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Café Américain

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Against Cultural Populism

Stuart Hall's Influence on Cultural Studies Did Not Go Unchallenged

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Commercial culture has never had it so good, at least from the point of view of its producers. That popular film and TV, music, video games, some easily consumable literature and more can be big business is obvious; but at the same time, compared even to a few decades ago, such culture commands a considerable level of intellectual respectability, while much less commercially oriented “high” culture (not to mention much historically or geographically distant culture) is decreasingly valued and taught. I wish here to trace some of the *intellectual* developments which have informed such a situation, and in the process pay tribute to the important work of two of the figures who did most to challenge it—[Greg Philo](#), director of the Glasgow University Media Group, and cultural sociologist [Jim McGuigan](#), latterly of Loughborough University. Both passed away in 2024.

To understand the significance of these two scholars’ work requires some wider historical context relating to changing views of the “masses” and “mass culture”, and especially of the extent to which lay citizens control the impact of such culture and media. From the nineteenth century onwards, following the major expansion of large cities, the new way of life they brought about—crowded, polluted, and with consequent feelings of loneliness—was captured by poets from [Charles Baudelaire](#) to [T.S. Eliot](#). Gustave Le Bon, in his [Psychologies des Foules \(1895, ‘Psychology of Crowds’\)](#), attempted to explain crowd psychology, as leading individuals to surrender emotional control and intellectual and critical reasoning skills, mesmerized by that mass in which they find themselves.

But such social models were subsequently modified by two key individuals. Walter Lippmann, author of [Public Opinion](#) (1922), made a positive case for the use of mass culture and media to manipulate large numbers of people, in the process coining the term “manufacturing consent”. Edward Bernays, author of [Crystallizing Public Opinion](#) (1923) and [Propaganda](#) (1928) (drawing on Le Bon, Lippmann and Bernays’s uncle Sigmund Freud) took ideas of crowd psychology and the “herd instinct” further, and developed influential theories of manipulation, which informed the emerging practice of public relations.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their seminal *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*), largely written by 1944, but published in 1947, set out most clearly their [theories of the culture industry](#), anticipated in some of Adorno’s earlier writings. This model radically shifted the focus away from artists and performers towards the industry which shapes and conditions their work in industrial

society. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the culture industry produced essentially standardized and formulaic products, pretending to satisfy needs and wishes by appealing to a lowest common denominator. Mass culture left little place for genuine artistic individuality, nor for that which might produce more ambiguous and pluralist responses from those who receive it.

Adorno (more than Horkheimer) expanded upon this model in subsequent writings. He considered not only jazz and popular music, but also radio, television, astrology and charismatic preachers. All of these largely effected a form of “mass deception” and manipulation upon populations. By contrast, while high culture was not immune to Adorno’s critique, nonetheless in some avant-garde work, such as the music of Arnold Schoenberg or the texts and plays of Samuel Beckett, Adorno believed there remained a “utopian” element, able to point beyond the world already known.

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The Adorno/Horkheimer model has been highly influential but has also been heavily criticized. Some viewed it as excessively elitist in its unwavering hostility to forms of culture valued by many, and in particular to popular music with African-American roots. But other prominent intellectuals pursued related or parallel directions, continuing to focus on the manipulative role of culture and media industries “from above”. The poet and writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger presented in 1970 a modified model of a *Bewusstseins-Industrie* (*‘Consciousness Industry’*), whereby the ruling classes had instilled a mode of consciousness which served their interests above those of other citizens, through media and education, transformed by increased leisure time and mass production of consumer goods.

In 1974, the 27-year old Greg Philo founded the [Glasgow University Media Group](#). Two years later the group published their first important study of television journalism, *Bad News*. This drew upon empirical data about viewing practices, viewers’ levels of interest in the news, whether they believed it “accurate and trustworthy”, what they considered “factual”, the “real world”, and in particular the use of language from media outlets, as well as techniques of filming, editing, etc. The group collected in 1975 a vast archive of 6 months of videoed material of news and current affairs programmes (from the BBC and ITN), broke it down into categories (reflecting those used by broadcasters), measured durations and order of items to gain knowledge of priorities, and also compared the broadcasts with materials made available to broadcasters from the Press Association. To all this they added observational studies conducted inside newsrooms and interviews with those on various sides involved in industrial and trade union matters. They could then derive a sophisticated picture of the ways in which broadcasters construct the world about which they report, including through such factors as widely varying emphasis on different types of items (home affairs, sport, human interest and science stories rarely came early in bulletins), and on domestic and international stories (especially disasters).

From empirical findings, Greg Philo derived a sophisticated picture of the ways in which broadcasters construct the world about which they report. His Glasgow University Media Group analyzed the Falklands War, mental health issues, the conflict in the Middle East, and refugees in terms of media presentation and audience reactions.

Later studies, in particular [that by Philo of the 1984-85 miners' strike](#), surveyed audience reactions and perceptions on the basis of news. Such studies found that the audiences received consistent messages (which put the studies at odds with dominant views from within cultural studies, as discussed below), but their response to these messages could vary, in ways relating to other knowledge and experience. For example, those who had been on a picket line were more likely to question whether the framing of violence as initiated by striking miners was representative of how such events would appear from both sides of the picket line. The Glasgow group later proceeded to analyze the Falklands War, mental health issues, the conflict in the Middle East, and refugees in terms of media presentation and audience reactions.

Overall, the Glasgow group frequently found that, on the basis of reporting, audiences perceived certain things which, sometimes unbeknownst to them, were counter-factual or demonstrably false. The group used this finding to frame major critiques of media representation and its effect upon public opinion. Even broader conclusions were found in an equally pioneering work, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's [Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media](#) (1988), which proposed a model of a propagandistic media informed by size, ownership, advertizing, the use of large news-gathering bureaucracies, a wish to avoid negative feedback, and (the book was written during the late years of the Cold War) general anti-communism, and directed towards generating consent for various types of policies.

Stuart Hall's Influence in Shaping Academics' View of Popular Culture

Adorno and Horkheimer, Enzensberger, Philo et al, and Herman and Chomsky, all focused on a "top down" model of media and mass culture which controls reactions from viewers and consumers, allegedly in order to consolidate a docile public which will not question capitalist society. Overall, none of these writers invested much faith in the power of such viewers and consumers to resist this process. This was unsatisfactory for some, including the Jamaican academic Stuart Hall (1932-2014), who took over the directorship of the [Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies](#) at the University of Birmingham in 1969 (the so-called "Birmingham School"), and worked initially on various projects engaged with multiple strains of Marxist theory, in particular one, [Policing the Crisis](#) (1978), on the generation of "moral panics" around mugging in the 1970s.

But around 1980, with hopes of socialist change dashed by the election of the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, and also just after Hall had left Birmingham for the Open University, his emphasis changed. In an [initial article on television from 1973](#), then [fleshed out more in 1980](#), he posited a linguistic model of television called "encoding/decoding". According to this, the producers of news or culture ensure that their work (viewed as a "text") is "encoded" with a viewpoint and

perspective on the social order, but viewers could “decode” this in various ways, to what Hall called the “oppositional code”, creating their own meanings at odds with the encoding. But not all of Hall’s work necessarily went in this direction; in the same year, [he began to use the term *authoritarian populism* to analyse Thatcherism](#) and the ways politicians in advanced capitalist democracies gained legitimacy through appeals to popular consent, implying at least some degree of manipulation from above.

Populism was a field of political practice which had first been theorized properly by sociologist Edward Shils in the 1950s, and its study soon afterwards developed into a more extensive field of scholarship, fuelled in particular by [important work by Margaret Canovan](#). Hall downplayed more the dialectical model of politics found in his work on authoritarian populism when dealing with culture in a 1981 essay, ‘[Notes on Deconstructing “The Popular”](#)’. Here Hall attacked earlier critiques of culture which the “masses” listen to, buy, read, consume, appear to enjoy. He maintained that such a view of them as “cultural dopes” who were fed “an up-dated form of the opium of the people” was “deeply unsocialist”, and he further suggested that “denunciations of the agents of mass manipulation and deception—the capitalist cultural industries” make those doing the denouncing feel “right, decent and self-satisfied”.

To be sure, there had been some earlier sociological critiques of “mandarin” views of low culture. US sociologist Herbert J. Gans, in [Popular Culture and High Culture \(1974\)](#) sought to reframe culture in terms of “taste cultures” and “taste publics”, while French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, especially in his [La distinction \(1979, ‘Distinction’\)](#), developed a model of *cultural capital*, forms of knowledge, behaviour or skills reflecting and consolidating social hierarchies, and of the *habitus*, those forms of perception, conception and action internalized by virtue of class or education. By this model, an elevation of a certain high culture reflected the elevation of particular classes in society.

While Bourdieu’s work in particular has had much influence, it was Hall’s work which opened the floodgates to a new degree of academic attention towards popular culture, viewed in a benign or celebratory manner. His charismatic if also arrogant personality, frequent media appearances (helped by his OU television work), and presence in the UK, a nation with such a strong popular culture, were decisive for the dissemination of the ideas of Hall and those around him (also in the US, with much of the Marxism erased), later in a type of rapprochement with postmodernist thought, with its collapsing of existing hierarchies of value.

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Furthermore, Hall’s ideas were being taken up by younger figures from a “boomer” generation who had grown up immersed in popular culture. Others in the Birmingham School continued to follow Hall’s example even after his departure: in a wide range of their publications from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s, one could regularly encounter such faintly ludicrous spectacles as Antonio Gramsci’s prison notebooks

standing alongside interpretations of *Jackie* magazine or the UK soap opera *Coronation Street*.

Pop Culture as a Marxist Defense against Elites

Amongst the most important publications which followed were a heavily weighted ethnographic study of [*Family Television* \(1986\)](#) by Birmingham Schooler David Morley and of [*Television Culture* \(1987\)](#) by media scholar John Fiske (with much attention to the [*US series Dallas*](#)). Morley's book was celebrated by Hall and others (including Fiske) as a definitive way out from models of meanings being imposed from above. This paved the way for two 1989 publications which expressed what I would characterize as a complete surrender to *market* populism. One was another book from Fiske, [*Understanding Popular Culture*](#), in which he roundly declared "popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry", maintained that commodities move from the realm of the distributional to the cultural at the point of sale, described approaches to consumption as "guerilla actions" to subvert dominant values, and quite outrageously compared some types of shoplifters to the Vietcong.

The other was by sociologist and activist Andrew Ross: [*No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*](#), in which he totally dismissed any type of defence of high culture, portraying such defence as hegemony of a dominant class aiming to protect their privilege, and an affront to democracy. Ross would be amongst the editors who published the [hoax article by Alan Sokal](#) in 1996, and in his book [*Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits*](#) (1991) he wrote with some sympathy about alternative medicine and New Age thought, "a politics of identity and subjectivity", as "a countercultural formation in an age of technocratic crisis".

As this tendency thus reached a head, a proper critique was needed. None was more powerful or influential than that of Jim McGuigan, in his [1992 book *Cultural Populism*](#), in which he surveyed the now extensive field of cultural studies as a whole and its fault lines. After tracing how Hall and others had shifted the terrain away from critical engagement with mass culture and mass media, McGuigan aimed his critique above all at Fiske, noting first how his study of television completely ignored changes in regulation and technology during the time of writing. Most devastatingly, he identified how Fiske's "semiotic democracy" resembled "the ideal of 'consumer sovereignty' in free market economics". To Fiske, just as much as to Thatcher, the consumer was sovereign.

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Fiske's work could not be read the same way again. A [preface by Henry Jenkins](#) to a revised edition of *Understanding Popular Culture* strikes a defensive tone when acknowledging McGuigan's critique, evoking "the lived experiences of working class people" and their supposed "popular skepticism against entrenched power" (hard to reconcile with [evidence of widespread working class support for the UK Royal Family](#)).

A whole range of critiques of cultural studies followed in the wake of McGuigan. In even more emphatic language, [UK sociologist Keith Tester wrote of](#) cultural studies as a “morally cretinous” discipline which was “the bastard child of the media it claims to expose”, and was permeated by mannered jargon, uncritical references to hallowed thinkers, and a pronounced Anglocentrism. US Sociologist [Todd Gitlin](#) wrote of how cultural studies simply inverted old hierarchies, so that popular taste became an automatic yardstick of quality, writing that “one purports to stand four-square for the people against capitalism, and comes to echo the logic of capitalism”.

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Political analyst Thomas Frank, in [One Market Under God \(2000\)](#), noted how cultural studies’ market logic meant that “virtually any criticism of business could be described as an act of despicable contempt for the common man”. [Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner](#) argued for the limited nature of cultural studies’ obsession with cultural “texts” in place of wider political engagement, while in an especially acute book, [American Idyll: Academic Antielitism as Cultural Critique \(2011\)](#), Catherine Liu, drawing extensively on Frank, linked cultural studies (as it had grown in the US) to a wider populist anti-elitism which was a recurrent aspect of American life for decades, constructing the market as a countercultural site of resistance to government, regulation and expertise.

Philo, for his part, regularly critiqued the work of Hall and Fiske. He felt Hall’s model had led cultural studies into a cul-de-sac, as it was so secure in its conviction of the power of audiences to interpret in their own way, as to neglect media power. In [an important essay](#) published in the 2001 volume *Market Killing: What the Free Market Does and What Social Scientists Can Do About It*, Philo and David Miller analyzed the ways Hall’s 1980s work had moved closer and closer to a celebratory view of popular culture, and noted how this branch of the sociology of culture, while affecting some qualities of subversion and resistance, was actually embracing many of the values of the free market. Furthermore, [in a 2008 article](#), Philo set his sights squarely on Hall’s encoding/decoding model, arguing cogently how this excludes the crucial role of external *knowledge* on the part of “decoders” (Philo notes that dissenting views of TV coverage of picket lines tend to be limited to those who have been on them).

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McGuigan went on to publish a range of important texts developing further ideas on the interactions between culture, policy, economics and a “public sphere” in the sense defined by Jürgen Habermas. He also engaged with the rhetoric about cultural industries originating from some figures on the radical left but echoing in part conservative market logic, and published specific cultural analyses of such phenomena as the death of Diana, the construction of the Millennium Dome, and the growth of the mobile phone. His critiques in no way reflected the neoliberal logic

which had come to consume the work of Hall and others. Perhaps his most notable later publication was [*Cool Capitalism* \(2009\)](#), which built upon Thomas Frank's book [*The Conquest of Cool* \(1997\)](#), aspects of Naomi Klein's [*No Logo* \(1999\)](#) and Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's [*The Rebel Sell: How the Counter Culture Became Consumer Culture* \(2006\)](#) (also to my mind evoking distant memories of George Melly's study of British popular culture, [*Revolt into Style* \(1970\)](#)) for an investigation of how capitalism easily appropriated much of so-called counter-culture for new marketing strategies.

Today such ideas are much more mainstream. Furthermore, it would be practically impossible for media scholars to ignore the increasingly global nature of means of mass communication, or to return to the rather parochial and provincial outlook of the Birmingham School (what would, for example, Dorothy Hobson's study of [*Crossroads* \(1982\)](#) mean to almost anyone outside of the UK, or those too young to remember the soap opera before its main run ended in 1988?). Work which excluded questions of concentrations of media power, influence and representation would be unlikely to be taken seriously, at least in media and communications studies. For this there is a great debt of thanks to Philo, McGuigan and their successors. The absurdity of Fiske-ian textualism should be clear if one imagines a study of Twitter/X over recent years which ignores the role of its ownership. While there is much about the political assumptions of some in the Glasgow group with which I would personally take issue, their approach is much more serious and rigorous than was most work from Birmingham.

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Nonetheless, in some other areas, such as popular music studies, there remains a reticence in engaging with the music industry's role in conditioning public taste, so that the industry is often presented in a naïve and idealised manner akin to much 1980s cultural studies. The decline in the study of much "high" culture in universities, save for the most elite amongst them, is undoubtedly legitimized by this tradition. A positive view for artistic and aesthetic education, making the more demanding varieties of culture accessible to more people, is also excluded from 1980s-inflected cultural studies, as it is—like anything else which might have an impact on how culture is received—anathema to an aesthetic of high consumerism. The offspring of the Birmingham School have become a new elite in other disciplines. This is no progress, and they must be critiqued as thoroughly as they claimed to critique older elites.