brand, transform listening habits globally, and open the way to iTunes becoming one of the key sites of capital accumulation in the music industry. In the years which have followed, the de-commodification of music has made it increasingly difficult for content-producers to

achieve The kinds of autonomy which they were able to as small-to medium-scale commodity-producers. In fact musicians increasingly struggle to generate income through any channel not funded by corporations in search of reputation-enhancement opportunities. The music industry is increasingly a subsidiary wing of the advertising industry. A bit like everything else...At the same time (and this is an issue which I haven't heard anyone else talk about – I'd like to know if they do), it seems fair to say that the availability of free content, especially music, has been an important factor in maintaining consent for neoliberalism, especially among the young, despite falling real wages and the spread of endemic precarity. Under all these circumstances, I think it's probably unrealistic to expect music culture to re-emerge as a site of intense creative mobilisation quite yet. I'll be very surprised if it doesn't sooner or later.

Because none of what I'm describing here is a situation which can't change. In fact among the young I think things have been changing for some time, at least since the 2008 financial crisis. One anecdotal, but potent piece of evidence I would offer for this is based on conversations with my students each year in seminars discussions of Angela McRobbie's seminal book *The Aftermath of Feminism*. In that book Angela posits the existence of what she calls a 'new sexual contract' which neoliberal culture offers to young women. According to the terms of this contract, young women are offered both personal freedom - especially sexual freedom - of a kind unknown to previous generations, and, crucially, access to the labour market on equal terms with men unless and until they decide to have children (at which point all kinds of entrenched inequalities kick back in, of course). In return, they have to adapt themselves to highly restrictive forms of self-management, conforming to quite narrow, highly-sexualised modes of self-presentation in most social situations. The iconic expression of the 'global girl', party to the new sexual contract, is probably Carrie Bradshaw, fictional heroine of the once-popular TV series *Sex and the City*. Now, for the first couple of years after the book appeared, my students - especially female students - were almost all very taken with this notion, often exclaiming that it described perfectly the condition of contemporary young femininity. Since around 2012, however, as the effects of the 2008 financial crisis have really percolated through the wider culture, the response from students to how they felt

about McRobbie's account has been more nuanced, and generally something along the lines of 'well, it *used* to feel like that, when I was at school / for girls a bit older than me / for my older sisters...but now the pressure doesn't seem to be the same'...further exploration generally leads to the conclusion that in a labour market as weak as the current one, young women feel less inclined than they might have done to conform to norms which are ultimately dictated by corporate elites. That, I think, is what a situation of weakening hegemony looks like, at the level of lived experience. That's just one example of what the end of the long 90s might mean in the sphere of everyday culture,

This and the other examples I've already given make clear that capitalism cannot move forward, cannot survive, without generating and circumscribing real sites of collective creativity and organisational invention, and that the promised potentiation of the digital revolution is real, even if capital is constantly involved in operations to capture it, contain in and channel it. I think there's little doubt that the curtailment and striation of spaces of creativity which have defined the long 90s cannot go on unchecked. It's already the case that in the sphere of political organisation (and, according to Robin McAlpine, in the field of Scottish tourist tat), the long 90s are over.