Culture Industry in the Death Cult of Global Capitalism

Jonathan Harris

CHEAD

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Sheffield Hallam University

In a hitherto effectively lost essay by Raymond Williams reprinted recently in *New Left Review* – a piece first published obscurely in 1961, shortly after his highly publicized book *The Long Revolution* – Williams identified what he called a 'human' politics concerned with ways people try genuinely to understand and improve their world. This, he contrasted with what he called the politics of 'parading robot […] polemic.' Williams was talking about the Cold War and its rival 'robot polemics' of Soviet Communism versus Western Democracy, but the characterization works as well, for me, when we consider the contemporary 'robot polemics' of art and design's pivotal role in leading our 'creative industries' and 'cultural industries.'

The analogy isn't simply formal. Williams, in 1961, in *The Long Revolution* had made the optimistic case (even then), from a non-Marxist perspective, that Britain was moving, because of the deeply transformative forces of 'cultural democracy,' towards a substantive democratic socialism. This argument E.P. Thompson, the socialist historian, took apart in his otherwise generally supportive review of the book in *New Left Review*. Williams had left out class conflict and struggle, Thompson said, in his picture of British social history – not mentioning, for instance, the Peterloo Massacre in his account of critical socio-political developments in England in the 1840s.

Rather than responding to Thompson directly in the same journal, however, Williams decided to publish instead his short essay called 'The Future of Marxism' elsewhere, and with no mention of Thompson's critique. Its detail, and its context, you might say, can no longer be relevant to us. *It is*, however. In this essay Williams talked explicitly about Soviet, eastern European dissident and western Marxism – which, tactically, he had chosen *not* to do in *The Long Revolution,* a decision that had helped that book earn a much wider, positive and less partisan response than it would otherwise have received at that critical moment in the Cold War.

The idea of the 'British national interest' (a phrase bandied around ad infinitum during the period since the 2016 Brexit Referendum), if linked to explicit ideological or party positions, would be seen for what it was and always is: a partisan, partial gambit aiming to become hegemonic. The claim says: 'here is *my* view, *our* view, of what the 'British national interest' is; your livelihood and happiness depends on *your* acknowledgement that what *we* say is right. 'Acknowledgement', 'concession', 'agreement' – all political processes that socially usually involve persuasion *and* the coercive threat: 'and if you don't…'Support *us*. Become *us*.

My point here is observational only. Take your pick of whose views you'd rather see inserted: Con, Lab, 'the Independent Group,' E.R.G., I.M.F., E.U., World Bank, B.B.C, BCU, C.H.E.A.D. The 'robot polemic' has been at work in many fields since 1961 but the fundamental difference since the 1990s has been that the contrast between Soviet or western socialist variants and western capitalist-democratic variants has ended. The only game being played now is global contemporary capitalism articulated, as David Harvey, Wolfgang Streeck, and Susan Watkins have argued, to different state formations and to different aggregates of states. (The titular, robot polemic called 'Neoliberalism,' as various

commentators have pointed out, is false on both counts: the dominating forces and interests at work in contemporary global capitalism are neither 'new,' nor 'liberal.')

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I see a local 'robot polemic' at work in the way CHEAD and academics in British universities try their best to defend what 'we' think of, and represent, as 'our interests', within 'the British national interest.' There's a slab of it to do with our conference today: '[…] a pivotal point for art and design. The strategic positioning of the cultural and creative sector critically developing knowledge and fostering challenging enquiries […] fundamental to Britain's economic recovery post-austerity, post-Brexit and pro-fourth industrial revolution […] Creative industries […] cultural value […] Place […] re-profiling […] trading offer.'

I don't personally stand outside of this activity, by the way. As a Head of a School of Art, I am a prime perpetrator of this kind of thing. Having recently written a TEF pilot subject submission for 'Creative Arts and Design' I would qualify now as one of its arch-exponents. *It's in my job description.* At the same time, along with many of you, I read and concur with Stefan Collini in the *London Review of Books* who lacerates British government higher education policy, TEF especially, on a regular, and, you might say, also robotic basis.

In fact, having had to immerse myself in TEF literature, I get the strong impression that, if there is robot polemic, there is also robot dispute and robot nay-saying, which has become a broad feature of polarized and polarizing political debate since 2016 in this country and has equally, if in different ways, contaminated, for instance, US politics. But it certainly didn't start with the Brexit Referendum or with Trump's election (these events both have to have been *effects* as much as they have become, in themselves, *causes*.)

Williams's distinction between 'human politics' and 'robot politics' perhaps made more sense in the Manichean era of high Cold War. There is a kernel of sense, even perhaps of common sense, now, in our polemic of 'creative and cultural industries' that another necessary 'tactical' game is being played. After all, our wager says: *this* is the language *they* understand (in fact it's the only language *they* understand) and through it, if we manage to sound convincing, we get more jobs, more resources, more students.

I am doubtful, however, about CHEAD's hopeful 'post-austerity' claim. Through this language maybe, now, we will simply *get to keep* the jobs we've got, *get to keep* the resources we've got, *get to keep* the students we've got. This line of reasoning or hope without expectation, however, may follow a law of remorselessly diminishing returns – which contemporary global capitalism, now, offers most people in the world: read Thomas Piketty, Naomi Klein or Mike Davis.

So, through this tactical language maybe we simply get *not to lose* too many jobs, *not to lose* too many resources, *not to lose* too many students. With the impending government fees review, this latter issue neatly illustrates the dismal 'negative dialectic' we've gotten ourselves into, you might say, through adopting hegemonic language as our own and trying to wield it (although we might argue: we had no choice, 'there was no alternative'): we both,

that is, *want* more students, because we believe that is a sign of and a move towards more 'democracy,' but we simply *cannot take* any more students because there are not enough teachers and not enough resources to deal with them (in fact, there *will* be less teachers and less resources).

TEF social aims are, 'on paper', laudable – utopian, even, given the real world. This sense of their 'utopian' whiff, however, tells us how bad things have *really* got since the 1960s: how far the 'centre' of what used to be called social democracy (never mind the 'left', or socialist interest in education) has moved to the right and/or been obliterated. Tariq Ali has called it the 'extreme centre.' (When Jeremy Corbyn can apparently sound like a Bolshevik, rather than someone to the right of Neil Kinnock in 1977.)

Collini's exquisite critiques are excoriatingly accurate, but then I think: Oxbridge colleges, and now probably *only* Oxbridge colleges, are mostly immune to the consequences of a collapse in state subvention for what we are trying to do in higher education, for 'cultural democracy,' through art and design, in support of our 'creative and cultural industries.' But then, again, there are those hegemonizing 'we's and 'our's. *Are* there actually agreed interests in 'art and design'?

Is the ostensible agreement actually merely a negative one (like over Brexit)? We know, that is, what 'we' are against – cuts, less staff, less students, less teaching of art and design in schools, less social mobility, less international mobility, etc. – but there is no real institutional discussion, because no institutional discussion is now practically politically possible, about what 'we' might actually *want* or be *for*, once we stop thinking of ourselves as academics in university or college jobs, or as members of CHEAD, rather than as fully autonomous humans. Our robotic existence, inside education institutions, limits us to what CHEAD astutely calls (and I like the turn of phrase, as it sounds intrinsically self-parodic): 'delivery agents for the commodified derivatives of a cultural landscape.'

That's my day job, in a nutshell. But, then again, no – not every day, but quite often something interesting *happens in the art school with the students and I think: Wow! You know, we really* could *transform the world!*

The elimination of open political and partisan debate *inside* universities, at all levels and in all places, has characterized their intellectual decline since the 1990s, since ill-named neoliberalism really got cracking, globally. It may be the case, before then, that in Britain, parts of left academia in universities also behaved robotically, and that this was a legacy of the 1960s and the Cold War. But this *was* also a time, believe it or not, when people genuinely believed, as I did, that democratic socialism was possible in *this* country and that art and design (in my case, art history) had a practical and significant role in getting 'us' there. That was 'the British national interest'

It was with ever more melancholic gasps of irony that we saw, onward from the later 1980s, the progressive appropriation and capture of terms such as 'creativity' and 'culture' by the hegemonizing forces of global capitalism, articulated by conservative, then new labour and then 'lib-con' governments. Perhaps we can look forward, now, to our recently emerged

'Independent Group' MPs appropriating that older 'Independent Group' – those sexy, creative '60s art and design proto-'cultural industries' – as a vehicle in their big, but not at all new, political sell.

The term 'Cultural Industries' represents the most dismal semantic and ideological hijacking, of course, because, through it, the almost identical term, 'Culture Industry,' was turned around 180 degrees from Theodor Adorno's and the western Marxist Frankfurt School's meaning and intent, which was to diagnose and predict, though it actually underestimated, where 'we'd' all be with global 'consumer capitalism' by 2020 – and partly thanks to 'art and design.'

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My title for this talk, you may now see, wasn't simply intended to be facetious. As you've probably gathered from what I've said so far, I can't offer you, or myself, much to be optimistic about at the moment. *(I'm not always like this.)* Re-reading Williams's *The Long Revolution* always makes me aware, again, of how far we have travelled and that – whatever we might agree or not agree are the real gains since 1960 (that's my first question for our discussion session) – the losses and defeats in terms of hope and capacity for transformative *national* social change, if you see yourself as a democratic socialist, seem now, to me, to be definitive and terminal.

No doubt this view *is* coloured by my age, my generation, my experience. Perhaps this perspective partly underpins the CHEAD corporate 'there is no alternative' arguments about creative and cultural industries – along with the real commitment to the principle, which I share, that we are educating our people so that they *can* get and keep decently paid, meaningful and enriching jobs using their creative talents and ability.

If you *don't* see yourself as a democratic socialist, presumably everything I've said so far you might well read and dismiss as itself prototypically 'robot polemic,' especially if you articulate your own views from what you think of as a coherent, practical, political and ideological position (the stubborn public stances, that is, of all the current mainstream British political parties, though with a big question mark – posed by critics from left *and* right – hanging over Corbyn's Labour Party).

The root of that professionally optimistic group of stances, I would have thought, must include the continuing belief, for example: that global capitalism affords the possibility, if perhaps not the current actuality, of real, continuous socio-economic gain for everyone (rather than a structural and increasing inequality); belief in a future where climate change *isn't* going to be disastrous for the planet (rather than likely to make our societies un-livable in within 100 years); and belief that global 'fourth industrial revolution' techno-consumer culture industry may well flourish into a system allowing maximum personal freedom while at the same time powerfully and permanently regulating corporate avarice and its connivance in state repression. (To the latter, we might add that CHEAD 'proudly' wants our governments and businesses to see that art and design should be at the forefront of delivering this 'deliverable.')

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At the other end of his career, in 1983 Williams published his last book, called *Towards 2000* (subtitled 'The future and what we can do to change it'), the year I finished my undergraduate degree. Its epigram was from Thomas Hardy: 'Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst' – though, admittedly, Hardy wasn't much of an optimist either! If still stuck in the Cold War – for those here who remember Ronald Reagan, cruise missiles brought to England, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the US hostages held in Tehran – Williams was also, in this book, much more interested in corporate capitalist cultural production and the globalization processes just underway by the early 1980s.

I recommend his chapter called 'Culture and Technology'. CHEAD and all of us might reflect, having read or re-read it, on how to engage institutionally in the politics, *not* of professional advocacy for 'creative and cultural industries', but of corporate *versus* social need, rescuing meanings, values and ambitions *from* their present ideological capture. How we might do that is my second question for discussion. (It goes without saying by now, I hope, that this is an explicit political position of belief in democratic socialism, however dire the present situation is: there is no meaningful, or non-robotic, 'we' or 'our' here outside of explicitly political, *not simply* 'professional,' discourse). Williams noted:

There are very few absolute contrasts left between a 'minority culture' and 'mass communications.' This situation has to be traced, eventually, to the deep roots of 'minority culture' itself […] The privileged institutions of minority culture, bearers of so much serious and important work, have for many years been fighting a losing battle against the powerful pressures of a capitalist-sponsored culture. This is the most evident source of cultural pessimism. But its deeper source is a conviction that there is nothing but the past to be won. This is because, for other reasons, there is a determined refusal of any genuinely alternative social and cultural order. This is so in theory, in the determined objections to new forms of democracy or socialism. But it is even more so in practice, in the effective interlock – now so clearly visible – between the social conditions of the privileged institutions and the existing social order as a whole. (134-5)

Well, the really powerful 'privileged institutions' are different now – though some of the old ones survive, though in a very different pecking order. But we are now further away from participatory socio-political democracy and something we might agree to call 'cultural democracy' than ever. If May's Brexit deal *is* finally scuppered by the 'troubles' of the 'Irish backstop' then this underlines that, within the overriding 'British national interest' insisted on by the warring Conservatives, the deep imperial, colonial and postcolonial 'interest' – reactionary, nationalist, chauvinistic in its true colours – has remained (to use a good Marxist term) 'overdeterminingly' active and disabling.

CHEAD, in order to cease to behave robotically, to cease to simply burnish its robot polemics, has to grasp and articulate *that* state of affairs. Whether it should or could do that is my third suggestion of topic for our discussion now.

Thank you.