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McRobbie, A. and Bennett, T. 2022. From rag market to creative economy: interview with Angela McRobbie

## From Rag Market to Creative Economy: Interview with Angela McRobbie

*Editor's note:* This interview forms part of the special issue *What Was Cultural Economy?* The issue has its origins in a January 2020 symposium, held at City, University of London, marking two decades since Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke convened a 'Workshop on Cultural Economy' at the Open University in Milton Keynes. That earlier event culminated in the publication of the edited collection *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life* (Du Gay and Pryke 2002). *What Was Cultural Economy?* collects responses to these founding moments in the field from a number of key figures, who each reflect on the relationship between conceptual clarification and their own academic histories. Angela McRobbie is a Fellow of the British Academy, Emeritus Professor Goldsmiths University of London and she also holds an Honorary Doctorate from Glasgow University. In this interview, she reflects on her intellectual and professional trajectory from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, amid her associations with Stuart Hall and the emerging cultural economy agenda at the OU. The edited transcript expands on, and incorporates elements from, her contribution to the 2020 workshop. It was conducted by Toby Bennett on 14 January 2022 by video call.

TB: From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, you published a number of books and articles, and engaged a number of projects and colleagues, that seem to speak to a turn in your own thinking: from *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses* (McRobbie 1989a); towards a focus on young women in British fashion design (McRobbie 1998) and the broader entrepreneurial "culture society" (McRobbie 1999); and into the emerging 'creative economy' policy discourse (McRobbie 2002a; 2002b). Building on your earlier writing at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, this body of work exhibits a shift in interests – in the empirical objects you're studying, the theoretical resources that are being drawn on – in dialogue with the parallel but distinct 'cultural economy' agenda being developed at the Open University (OU). So, just to set the terrain, maybe you could describe how you see that trajectory?

AM: Through the early 1990s, when Stuart Hall was at the Open University, there were indeed a series of debates on cultural production and cultural consumption. And from Stuart's end of the equation, this very much emerged from shorter pieces that were published in *Marxism Today*: on post-Fordism, the debate on New Times and on popular consumption. In effect, we – Stuart, everybody else – were engaging with major shifts in capitalist production and in the creation of new forms of consumer culture. The idea that culture was now at the forefront of the economy, or that the economy had been culturalised. I think that's really

what we were responding to. So the group, as I remember, were Paul du Gay, Keith Negus, Sean Nixon and, later, Liz McFall. We were linking spheres of popular culture together but also looking at them quite separately. So there was work being done on fashion, on popular music, that was Keith Negus; advertising, Sean and Liz; and supermarket shopping, which is what I remember from Paul du Gay's very original analysis.

My own emphasis subsequently moved towards questions of work, labour and self-employment. I would say the moment between the late '80s and maybe more like the mid-'90s was characterized, in my recollection, with three strands of thinking and the first very much did come out of "Second-hand Dresses and the Role of the Rag Market" in the *Zoot Suits* collection (McRobbie 1989b). Youth cultures needed to be revisited from a different sociological frame. And that went against the grain of the kind of Marxist orthodoxy. What I was saying was that youth cultures were generating their own labour markets and cycles of consumption. There was an informal labour market emerging out of that moment of youth unemployment. I also was interested in the subcultural entrepreneurs, most of whom at that point had not gone to university or art school. So, for example, in both Birmingham and London, probably also Glasgow – the three cities that I'm most familiar with – it was clear: as soon as one was into listening to music, going to fashion markets, reading magazines, it was very clear that there were many working-class young people who were deeply invested in *producing* magazines and writing and *making* music. If they had gone to university, it was the new universities: places like the London College of Printing [now London College of Communication]. And also, of course, from a feminist perspective, I was particularly interested in young women's involvement.

The second strand was very definitely with Stuart Hall, Martin Jacques and *Marxism Today*. My time was limited when I was also teaching and having a domestic life and trying to carry on with my research. But in *Marxism Today* there was, again, a very animated set of debates with Stuart that really came to be materialized in the *New Times* reader (Hall and Jacques 1989). And that was about how, in the moment of Thatcherism, sociologists and political people, folk on the Left, had to take seriously the expressions of desire and aspiration of working-class people to, if you like, be listened to – which of course Thatcher did. There were all kinds of attacks on this work. I remember the political economists of media and culture being pretty contemptuous of those attempts to understand the popular vernacular, the enjoyment of shopping and of going to IKEA. So, to cut it short, there was a feminist and gay argument – also an anti-racist argument, which Stuart wanted to take seriously – about

the sense in which working-class people, black and white, did not want to be locked into the mantras of the old Left.

And then I think the third manifestation was with Foucault. There was a very interesting coming together of Foucault's notion of power as being more distributed, more dispersed, less rigid, less of an imposition. There was the question of subjectivity. And some of the earliest debates around the way in which Foucault was used was not just in relation to the *History of Sexuality*, which was important, but also in cultures of consumption. There was the work by Erica Carter about supermarkets and housewives in Germany (Carter 1997). And also Paul du Gay, and the spatial organization of retail and shopping, using a kind of panoptic, Foucauldian lens (du Gay 1996). Frank Mort was also a key figure in his seminal research on London's West End (Mort 1996); he went to meet Foucault actually, in Paris, when he was still at Birmingham (cf. Mort and Peters 2005). So I would say that that moment also connected with a shift away from the kind of Lukácsian and conventional Marxism of some of the other guys in the field of media and communications. I was actually more interested in cultures of production; I wasn't going to be a consumption scholar. I might, in *Marxism Today*, talk about young women's pleasures in *Topshop*, I think I even wrote a piece about *Laura Ashley* (McRobbie 1985). But this was more like a pop sociology of the times.

TB: *Marxism Today*, Cultural Studies, and the broader 'cultural turn' across social science was often criticised for taking the economic 'base' for granted and indulging in populist celebrations of consumption (McGuigan 1992; Morris 1988). Yet you've described a kind of 'cultural turn' towards new forms, and new analyses, of *production*. This happens at roughly the same time as the demise of two of Stuart's key interlocutors: Marxism, as an analytic framework, defined by an economic project, loses a lot of legitimacy; and Margaret Thatcher was deposed shortly after – although, as Stuart maintained, her political demise didn't mean the end of her economic project; it was still working through the system, through technologies of governance. So how would you locate your work in this post-1989/1990 moment? Is it that the "quarrel with Marxism", which Stuart saw structuring his engagement with Cultural Studies, and with the New Left more broadly (Hall 1996a: 269), is effectively over, opening up new space to explore economic life outside of the strictures of that framework?

AM: To deflect this question in a slightly different direction, maybe it is better to say that the 'quarrel with Marxism' was a moment of real productivity. I think that the work that I began

to write around that time was viewed with a sense of betrayal from the older Marxists – I was stepping outside, to look at entrepreneurial activity – making a living by selling dresses and promoting clubs and setting up record labels – all of which could be seen as within the capitalist cycle of production. On the other hand, these were DIY projects, defined from the start as non-commercial. So they were not wholly inside the commodity-machine. I remember interviewing, for one chapter on cultural intermediaries, the editor of [the style magazine] *iD*, Edward Enninfu, who is now *Vogue* editor. And also I interviewed Sheryl Garratt, who I'd known previously from her time in Birmingham and the punk scene: she was, by then, editor of *The Face*. And what was interesting about both of them was that they talked about working for nothing – everybody was working for nothing in the early 1990s – but then Sheryl Garratt said to me, “ah, but the page is art!” This was interesting because it kind of indicated this full-scale aestheticization of work. This was more than just a new fashion magazine. Looking back at these cultural phenomena: the rag market, the zines and the music paraphernalia, what was needed was a more precise conjunctural analysis of the class formation informed by race and gender which that post-punk moment heralded. The politics of the participants in these forms of cultural production were not entirely legible. It was not clear-cut. I recall them as disconnected from the leftist-feminist repertoire, more like urban hedonists, clubbers, enthusiastic young subcultural professionals. It was the moment which also marked the rise of the DJ as a full-blown cultural producer. I'm sure at some point someone will do a more in-depth PhD on the sublimated politics of the post-punk period, and its subcultural economy.

Stuart and his colleagues were, in a sense, part of a project to create a neo-Marxism that fitted with the times and was open to new currents. Obviously, there were all kinds of other Marxist and Leftist frames and ideas but I think, in that moment of the Open University, the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau was very important for Stuart, their reworking of Marxism through articulation, the 'chain of equivalence' and also the contingency of the historical moment such that any Marxist inevitability and teleology was unsettled (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). I can't speak for Stuart of course but I recall the hard work of using Marx, especially the *Grundrisse*, to think about a non-teleological looseness and the way in which elements of difference come into play and form new associations. This is all apparent in the Open University books published during those years and especially the edited collection '*Race, Culture and Difference*' (Donald and Rattansi 1992). Stuart's time at the Open University was also his moment of drawing on psychoanalysis. He was in constant dialogue with Homi Bhabha. That was Stuart's Fanon moment (cf. Hall 1996). Then, of course, Judith

Butler came along in 1990-1993 and, although there was not an actual or direct engagement with Butler, I always felt myself that they were totally fellow travellers. The books he produced at the Open University on race are absolutely classics and they show Stuart thinking psychoanalytically. There is a kind of 'working through' of key debates similar to what one finds in for example Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). So I would argue that Hall was a post-structuralist neo-Marxist, working across a spectrum of questions concerning difference, the politics of meaning and the question of representation.

TB: To place some of these ideas in a more socialised and maybe a more materialist frame, then, I wonder if you can place your own trajectory within the shift you have described. You're doing feminist work, in a field that's still emerging. Alongside various scholarly disputes, you mentioned the new universities. How does this inflect the academic labour market at this time – I guess particularly for CCCS graduates such as yourself? How is this kind of interdisciplinary work, engaging new currents of thought and practice, finding its place across the academy, from your perspective?

AM: My husband was a German scholar and in order for him to do his PhD he had to move to Germany for a while. I also then won an ESRC grant to do some work in Germany which involved finding comparative work to my own on young women and youth culture. This was very nice, we lived in Bochum and then Berlin. It resulted in a short book with a German colleague based in Berlin (McRobbie and Savier 1981). So we were in Germany for about eighteen months and then, by the time I came back, I got a full-time job at the Polytechnic of East London, out in Dagenham. But it proved completely impossible to do because I had a home and a life back in Birmingham, and a child at school, and I couldn't move house to Dagenham and commute. So I actually left the job and took a big risk in giving up a full-time post – not a wise career move. Instead I took a three-year, annually-renewed post at Central Saint Martins. That was such exciting teaching – because at that point in Central Saint Martins, the Cultural Studies provision brought film students, fine arts students together with fashion students, so they were all together. We watched lots of films, we read Laura Mulvey and Homi Bhabha. I really enjoyed working with the film students in the dark cubby-hole edit suites. I taught Isaac Julien, I taught a whole bunch of filmmakers, and some early feminist artists. I was working alongside Tina Keane, the avant-garde filmmaker, and John Stezaker the collage artist. So that was 1982 until 1985. But it was on a rolling one-year contract – the art schools have always liked a turnover of people. So after that I took a full time Lecturer in Sociology post. I stayed in Thames Valley University (TVU), which is now the University of West London, for nearly a decade and was made Professor in 1994. It was an

excellent place to work. I created a Masters in Cultural Studies which attracted a lovely set of cohorts each year, many of whom went on to do PhDs and eventually pursue academic careers themselves. Then I went to Loughborough and to Goldsmiths in 1998.

TB: The Higher Education system is also expanding and changing quite a lot at the same time.

AM: Both expanding but also, of course, there were new forms of regulation. New forms of audit culture, new forms of hierarchy and endless metrics. The piece that I wrote in the book *Without Guarantees* (Gilroy, Grossberg and McRobbie 2000) was one of the first pieces that was published about the impact of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)/Research Excellence Framework (REF) in British university culture – and what that meant for women scholars. That piece contained a gentle dig at how academia, up until a certain point in time, was so male-dominated. Men, who had time on their hands where they could easily spend an hour or more at lunchtime in the pub, or in the senior common room, because they had wives at home doing the school collect. It was completely a feminist issue. And it was also, of course, an issue for the few black and Asian scholars at the time who were invariably isolated. There was a feeling of ‘jobs for the boys’ – but also there was no vocabulary for opening out discussions about productivity, about combining research with teaching loads, all the things that only in the last ten years have written about extensively (e.g. Gill 2014). So the chapter was from the talk that I gave at Stuart's retirement event, which was a big event hosted at the Open University. My piece reflected what I thought was also a kind of Hall position, that it was important to defend the non-elite universities. I had done my first degree in an ancient university (Glasgow) and then my second at a red-brick (Birmingham). Moving across the universities, from Central Saint Martins to TVU, to Loughborough and then Goldsmiths, fitted well with my cross-over of interests between sociology and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note from TB, for those unfamiliar with the oblique connotations of status and hierarchy enshrined in the vernacular taxonomies of UK Higher Education. The term “ancient” refers to universities founded in the sixteenth century or earlier, while “red-brick” describes Victorian civic institutions associated with industrial cities at the end of the nineteenth century. These are typically contrasted to the newer “plateglass” (1960s) and, finally, “post-1992” (former polytechnic) institutions: of which Loughborough and the OU are examples of the former; TVU/University of West London the latter. This is the shorthand; clearly, reality is more complex. Whether research evaluation audits and performance rankings have done more to flatten or to entrench such hierarchies, they have surely helped bring art schools, such as Goldsmiths and Central Saint Martin’s (University of the Arts, London), which once sat outside the established university system, inside it. Of course, these also travel with their own internal economies of prestige and elitism which, thankfully, there is not space to get into here.

TB So you were arguing that that the new audit culture challenged some of the complacency of everyday work cultures in the academy, while it also inscribed new hierarchies. How did it affect the kind of writing you were doing? Especially, I guess, the more public-facing work that didn't easily fit the established metrics?

AMR I remember Stuart going up to Milton Keynes at the weekend to compile the entire RAE (as it was then called) for his department, there was no one else who stepped forward to help with the work. Funnily enough, looking at the marvellous full bibliography published by the Stuart Hall Foundation, I was struck by how many broadcasts and reviews and short pieces Stuart was writing night and day, year in, year out.<sup>2</sup> It was nothing he ever drew attention to, he just did it. Maybe as a mode of production, certainly I could never aim to emulate it – but the style of being a public intellectual really appealed to me. We all had exciting moments with *Marxism Today*, delivering reviews in the dead of night through the letterbox of the editor Martin Jacques, who lived ten minutes away from my home in Holloway. In 1998 there was the retreat in a Hertfordshire country house, which brought together people like Will Hutton, Suzanne Moore, myself and Kevin Robbins. I was also writing reviews of films, books and artworks for *The Guardian*, *The New Statesman*, *The Independent*, *Sight & Sound* or for various BBC Radio Three and Four programmes. So, for sure, being someone who responded quickly to what was, and is, going on was part of the pleasure of the job. And that really got lost with the neoliberal university and the retrenchment of the disciplines. Of course, you went along with it and produced all that was needed for the REF. But I think I also saw the public intellectual role as a kind of political activity which entailed a kind of 'damn the REF' ethos.

TB: So then can we talk about your involvement with the OU? How did you come to contribute to aspects of course design, or just simply become involved in the discussions, events and other interactions that are going on at the time?

AM: My earliest Birmingham work from the Masters thesis was published and used across the 'famous' U203 course on popular culture and there were then two or three volumes edited by Tony Bennett and others, all of which did very well and were a hit with the students. *Popular Culture: Past and Present* (Waites et al. 1982), I was so delighted to have pieces in there. And then there was the *Popular Television and Film* reader (Bennett et al. 1981), also from the OU. There were probably about four volumes. You know, the CCCS Working Papers,

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<sup>2</sup> Compiled May 2021 by Catherine Hall, Bill Schwarz and Nick Beech.  
<https://www.stuarthallfoundation.org/stuart-hall/bibliography/>

they were rudimentary but all of the Open University books were super well put together. All the books that Stuart was involved in, each of them was absolutely stellar and I think they demonstrated that it was possible to combine a pedagogy with research, that they could fruitfully work together. So I always felt a close connection with the OU. I never wanted a job there because I liked the live presence of students so I'm very glad, retrospectively, that a job I did apply for, around 1981, went to James Donald.

Some years later, when I was doing the research on young fashion designers, I was also beginning to write some articles in advance of the finished product. And Stuart and Paul du Gay and I were in conversation about the idea of cultural production with Keith Negus as well. I think Paul was a postdoc working closely with Stuart – and maybe then Paul, Stuart and I would go for dinner together, either in Milton Keynes or in London. Stuart and Paul were putting together a volume for the D318, Culture, Media and Identities course that included a long piece about Benetton, by Peter Braham, who did the big fashion chapter (Du Gay 1997). So they wanted me to take part in the module. Paul du Gay called me in to do a number of audio discussions that went to the students as tape cassettes. My actual contribution was more in terms of conferences, debates, discussions and several audio files that then became part of the curriculum. I was also the external examiner for Sean Nixon's thesis and I got to know Sean. Sean was doing his wonderful work, which I still use, that became *Hard Looks* (Nixon 1996). Paul and Sean were both full of ideas. But there was quite a lot of under-the-surface resentment, within Sociology, that Stuart was also a public intellectual and Paul was taking up Stuart's, kind of, embattled position. When Stuart retired, I think, Paul felt that quite badly. I think he found the geographers more amenable to the kind of work he was doing on space – so it was Mike Pryke, Nigel Thrift somewhere in the background. There were a lot of times that I would be driving up to Milton Keynes to listen to Doreen Massey or others. So I think that it would be interesting to think about the alliances and the pragmatics that Stuart held together.

TB: Just as Stuart retires, 'Cultural Economy' starts to cohere as a newly-defined intellectual project for Paul and Mike and others, at the OU and beyond – for example in the workshop in 2000, which you attended. Much of the territory that project moves on to explore involves quite formal economic spaces: so financial markets, housing markets, energy markets, large organisations, the civil service, 'corporate culture'... Whereas your work is much more interested in informal worlds – the rag market, the club – and the much blurrier lines between production and consumption, often with those who are left out from the broader economic programmes or fall into the gaps. There is also perhaps some theoretical

divergence from earlier forms of Cultural Studies. So I wonder how you relate to that project and whether you saw it as a fruitful direction, in a way?

AM: I think the 'circuit of culture' was a productive model (Du Gay et al. 1997). It brought theoretical insight directly into dialogue with empirical work and it helped me frame the kind of research I wanted to do on the creative economy and on the modern work society – what is now referred to as precarious labour. There's probably three paradigms that have emerged since that moment. There is the *Journal of Cultural Economy* and the markets work that they're doing. Then there's the cultural and media policy work, such as the enormous amount of research going on in Leeds under David Hesmondhalgh's steer. In Glasgow, Philip Schlesinger's important cultural policy centre occupies a key position for the Scottish arts and cultural world. I think the other paradigm, that I feel very comfortable with, is the feminist cultural and media studies framework, so the kind of work that people like Jo Littler and Ros Gill are doing at City University, Shani Orgad at the LSE and Catherine Rottenberg at Nottingham, and Sarah Banet Weiser now back at USC. That's really where I would say I put a lot of my energies into. I was not so drawn into the markets paradigm myself. Suddenly Michel Callon and Bruno Latour and STS appeared and there is all the marvellous work on assemblage, *Reassembling the Social*, the work on financial markets, Karen Knorr-Cetina, my former colleague Lisa Adkins' work on money... But while I have the highest regard for economic sociology, it's just not my field.

On the origins of my own creative economy work, it was really all at Goldsmiths. From 1998 I have had two strands of research both influenced by Stuart Hall. One was the creative economy work, the other my work on feminist theory and my conjunctural analysis of the Blair period and its 'post-feminist' neoliberal 'turn' (McRobbie 2009). In 2000 Goldsmiths (along with Channel 4 and, I recall, Smirnoff) sponsored something called the 'Cultural Entrepreneurs Club' and I was duly sent off to this event. It was actually hilarious. The article that Paul du Gay and Sean Nixon published in their 'cultural intermediaries' special issue (McRobbie 2002b) and has since been re-printed in various other locations, came from this experience. There were a few points then that are still relevant today.

First of all, the celebration of the long hours culture. In Germany they have *die Lange Nacht der Museen*: people go out all night on the streets, pitching, talking to venture capitalists. I just drew attention to the question: How can parents do this? How can mothers do this? How can low-income, never mind ethnic minority, socially-excluded entrepreneurs do this? So there were real structural features at the heart of this celebratory cultural economy. And

the other point I made in that article was the bypassing of trade unionism and of workers' rights and entitlements. I remember being shocked, with my students and others I was bumping into at the time, at the way they got jobs from talking to some people at a gig. This all bypassed the formalities of recruitment and the anti-discriminatory measures in place that feminists and others fought so hard for. So I wanted to make the point: what does this mean for people that don't have the social savvy, don't have the cultural skills, don't have the connections? But the 'new economy' ever since has worked on this basis, by getting jobs on the grapevine. I drew attention to the way in which the new economy was in reality a process of labour reform through its bypassing of law, legislation, welfare rights and so on.

There was a series of disarticulating practices associated with, if you like, neoliberal political culture. Anti-solidaristic silencing of words such as 'poverty' and 'unemployment' – these were non-words in the vocabulary of New Labour at the time. But they were also non-words in the vocabulary of Richard Florida: they do not appear in his multi-million selling book, *The Creative Class*. Instead, as Sarat Maharaj said, in the place of our older vocabularies there was 'multi-cultural managerialism'. And Stuart Hall himself talked about the 'dismantling' of multi-culturalism. Instead there was 'leadership', 'diversity' 'sponsorship' versus 'support', 'equality' and 'social justice'. So really, had he lived longer, I think Stuart's critique of neoliberal culture would have been devoted to unpicking these kinds of processes.

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