SOC 340

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Cultural Chaos

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6 Cultural capitalism and the commodification of dissent

The economic drivers of cultural chaos arise from two evolutionary trends in the capitalist mode of production. The first, discussed in Chapter 2, is towards greater productivity within the capitalist system as a whole, notwithstanding the persistence of social relations of exploitation within the production process, and the unequal distribution of wealth both within the nation-state and internationally. This trend challenges a key premise of the control paradigm – that ideological control through the inducement of false consciousness in the minds of the masses, as opposed to their informed consent, is required to explain the reproduction of capitalism over time.

Second, and the subject of this chapter, is the evolution of news and other journalistic forms as cultural commodities, to the point at which producers have an economic incentive to 'surprise and disrupt' elites, as Luhmann puts it, by being the first to report stories such as Abu Ghraib (or the shooting by US troops of unarmed prisoners in Falluja in November 2004, covered on the front page of newspapers all over the world) quickly, and with as much objectivity as they can manage.

The perverse logic of cultural capitalism

Chapter 2 argued that capitalism's economic success can be reconciled with a materialist theoretical framework if it is accepted that capitalism contains the seeds not, as Marx and Engels believed, of its own destruction, but (in conditions of mass democracy, and in the era of mass media) of its auto-reform and progressive humanisation; its self-correction and improvement, as measured by standard economic and quality of life indicators. Just as the mechanism of self-destruction of capitalism, for Marx, was the blind application of the profit motive and the merciless extraction of surplus-value from the worker, so the mechanism of self-improvement and self-correction is also the profit motive, and in particular the need to sell cultural commodities. In contemporary conditions, these commodities have to succeed (sell) in a competitive market of relatively empowered, relatively knowledgeable citizen-consumers, who are in a position to exercise choice and who do not respond well to being patronised.

Critical media sociology is most passionate when condemning the evils of commercialisation and the commodification of journalism. Herman and McChesney

typify the style of attack when they note that, because they 'represent narrow class interests', commercial media organisations present 'a clear and present danger to citizens' participation in public affairs, understanding of public issues, and thus to the effective working of democracy' (1997: 1). 'The very logic of private media market control and behaviour', they continue, 'is antithetical to the cultivation and nurture of the public sphere' (ibid.: 7). The media, however, have always been mainly commercial entities, producing content for profit by capitalists. There have been markets, more or less free, since the birth of capitalism, not least in the cultural sphere. Indeed, with the exception of UK-type public service broadcasting, and a few isolated examples of publicly subsidised or party-run media, almost all the products of the capitalist culture industries since the invention of the printing press have circulated in commodity form. Even system-dissenting media, be they Trotskyist newspapers or books by Naomi Klein, have survived largely on their ability to sell copies at a price capable of producing a profit.

The example of Klein's *No Logo* (2000) demonstrates that cultural commodities are distinct from other kinds in that the act of their consumption has ideological consequences which, through the mechanisms of consumer choice and democratic participation, impact on the wider commodity system, creating a virtual cycle in which profits are made at the same time as radical and even subversive ideas are disseminated. Cultural commodities generate political and ideological feedback, and open up opportunities for further (commercial) production and distribution of radical ideas. Madonna's music and videos were a triumphantly commercial phenomenon, as well as a political statement about women's sexuality at the end of the twentieth century. Following on his record-breaking documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* was one of the cinematic hits of 2004 in the United States, as well as being a trenchant assault on the Bush administration and American foreign and economic policy in general. In contemporary cultural capitalism, commercial viability and political radicalism coexist, as Jeremy Rifkin observes in *Age of Access*:

> Counter-cultural trends have become particularly appealing targets for expropriation by marketers . . . By identifying products and services with controversial cultural issues, companies evoke the rebellious anti-establishment spirit in their customers and make the purchases stand for symbolic acts of personal commitment to the causes they invoke.
>
> (Rifkin 2000: 174)

To this extent, the circulation of cultural commodities becomes at one and the same time a source of profit, a mechanism of systemic self-regulation, and a means of promoting progressive social change. At a certain point in feminist history, for example, and well before Madonna made her first record, women began to matter economically to the smooth reproduction of capital. Always important to the reproduction of labour power, and thus worshipped in patriarchal culture as mothers and lovers, during and after the Second World War they emerged as a key group of industrial workers, and then increasingly important consumers, compelling respect and attention from a still-patriarchal system. In satisfying the demands of women as consumers, capitalism thereby hastened the progressive evolution of patriarchy as a system of stratification, to the point that by the twenty-first century, only eight decades after women first achieved the vote in Britain and the United States, overt displays of sexism were politically and culturally taboo in public life and in the mainstream media (the defiantly pre-feminist sexism of lad mags and a character such as Sid the Sexist in *Viz* magazine fall, I have argued elsewhere, into the category of postmodern irony, indicative of feminism's success rather than its failure [McNair 2002]).[1]

The same *commodification of social progress* has been seen in relation to racism and homophobia. Notwithstanding the debate about the persistence of ethnically based inequality in America unleashed by Hurricane Katrina in September 2005, the rise of the black middle class and the ascendancy of black subcultural forms such as hip-hop are oft-noted trends in the west. Whether in the rise of Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice in the political sphere, or Kanye West and Missy Elliot in the cultural, the direction of change in America (and in comparable countries such as the UK) is clear.

Observing the mainstreaming of homosexuality, Andrew Sullivan, an 'out' gay conservative, states that the gay rights movement in America has been 'perhaps the most tangible social revolution of the last twenty years of conservative ascendancy', and wonders about the meaning of this 'paradoxical confluence'[2] of 'cultural conservatism simultaneous with gay revolution'. There is no paradox, however. There *is* cultural conservatism (as there is still racism in society), and since 2000 it has been established in the White House. But the gay rights movement in America, as in Britain, Australia and many other advanced capitalist societies, has, like feminism, become integrated into mainstream culture by virtue of its economic power, and its associated demand for goods and services. As Sullivan puts it, 'what happened was neither right nor left'. What it *was* was good business. The sexual citizenship enjoyed by women and practising homosexuals in the western world today has been facilitated not least by the media marketplace, which is blind to sexual preference as long as the money is right. In socialist Cuba, by contrast, or the quasi-medieval feudalisms favoured by Islamic fundamentalism, homosexuality, like feminism, is still regarded by the state as a crime, subject to severe punishment up to and including death.

In this sense the erosion of what might once, and quite recently, have been dominant ideas (be they racist, sexist, or class-ist) can be a process entirely consistent with the normal workings of the cultural marketplace, with the only constraint being on ideas that are incompatible with capitalism (and neither feminism, nor anti-racism, nor gay rights have been anything but good for capitalist economies, since they improve the available human resource). Far from being held back by the commercialisation of the media, social and political progress have been its by-product. The market provides a highly efficient mechanism for the circulation of dissenting, progressive ideas in commodity form.[3]

Critical media sociology has resisted this conclusion, preferring to see apparent advances in the representation of women or ethnic minorities (to cite two categories

~t media linage traditionally criticised as inadequate) as either tokenistic or illusory, 111 that the appearance of progress is really the cover for something else.John Fiske's *Media Matters* labours to make its case that US media coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial, which ended in a controversial acquittal due to revelations of police racism, 'contributed to racial antagonism' (Fiske 1996: 274) and promoted 'essential racism'. That is one reading of the story. An alternative is that by highlighting institutional racism in the LAPD, and making that racism the justification for the acquittal of an accused man generally regarded as guilty (and later convicted in a civil case), coverage put racial antagonism high on the US media and public agenda, where it was extensivcly debated for months and years afterwards. Coverage of the Stephen Lawrence murder had a similar iInpact on UK debates about racism, leading to ground-breaking investigative journalism such as the BBC's *the Secret Policeman,* in which an undercover reporter produced evidence of overt racism at a police training college.

There is similar resistance to the idea that images of women in mainstream culture have altered for the better. The recent *Women and]oumalism* (Chambers *et at.* 2004) argues that, notwithstanding the obvious increase in the number and status of women working in the news media, journalism is still sexist. These authors concede the emergence of women as an economic force, but then suggest that this has

> sanctioned the rise of a whole new feminine, but covertly anti-feminist, journalistic form in tile twenty-first century, in which it is now permissible for women to expose their own and other women's personal insecurities and vulgar habits, sexual conquests and defeats, and abuses of substances and people.
>
> (Chambers *et al.* 2004: 214)

Why such content should be judged 'anti-feminist' was not made explicit by these authors. As I and otllers have argued, however, the feminisation of the public sphere through such formats as daytime talk shows, reality TV, lifestyle and makover strands, and entertainment formats such as *Footballers' Wives* and *Desperate Housewives,* can be viewed as a progressive evolution rather than a 'vulgar' dumbing down or cultural degeneration (Lumby 1999). From this perspective, the emergence of women into mainstream political, economic and social life has been reflected in rather than constrained by, popular culture. The market has been the vehicle fo; the dissemination and articulation of a diverse, popular feminism.

Competitive market pressures impose constraints on the content of mainstream media, clearly, but commercial considerations also determine that there is a market - a *counter-cultural marketplace* - for dissent. Political dissidence sells like never before as the career of Michael Moore demonstrates most clearly. His best-selling books: and two successful documentary films, confirm the observation that 'the culture industry doesn't mind dissent - as long as it produces a profit'.4 **In** Moore's view, as reported in that most upmarket and consumer-oriented of media outlets, *Vaniry Fair,* 'the reason I survive doing what I do with these large media conglomerates whose heads aren't necessarily in agreement with me politically is I make them a lot ofmoney'5

Within weeks of its release on more than 700 US screens - the biggest opening for a documentary ever in the United States - Moore's *Fahrenheit* 9/11 had become the surprise hit of the summer of2004, earning $200 million at the box office and an estinlated $50 million for Moore personally.6 This success followed on a higWy effective promotional campaign (which included turning up at Cannes and winning the Palme D'Or from a predictably anti-Bush French jury - this was the year of 'freedom fries' and 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys'), during which Moore clainled *thit* he was a victinl of censorship because the Disney corporation which produced his film subsequently refused to distribute it. Moore provided a master class in the art of making counter-culture commodities work in the capitalist media marketplace by turning his low-budget, anti-government polemic into a box office smash eclipsed in that pre-election summer only by *Spider-Man 2.*

The mainstream ascendancy of Moore's films and books (only the most commercially successful of a wave of successful counter-cultural commodities which accompanied the era of George W. Bush and the war on terror, including Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* [2004] andJennifer Abbott's *Tlze Corporation* [2003]r illustrates the loosenina‿connection between control of the media, which clearly remains in the hands of big media capital, and control of the message, as *well* as the *meallllng* of tile message. Joel Bakan's book, on which the film of *Tlze Corporation* is based, is published by Free Press, a subsidiary ofVIACOM corporation. Its commercial success leads Bakan to remark that 'I think the market for our film and the book and the other critical stuff shows that people are actually really interested in engaging with critical ideas'.8 Robert Greenwald's *Outfoxed* (2004) was a successful documentary critique of News Corporation's Fox News network,9 joining a plethora of counter-cultural commodities dedicated to debunking so-called Big Media.

People have always been interested in dissent and debate, of course. Radical newspapers flourished in both Britain and America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Conboy 2004). The success of *Ihe Corporation* and other counter-culture products shows that the twenty-first-century media market has more space than any in history for outlets for quite radical, even anti-systemic debate. **If** the McDonald's corporation is viewed by many critical theorists as an evil empire, and the exemplification of all that is wrong with global capitalism in the twenty-first century, it is one which *Super Size Me* brought to heel witll a low-budget movie, shot on video for less than $200,000, which played to packed ho.uses all over the world and made some $150 million in cinema and rental receIpts. Spurlock's critique of Big Capital, like those of Moore, Klein, Chomsky and many others, was not censored, or marginalised, or dismissed, but became on the contrary a successful counter-cultural commodity, a lucrative brand of dissidence in a cultural marketplace which cares not what you say, as long as there is someone prepared to pay to hear you say it.

Jumbo Conquered the World (2004) cites an article written for the *Guardian* by UK-based journalist Seamus Milne, two days after *91* ❙❙. In it he blames the American people, including those killed in the World Trade Center buildings that morning, for the atrocity inflicted upon them by Ai Qaida. By their 'unabashed national egotism and arrogance', argues Milne, and their failure to address 'the injustices and inequalities' that in his view motivated the bombers, they had gotten more or less w.hat they deserved, 'once again reaping a dragon's teeth harvest they themselves sowed,.lo A contributor t~ the usually genteel *London Review if Books* declared in an essay a few days later that 'however tactfully you dress it up, the United States had it coming. World bullies, even if their heart is in the right place, will in the end pay the price'. [11] Such dissent from the general sense of horror at innocent lives cruelly snuffed out appeared in many media oudets throughout the western world, not least in the United States. When they did they were criticised by other commentators, as in the case of Susan Sontag's *New Yorker* article defending the 'courage' of the September ❙❙ terrorists. [12] But they appeared, and in high proliJe, in mainstream media. There was no censorship and no constraints on what might be said.

In the 1960s Umberto Eco declared that the future of the revolution (in the days when the idea of socialist revolution could still be taken seriously) was not dependent on the Bolshevik model of seizure of the means of intellectual production - on storming the radio and TV stations and replacing them with progressive propaganda apparatuses - but on influen'cing the reception of the message by audiences (Eco 1986). Eco championed the subversive power *ot* semiotics, and analysed the implications of differential decoding for a materialist theory of ideological control. Half a century later we can develop this idea to argue, with due respect to Marshall McLuhan, that the medium is *not* the message.

The medium, whether it is controlled by Silvio Berlusconi, Rupert Murdoch, or the heirs of Walt Disney, is merely the carrier of messages which, once released into the cultural marketplace and the maze of new information and communication technologies described in Chapters 7 and 8, exhibit viral characteristics. For reasons that are not always obvious or predictable, they replicate and spread, and as long as they make money for cultural capital, they are free to flow around an expanded, interconnected sphere of corrimunication. Some, like the films of Michael Moore, are explicidy 'radical', system-critical messages. Others mutate and come to mean things that their makers may not have intended or foreseen. They interact with the political and ideological environments in ways that no media baron can entirely control. News stories set off political crises; radical movies and books dominate significant portions of the media agenda, sometimes forcing change on governments and corporations. *Super Size Me* embarrassed McDonald's into launching healthier fast-food lines; Jamie Oliver's 2005 Channel 4 series on the deficiencies of British school meals provoked policy responses in the direction of healthier eating for kids.

Fox News reflects the views of its proprietor-in-chief, no doubt, but itself becomes the subject of best-selling books, a filrri *(Outfoxed)* and a mainstream critical discourse about news bIas WIthin which News Corp has to operate, like it or not. To adapt the materialist slogan - those who control the means of production control also the means of intellectual production, but not the content of what those means produce, nor the meanings derived from that content by individuals in societies increasingly informed by a globalised public sphere. The link between economic base and cultural superstructure is weakened. New information and communication technologies (see Chapters 7 and 8) have not ended the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few big corporations, but d1ey have enabled an environment in which the latter are obliged in their own self-interest to share the public sphere with an increasingly diverse range of editorial viewpoints and voices.

Some resist. And in d1e *post-91* ❙❙ era of resurgent neo-conservatism there are examples of advertisements being pulled from controversial publications, and crude attempts to reimpose an earlier model of moral and political censorship even in countries such as the USA. These have a tendency to backfire on the would-be censors, however, as they inevitably become part of the media agenda. When two News Corporation newspapers refused to carry advertisements for *Outfoxed,* the resulting publicity helped promote the film better than any paid advertising could. The Disney corporation did indeed pull out of its agreement to distribute *Fahrenheit 91/1,* as Michael Moore alleged in the mond1s leading up to its reiease by another distributor. But the publicity which its shrewd director generated from that decision merely increased the film's commercial power. 'Censorship' became part of the film's unique selling proposition.

As we have seen, the response of critical media scholarship to a phenomenon like me mainstream commercial success of a counter-cultural text such as *Fahrenheit 9111* is to dismiss it as tokenism. Like the Chomskyan response to an elite-critical news item, an e1ite- or system-critical film commodity such as *Fahrenheit 9111,* or Moore's chart-topping book, *Stupid White Men,* which by June 2003 had sold 500,000 copies in the UK alone, tends to be neutralised in d1e terms laid out by Horkheimer and Adorno more man six decades ago in meir *Dialectic if Enlightenment.* These writers, expressing the deep pessimism of the Frankfurt School, believed mat the capitalist culture industry 'made up such a totalising system that it was literally impossible to rebel against it. This complex not only anticipated the urge to revolt but would sell you something to satisfy'.[13] In cultural capitalism, they insisted, 'departures from the norm' of mass cultural, pro-systemic uniformity are to be regarded as 'calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of me system' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973: 129). Such an analysis assumes mat it is only mese 'calculated mutations', and me totalitarian mind control they allegedly permit, which can explain social order and apparent mass consent to the capitalist system.

A somewhat different strain of cultural pessimism runs mrough Naomi Klein's best-selling *No Logo* (2000), a work which, like Michael Moore's books and films, went to the top of the charts (and became a leading counter-cultural brand) by condemning the commodity economy within which it flourished. Acknowledging the growth in the 1990s of 'cultural diversity' arid 'identity politics' (ibid.: 113), Klein condemned them as evidence not of social progress but the ascendancy of

UJdHUlUg IS Klng. L;ontrary to what the feminists, gay rights activists and ethnic minority activists thought they were doing by fighting for access to cultural resources and political rights all these years, Klein argued that 'identity politics weren't fighting the system, or even subverting it. When it came to the vast new ind~stry of corporate branding, they were feeding it.'

She was right on that latter point, if not in the conclusion that identity politics is thus devalued. It is true, as I have suggested, that social progress in sexual and ethnic politics, as well as in related spheres of identity politics such as disability rights, has been achieved in large part through the communicative, distributive channels of the cultural marketplace; and the growing power of women, gays and other once marginalised and suppressed communities to influence those channels through economic pressure. That, indeed, is precisely my point in this chapter. Access to cultural commodities, and the participation of previously excluded social groups in mainstream culture, has been an index of political success and social progress, if not a sufficient end in itself. Before there could be a Pink Dollar or Pound there had to be a gay liberation movement, endowing homosexual men and women with sufficient confidence to 'come out' and demand the same range of consumer goods and lifestyle accessories as straight people. Before there could be a globally successful hip-hop music scene there had to be.a black power movement with a worked-out critique of mainstream, white-dominated culture. When progress has been achieved, however, by one marginalised group or another, that group has often found the cultural marketplace a fertile arena for the articulation of identity and the realisation of previously suppressed lifestyles. The producers of cultural commodities, conversely, have found members of these groups an increasingly lucrative source of business.

From Adorno to Klein, then, the pessimistic perspective has viewed mass access to and participation in culture as incorporation into a commercial system which is by definition antithetical to what they define as 'genuine' human progress; equivalent to the corrupti.on of authentic cultures by mass-marketed forms, and the illusory fa<;:adeof a global village where, in reality, 'the economic divide is widening and cultural choices narrowing' (ibid.: xvii). In cultural capitalism, from this perspective, rebellion and dissent are commodified and integrated in such a way that the system is not threatened, but shored up. This is a coherent position if one assumes that capitalism (and its associated phenomena, such as consumerism) is decadent and doomed to be replaced by a superior mode of socio-economic and cultural production. If so, shoring up the system can be viewed as a conservative media function. When, on the od1er hand, it is recognised that capitalism is here to stay, and that the critical task is to reform and humanise rather than replace it, the capacity of the media to channel dissidence and diversity becomes a valuable political tool in d1e progressive project.

At the end of the century of Stalin and Hider, it is notable that while they and the totalitarian systems they built have long gone, liberal democracy, consumer capitalism and mass culture have indeed been shored up, with or without the help of counter-cultural commodities. And when one considers the alternatives, would we have had it any other way? In the context of the 1940s when *Dialectic qf Enlightenment* was written (an atmosphere of creeping, aggressive totalitarianism which also produced Orwell's *Animal Farm.* and 1984), mass culture pessimism can be understood. To accept it today means acceptance of the view that there is a realistic alternative to capitalism available; that capitalism was and has remained oppressive in its nature; and that dissenting, ideologically subversive cultural commodities can never actually *change* the system for the better, as opposed to merely masking or putting Band-Aids on its wounds. The pragmatic optimism implied by a chaos paradigm, on the other hand, acknowledges the status of capitalism (for d1e reasons of self-interest in profit maximisation oudined above) as a fundamentally progressive system in economic, political and social terms, and that the contemporary media marketplace now provides an in1portant mechanism for the ongoing internal reform and humanisation of the system. The concrete evidence of global socio-economic progress, democratisation and the exercise of critical media scrutiny leading to progressive change on a number of fronts can easily support a reading of capitalism's capacity for change which acknowledges more than tokenism, and a view of critical cultural commodities as more than distractions.

Why should it be so? Simply because the accumulated weight of historical, political and cultural experience means that contemporary capitalism contains within it many individuals who, far from being brainwashed or seduced into submission to a dominant ideology which is opposed to d1eir own interests (if such a thing as a dominant ideology can be discerned from the diversity and chaos of contemporary media coverage), are fully aware of the flaws ofd1e system, who may even be prepared to demonstrate for change at G8 meetings, but who recognise that it remains the best, if not the only, game in town. They are affluent, many of them, and young, with historically unprecedented reserves of disposable income. In their desire to have their dissent recognised and validated they form a valuable market for the cultural commodities of symbolic dissidence.

The circulation of these commodities may, as in the case of *Fahrenheit* 9/11, have a real influence on the political environment. One observer notes d1at

> *Fahrenheit* 9/11 was woeful journalism. But d1at didn't deter the public. A report by the activist organisation MoveOn.com estimated that 44 per cent of all US voters would have seen the film by the time of the presidential election _ and a third of those would have been self-identified Bush voters. 14

Michael Moore's film did not prevent the re-election of George W. Bush. It may indeed have contributed to the victory by angering and mobilising d1e Republican vote. Moore himself believes that his film 'prevented a Bush landslide',15 while one senior Democratic campaigner in 2004 attributes the high turnout that November to 'd1e fact that the other side [the Republicans] would not allow their president to be trashed by Michael Moore' .16

I have already noted the difficulty of demonstrating media effects, and no one can say for sure if *Fahrenheit* 9/11 helped or hindered the fortunes of the Bush