My contribution to the debate on 'Authoritarian Populism and Impure Futures: The Legacy of Stuart Hall', City School of Arts and Social Sciences Online Festival of Research, 23 June 2020

On Tuesday 23 June 2020, as part of the City School of Arts and Social Sciences Online Festival of Research, a public debate was hosted entitled 'Authoritarian Populism and Impure Futures: The Legacy of Stuart Hall', co-convened by Professor Chris Rojek, of the Department of Sociology (author of *Stuart Hall* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003)), and myself. It was chaired by Professor Sylvia Walby, also from Sociology. Chris and I both featured as panellists, alongside Dr Jessica Evans, of the Open University; Dr Ajmal Hussain of the University of Manchester and Professor Jim McGuigan, Professor of Cultural Studies at Loughborough University. Unfortunately Professor McGuigan had some microphone problems so was unable to speak, but was there in spirit. My own contribution, below, was quite deeply informed by some of the work of McGuigan.

A short report on the debate can be found **here** , and we hope to place the video of the debate online soon – I will post a link when it is up. This is a slightly longer version of the text I delivered, with minor edits. It was adapted in part from sections of a paper I gave in 2018 on 'The Populist Turn in Musicological Scholarship and the Retreat from Social Democratic Cultural Production, in which I placed the thought of Hall and others in the context of the debates on artistic autonomy in the Weimar Republic, the attack on forms of European protectionism and subsidy espoused by Woodrow Wilson in his 'fourteen points' formulated in January 1918, many of them authored by Walter Lippmann, known for his work on the manipulation of public opinion (which he did not view pejoratively), and from whom the term 'manufacturing consent' originates, as well as the relentless lionisation of commerce and market-driven musical production by many figures associated with contemporary musicology.

Populism is a vivid phenomenon in contemporary politics, witnessed in such figures as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, Viktor Orban, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi and others. It is not necessarily an especially new phenomenon, but it has certainly been theorised more extensively in its own right than previously. Stuart Hall was undoubtedly an early contributor to this branch of political analysis, anticipated in some of the collectively authored volume *Policing the Crisis* (1978). In this volume, he and others considered such matters as the creation of 'moral panics', or the ability of a figure like Enoch Powell to appeal to some base racial nationalism amongst working-class people, as witnessed through the dockers who marched in support of Powell following his 'Rivers of Blood' speech. Hall himself arrived at the term 'authoritarian populism' slightly afterwards, according to him through reading the final section of Nicos Poulantzas's book on *State, Power, Socialism*, about the growth of state control and decline of democratic institutions and civil liberties. Poulantzas viewed this as a type of 'authoritarian *statism*', an explanation which Hall nonetheless found unsatisfactory, because it took insufficient account of the extent to which advanced capitalist democracies appealed to popular consent for their policies, and achieved some legitimation in the process. As a result, he substituted the term

‘authoritarian populism’, an idea which was developed further in the important work of Margaret Canovan.

However, I wish to argue is that as Hall’s own thought developed in certain directions, he was unable to resist a populism of his own, which I believe undermined some of his earlier positions. I also want to say here how pleased I am to meet – at least in the online sense – Jim McGuigan, whose work on *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992) has had a significant influence on my own thought on populism in musical and musicological thought.

In early post-war Britain, the influence of thinkers associated with ‘Western Marxism’, including the Frankfurt School, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, György Lukács, Siegfried Kracauer, Galvano della Volpe, or indeed for a long time Antonio Gramsci, was relatively minimal on the left, by which I mean those to the left of the Labour Party. As such, there was less engagement on such a left’s part with issues of culture and consciousness, a more accepting view of forms of collectivism ‘from above’ combined with somewhat idealised views of the proletariat, and as such a strong tendency towards Stalinism. At the same time, the same era saw the height of various progressive developments resulting from benevolent attitudes from above, which originated in the late nineteenth century. These included the growth of the welfare state, of state education with the Fisher Act of 1918 and then the Butler Act of 1944, the foundation of the Arts Council in 1940, and its flowering in the post-war era, especially during the 1960s, a degree of increased openness to European modernist culture after 1945, not least in architecture, where a series of architects inspired by the likes of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe were charged with rebuilding bombed cities after 1945. Equally important was the role of the BBC as a sponsor and promoter of culture markedly distancing itself from commercial television and advertising.

The same era saw a new confrontation with commercial culture from the United States, which stimulated the growth of contemporary cultural studies. Richard Hoggart, in his 1957 book *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Pelican, 1958), contrasted new trends in American popular music with older forms of working class song. Whilst recognising the potential for nostalgic idealisation of the latter, he still saw in the former a high degree of standardisation, sentimentality, and appeal to a restricted and familiar range of emotions. Like Adorno and others before him, Hoggart identified the changes in music resulting from the relatively anonymous nature of mass production and the division of labour. The work of Raymond Williams, who in some ways bridged the worlds of Hoggart and of Hall, was of a related nature. Williams was highly critical of the bourgeois culture he encountered as a working-class boy from Wales, and the implied denigration of forms of working-class culture. But at least in his work from the 1950s, he did not necessarily see American commercial culture as the route to liberation. While neither Hoggart nor Williams adhered to an Arnoldian view of culture as a civilising force for the masses, by any means, neither were they starry-eyed about the top-down culture of American capitalism, though Williams’ position in this respect arguably shifted over the years.

When Stuart Hall took over as director of the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1969, founded 5 years earlier by Hoggart, there was a gradual but marked shift away from the outlook of Hoggart and in some ways Williams. Significant in this respect is one of Hall’s most lasting intellectual legacies, the model

of ‘encoding/decoding’ as set out in his 1973 essay. Looking at television culture, he proposed that certain messages were ‘encoded’ in the work by its producers, but that audiences ‘decoded’ others. This was not however in Hall’s view a passive process, whereby the messages decoded were simply what the producers wished, and much depended upon the background of the consumers and their own priorities and ideologies. Hall framed this in terms of production, circulation, use and reproduction. Emphasis was placed upon the agency of the recipient and their ability to ‘decode’ such work. This stood in stark opposition to the model of culture which had grown in the preceding decades from the Frankfurt School, which tended to stress the successful use of mass communications as a weapon of manipulation, as in Theodor Adorno’s writings on horoscopes or charismatic preachers encountered during his time in the United States. Equally it was at odds with the model of the ‘consciousness industry’ or ‘mind industry’ developed by the German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger in the 1960s, somewhat distinct from Adorno and Horkheimer’s ‘culture industry’. Enzensberger felt the latter placed too much emphasis on culture, in line with the priorities and interests of its protagonists. He argued instead that the previous century had witnessed a process whereby the ruling classes instilled a certain mode of consciousness amongst other citizens in a society through the mass media, education and other means. This was made possible by increased leisure time and mass production of consumer goods, all of which created sites for ruling class interests to manipulate others. Unlike Adorno, Enzensberger saw little possibility for critical resistance, as intellectuals were part of this whole process. Where this leaves Enzensberger’s own work is rather a difficult question.

The work of Hall and others on cultural studies have been labelled ‘cultural Marxism’, not only by old-fashioned conservatives but also in the major study of the Birmingham School, Dennis Dworkin’s *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) is already mistitled, in my opinion, taking its cue from the volume edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), which came out of an 1983 conference. Whilst various contributors to this were serious about their engagement with Marx, the volume contains an interview with Hall (linked to his article ‘The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists’) which makes clear how far he was moving away from Marxism, and especially its focus on economic factors. Hall had certainly written at length on some of Marx’s original writings, but rightly set himself against a reductive view of the relationship between base and superstructure adhered to by vulgar Marxists and Stalinists.

But a wider shift of direction on Hall’s part was signified most clearly in a 1981 essay, ‘Notes on Deconstructing “The Popular”’ (in *People’s History and Socialist History*, edited Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), also reproduced in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, edited Stuart Duncombe (London: Verso, 2002)), from which point I identify the move towards a populism of his own. Considering the period from the 1880s to the 1920s, Hall had little time for the idea of a ‘separate, autonomous, “authentic” layer of working class culture’ as he felt most things like that ‘are saturated by popular imperialism’. To Hall, this could not be ‘authentic’, but must be ‘the culture of a dominated class which, despite its complex interior formations and differentiations, stood in a very particular relation to a major

restructuring of capital; which itself stood in a peculiar relation to the rest of the world; a people bound by the most complex ties to a changing set of material relations and conditions; who managed somehow to construct "a culture" which remained untouched by the most powerful dominant ideology – popular imperialism?'

So far, I think Hall's point is valid, but he went on to argue against those socialists who were sceptical of ways in which working people consumed commercial culture , and the concomitant view of 'false consciousness':

Take the most common-sense meaning [of the word 'popular']: the things which are said to be 'popular' because masses of people listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them, and seem to enjoy them to the full. This is the 'market' or commercial definition of the term: the one which brings socialists out in spots. It is quite rightly associated with the manipulation and debasement of the culture of the people. In one sense, it is the direct opposite of the way I have been using the word earlier. I have, though, two reservations about entirely dispensing with this meaning, unsatisfactory as it is.

First, if it is true that, in the twentieth century, vast numbers of people do consume and even indeed enjoy the cultural products of our modern cultural industry, then it follows that very substantial numbers of working people must be included within the audiences for such products. Now, if the forms and relationships, on which participation in this sort of commercially provided 'culture' depend, are purely manipulative and debased, then the people who consume and enjoy them must either be themselves debased by these activities or else living in a permanent state of 'false consciousness'. They must be 'cultural dopes' who can't tell that what they are being fed is an up-dated form of the opium of the people. That judgment may make us feel right, decent and self-satisfied about our denunciations of the agents of mass manipulation and deception – the capitalist cultural industries: but I don't know that it is a view which can survive for long as an adequate account of cultural relationships; and even less as a socialist perspective on the culture and nature of the working class. Ultimately, the notion of the people as a purely passive, outline force is a deeply unsocialist perspective.

Hall went on to acknowledge that commercial popular culture could be manipulative, but was more concerned about any claims made for the autonomy of alternative forms of popular culture. I believe his seemingly moderate point is anything but that, and itself 'unsocialist' in ways which bring it close to postmodernist thinking.

Hall's appropriation of two Marxist thinkers is fundamental in this respect. One is Antonio Gramsci, and his concept of *egemonia* or hegemony, involving the role which intellectuals play in disseminating dominant ideologies throughout society, on the basis of the prestige and confidence they hold through their position:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural "levels" : the one that can be called "civil society", that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called "private", and that of "political society" or "the State". These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of "hegemony" which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of "direct domination" or command exercised through the State and "juridical" government. The functions in question are precisely organisational and connective. The intellectuals are the dominant group's

"deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government. These comprise:

1. *The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group ; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.*
2. *The apparatus of state coercive power which "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not "consent" either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis.*
3.

(Antonio Gramsci, 'The Intellectuals', in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1981)).

Hegemony is a vital concept and intimately linked with those of either the 'culture industry' or of 'manufacturing consent'. Gramsci uses the term sometimes in this respect, others simply to refer to explicit power from above, as with the power of one regionality (for example, Florence) to dominate others, and force them to conform to certain cultural norms – this was how a form of Tuscan speech became standard Italian. Elsewhere in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci also uses the term to refer to the domination of ruling class ideas of *laissez-faire* liberalism, an argument which resembles the later views of Enzensberger.

But the term has come to be used by some in cultural studies to refer to any set of aesthetic or intellectual values which are at odds with something construed as popular taste. In this sense, teaching a foreign language to young people who might not have expressed any particular desire to learn it, or teaching something about various forms of West African music to white Western teenagers, or even encouraging some to eat a more balanced diet than might be obtained from fast food outlets – or for that matter attempting to challenge young people on ideas which may be prevalent amongst their peer group, whether those might be forms of white supremacy, or misogynistic views of white early-teenage girls as one step away from prostitutes – all constitute some form of hegemony. In short, this view opposes *education*.

My reference to fast food outlets is not arbitrary, as I have in mind Marie Gillespie's book *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), an ethnographic study of a South Asian diaspora community in Southall, London, in which she talks about parents having a 'hierarchy of values attached to different foods', when they encourage them to eat *dal*, *saag*, *subji* (a vegetable curry) or *roti*, as opposed to food from McDonald's, KFC, Coca-Cola and so on, and comes close to endorsing the view of some teenagers that such products might entail some form of emancipation and global youth culture, a view embodied in the classic Coca-Cola advert featuring the song 'I'd like to teach the world to sing'.

Hall's view, as I relate it to education, is also bolstered by the writings of another of Hall's ideological heroes, Louis Althusser, who in his 1970 essay 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'Etat' (Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses)

(published in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated Andy Blunden (London: New Left Books, 1971)) wrote that:

…the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'. All the agents of production, exploitation and repression, not to speak of the 'professionals of ideology' (Marx), must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously' – the tasks of the exploited (the proletarians), of the exploiters (the capitalists), of the exploiters' auxiliaries (the managers), or of the high priests of the ruling ideology (its 'functionaries'), etc.' The possibility that schools and teachers might at least be trying to do something else more positive in their work is entirely ruled out.

Gramsci, however, in 1919 (in '[Communism and Art]' in *Selections from Cultural Writings*, edited David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, translated William Boelhower 9London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985)) praised the attempts of Soviet communists to increase schools, theatres and opera houses, to make galleries accessible to all, and so on, which he said showed that 'once in power, the proletariat tends to establish the reign of beauty and grace, to elevate the dignity and freedom of those who create beauty', comparing the work of Anatoly Lunacharsky and Maxim Gorky to the bureaucrats in Italy. In a few short essays from 1930 ('Concept of "National-Popular"', and 'Italian National Culture', ibid.), in response to a fascist journal which was perturbed by the fact that newspapers in Rome and Naples were serialising novels of Alexandre Dumas and Paul Fontenay, which were very popular, Gramsci wrote of how the Italian people '*undergo* the moral and intellectual hegemony of foreign intellectuals, that they feel more closely related to foreign intellectuals than to 'domestic' ones, that there is no national intellectual and moral bloc, either hierarchical or, still less, egalitarian' and that 'Every people has its own literature, but this can come to it from another people, in other words the people in question can be subordinated to the intellectual and moral hegemony of other peoples.' So hegemony here can be a voluntary and arguably not undesirable thing, as a counterpart to nationalism. Of course, these latter essays must be read in terms of the context of Italian fascism and the kitsch culture it bequeathed.

Lenin had argued that some sections of the working classes could be convinced that imperialism was in their interests and become its advocates, whilst many Marxist thinkers, not least amongst the Frankfurt School, had considered the phenomenon of false consciousness. This general trend of thought continued to inform the work of the Glasgow Media Group, founded in 1974. This would come to form a powerful alternative to the orthodoxies at Birmingham, with its director Greg Philo one of the most cogent critics of Stuart Hall. Through relentless collecting of evidence (published in their series of books entitled *Bad News*), Philo and his colleagues produced rigorous and compelling studies of how various forms of flagrant misinformation are disseminated and absorbed by media viewers through clear bias, lack of explanation and background, and various else. A similar outlook can be found in Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's book *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988). The Glasgow group, Herman and Chomsky were in no sense presenting those viewers who have been manipulated as somehow mere fodder beyond redemption, but they recognised that it took a level of education and critical consciousness to resist such manipulation. This is one reason why conservatives have

always disliked education towards such an end, and especially dislike the non-functionalised approach to learning associated with the humanities.

As Philo and David Miller point out (in their 'Cultural Compliance: Media/cultural studies and social science', in *Market Killing: What the Free Market does and what Social Scientists can do about it*, edited Greg Philo and David Miller (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001)), by the 1980s most of the analysis of the hegemonic power of the media had gone from Hall's work, and he moved closer and closer to a celebratory view of popular culture or at least of how it is appropriated by its consumers. This was even more pronounced in the work of some of those who continued in his wake, especially in two books published in 1989, around the peak of the Thatcher-Reagan-Bush senior era, and the year which later saw the fall of communism in Eastern Europe: John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) and Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Fiske interprets various approaches to consumption (which he describes as 'a tactical raid upon the system'), such as sporting of particular garments, make-up or hairstyles, as guerrilla actions which subvert dominant values, writing that 'At the point of sale the commodity exhausts its role in the distribution economy, but begins its work in the cultural. Detached from the strategies of capitalism, its work for the bosses completed, it becomes a resource for the culture of everyday life'. Ross, one of the contributors to the 1983 volume on Marxism and culture, is utterly scathing about any type of defence of high culture, seeing in this an affront to the values of democracy, and a hegemonic attempt by a dominant class to protect their privilege.

Both Fiske and Ross, wittingly or not, advocate quite vehemently the values of the free market, using the language of hegemony to attack any attempts to modify it. This type of phenomenon has been analysed by some of the most penetrating critics of cultural studies. Todd Gitlin (in 'The Anti-Political Populism of Cultural Studies', *Dissent*, Spring 1997) writes 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.' Thomas Frank (in *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2000)) also writes scathingly about of how cultural studies flaunted the logic of the market, seen as expressing 'the will of the people' so that 'virtually any criticism of business could be described as an act of despicable contempt for the common man' and the language of class warfare could be deployed in support of corporate objectives, for which cultural studies was a cheerleader, 'with stories of aesthetic hierarchies rudely overturned; with subversive shoppers dauntlessly using up the mall's air conditioning; with heroic fans building their workers' paradise right there in the Star Trek corpus'. Other relevant texts in this context include Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner, 'Decorative sociology: towards a critique of the cultural turn', *The Sociological Review* 48/4 (November 2000), pp. 629-48; Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: How the Counter Culture became Consumer Culture* (Chichester: Capstone, 2006); Fran Tonkiss, 'Kulturstudien und der "economic turn"' (2007), in Karin Harrasser, Sylvia Riedmann and Alan Scott (eds.), *Die Politik der Cultural Studies – Cultural Studies der Politik* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2007), pp. 214-226; and Catherine Liu, *American Idyll: Academic Antielitism as Cultural Critique* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011).

What can rarely be found explored in any remotely benevolent or even benign fashion in this type of cultural studies is the public sector. To a genuine social democrat, the public sector – and also the realms of the welfare state, regulation of capital and industry through democratically accountable bodies – acts as a corrective to the unfettered reign of capital, and offers realms of life, activity and indeed culture which maintain some degree of autonomy from the commodity principle. Marxists are often sceptical, and often draw attention to the difficulty of sustaining the public sector at times of economic slump, not to mention the role of global financial organisations in limiting the scope of individual governments to maintain the regulated and mixed economy. But that position comes not from an antipathy towards the public sector, but rather a belief that capitalism, in the sense of a society founded upon private property, needs to be hauled up by its roots in a wholesale structural revolution, rather than simply modified and reformed. A genuine Marxist revolutionary – and I am not arguing from that perspective – would want to end the private sector altogether. With this would be destroyed the cultural industries as we know them, for sure, hardly the position of many in the field of cultural studies. This is the primary reason why I cannot accept that the school of cultural studies bequeathed by Hall can be considered Marxist. On the contrary, through the relentless valorisation of commercial culture over that produced in other contexts in more-or-less social democratic societies (often expressed through kneejerk antipathy towards anything associated with ‘the state’), it should be clear where the cultural studies crowd’s sympathies lie, and how easily they revert to quite standard consumerist rhetoric.