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Perspectives on cultural economy: personal, institutional, historical

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ABSTRACT

In this short essay, Keith Negus responds to Toby Bennett's request for a personal account of his involvement in the emergence of cultural economy during the 1990s. It brings together reflections on a particular journey into academia, identifies the influence of specific individuals, considers the institutional environment in the UK at the time, and includes observations about the broader political and intellectual context within which cultural economy emerged as a distinct idea.

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Cultural economy; popular music; production of culture; Media Economics; Media Culture

This short essay 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. Meeting on the cusp of the millennium, participants at that earlier event brought together different disciplinary strands associated with the 'cultural turn' in British social science in the 1990s, leading to the edited collection *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life* (Du Gay and Pryke 2002). As such, it can be considered one founding moment in the history of this journal. In dialogue with the issue's editor, Toby Bennett, contributors to both the symposium and the special issue were invited to reflect on intellectual debates, institutional contexts and lasting legacies of that moment, within and beyond the OU's Faculty of Social Sciences, where Du Gay and Pryke, alongside Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and many others, were located. This makes for a prism of divergent replies to the question, 'What was cultural economy?', in which respondents have been encouraged to explore the relationship between conceptual clarification and personal history. Keith Negus is currently Professor of Musicology at Goldsmiths, University of London and one of the original Workshop participants. Here he reflects on his own personal and professional pathway into (and subsequently out the other side of) a cultural economy of popular music.

When Toby Bennett first asked me to recall my part in debates about cultural economy I was surprised and flattered by his interest, yet responded like a member of an old cult music scene by asking if it was really that significant. Whether or not it has any lasting value as an idea (one of the questions in this issue) it certainly provides a pertinent theme for critically reflecting upon an important period in the history of cultural and media studies in the UK.

Toby's project, and his prompting, encouraged me to a return to the early 1990s when I was making my first stumbling steps into HE teaching, and going through the inevitable highs and lows that accompany finishing a PhD. In retrospect, as these things must always be, my unreliable memoir evokes a personal story, institutional narratives, and longer contextual histories of politics and ideas.

My personal route into cultural economy arbitrarily appears from the foggy mist where I was attempting to make a living as a musician, while working in countless factories, offices, and warehouses. Pop dreams were punctuated by periods of unemployment when I would mail off

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recordings, book gigs, make endless phone calls, and visit record labels, agents, and people who were 'in' the music industry. A record deal was signed, a single released, and ... the band 'dropped' by the label. Bands broke up, reformed, deformed, mutated with members from other bands. Countless recordings, made in cramped studios on a tiny budget, were judged to be ... 'interesting.' Songs had ... 'potential.' A strange series of happenstances fittingly concluded with me jumping on to a coffee table in an 'occupational guidance unit' and declaring to the bemused adviser that I never wanted to work in another factory or production office again: 'Ah, you might be interested in this social science summer school.'

Through what was then called 'positive discrimination' and 'access to higher education' I found myself with other mature students and misfits studying in the inclusive environment of Middlesex Polytechnic on the outer fringes of mid-1980s London. I initially completed a Diploma of Higher Education at Trent Park, and then transferred to a degree in sociology at Ponders End. At Middlesex my outlook was transformed by many committed tutors, most notably Tom Wengraf whose classes explored how personal identity and everyday communication were mired in patterns of power and persuasion, and Ian Birchall's inspiring sessions that illustrated how literature is part of political struggle and social change, while still being art (and how Flaubert could illuminate Marx). I'd known from my experience of workplaces, and of playing in bands – whose members included a postman, taxi driver, carpet-fitter, welder, nurse, and painter-decorator – that class and inequality impacted upon life chances. At Middlesex I began to acquire a framework for understanding how everyday material culture is central to who we are, and what we can become.

Encouraged by James Curran, as his research assistant, interviewing book publishers and literary editors during a placement year at Goldsmiths, I managed to get an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant and started a PhD at Southbank Polytechnic in 1988. It was examined by Simon Frith in February 1992, and a redrafted version of the thesis was published as *Producing Pop* (Negus 1992). It focused on the 'discovery and development' of artists and described the practices, routines, and outlooks of recording industry personnel. For me, at the time, these were the less orderly human activities that were invisible in corporate structures of political economy, the systems models in organisation studies, and ignored by those studying audiences and consumers. The research accentuated how cultures of class, race, and gender were deeply embedded in the organisations and everyday routines of the recording industry.

My two supervisors encouraged me to think critically about research and writing, and gave me the will to battle with ideas and to find my own position. I will forever remember Jean Seaton's opening comment in response to one of my draft chapters: 'why do people have problems, but sociologists have "problematics"?' She taught me that good writing contained characters, a narrative, and preferably a plot. Paul Gilroy patiently supported my confused ramblings, and my bemusement when he spoke of such things as the 'ontologies of technology,' guiding me through many tricky concepts and theories. Paul's insights helped me see how music is embedded in the material conditions of cultural life and personal experience. He illuminated the contingent struggles with identity labels that we inherit and have to live with, but must always be seeking to move beyond.

My understanding of culture and class was not only acquired through study and research, and inspiring mentors, but accentuated by personal encounters in my early years as an academic. Not long after I got my first job at Leicester University in 1992, I earned extra income by giving classes for an absent scholar at Cambridge University. Awkward when attending a meal at 'high table,' I felt even more uncomfortable when patronisingly asked 'that's an interesting accent old boy, where is that from?' This followed the uninhibited quips of two teaching assistants at Leicester who lazily agreed that I 'sounded like Mick Jagger' when I lectured (close ... but a poor knowledge of geography, and of Mick's voices). Whether or not my move from London had taken me beyond what Jonathan Meades called the 'irony curtain,' I subsequently made a deliberate effort to bury that accent. I mention these incidents here as an illustration of how our cultural characteristics are embedded in everyday habits, attributed identities, and encounters with others. This, and similar

incidents, undoubtedly informed my personal interest in how culture is implicated in patterns of power, privilege, and prejudice.

The Centre for Mass Communication Research, that I joined at Leicester, was moving away from the social problem-based research of James Halloran, and the orthodox political economy of Peter Golding and Graham Murdock. It was being steered towards an inter-disciplinary, post-colonial, cultural studies perspective by Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi. With the encouragement of Annabelle, and nudging from Oliver Boyd-Barrett, I applied for and obtained a project within the ESRC Media Economics and Media Culture programme that ran from 1995 to 1999. This was directed by Simon Frith, another supportive mentor who profoundly influenced my approach to the study of culture and the music industry. The appointment of Simon as Director of the Media Economics and Media Culture (ME&MC) Programme was important for those of us who felt marginal studying popular music, and caused some discontent among those media studies scholars protective of the boundaries of their discipline. It was a bold decision by the ESRC at the time. My research was done during 1996 and 1997 within the strand of ‘corporate organisation and media output,’ often called the ‘culture of the firm’ at meetings. During seven months of research in the USA, I explored the ‘genre cultures’ of rap, country and salsa through over 70 interviews with music industry personnel in New York, Los Angeles, Nashville, and Miami.

The title of the ESRC funded programme signalled the interplay of economics and culture. It brought into dialogue contrasting voices, and sometimes antagonistic perspectives. I have a hazy recollection of seminars and symposia, and subsequent discussions in pubs, when this theme was explored in animated discussions between academic researchers and media industry practitioners. After the last ESRC event on the music industry, held in the doomed National Centre for Popular Music, Sheffield, in February 1999, Simon wrote a brief summary article, part of it summarising the outcomes of my study to a wider audience:

The music industry depends upon networks of informants ... these networks (the basis of trust, the source of knowledge) differ according to the musical genres involved ... A successful company is not one that imposes a singular company culture on its various musical divisions, but one which is able to manage divisions which operate according to very different cultures. (Frith 2000, p. 388–389)

In the same year I published the research as *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (1999), launched jointly with Angela McRobbie’s (1999) *In the Culture Society* – a book addressing a similar range of issues about culture, industry, and social life, written by an astute scholar who, on many occasions, forced me to reflect critically on issues in this area. *Music Genres* summarised and elaborated my then perspective on ‘cultural economy’: The economic judgements that were being made in music companies – which artists to sign, how much to invest in them, how to market them – were grounded in historically specific cultural values, beliefs, and prejudices. Commercial decisions arose within genre cultures that blurred distinctions of public/ private, professional judgement/personal preference, and work/leisure time. As I wrote in similar words for the workshop: Gaining recognition and reward as a cultural producer requires presenting a ‘marketable’ product, but it also entails negotiating patterns of power and prejudice arising from the way industries have been shaped by class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, along with racial labels, age, political allegiances, regional conflicts, family genealogy, religious affiliation, and language – characteristics that vary according to time and place.

Music Genres and Corporate Cultures was an attempt to describe record labels and genre cultures in detail. It is easy to look back, many years later, and to recognise the shortcomings. To see how culture – corporate cultures, genre cultures – is adopted uncritically, and is made to carry too much weight, and asked to provide too many answers. It was, undoubtedly, a time when culture (‘culture’) was important to music and entertainment corporations. Yet, these genre divisions were also structured into political frameworks of power and regulation, commercial competition and collusion, and economic commodification. Working practices were as habitual, routine, and pragmatic, as much as they were informed by cultural values and beliefs.

Perhaps the most important personal and professional thread in my story has been my conversations, and academic collaborations with Paul du Gay, who was then at the Open University (and referred to elsewhere in this issue of the Journal). We met as PhD students, at the British Sociological Association Summer School at Southbank in July 1989, bonding over coffee, and later beers, after an argument in a workshop session when we initially misconstrued each other's views of class, culture, and industries (neither of us can recall the specific point of contention). So began a series of dialogues on endless walks around London and through its (then) many record stores. These perambulations often became rambling late-night beer-infused ruminations that blurred everything in our personal lives with politics, economics, culture, the relationship between production and consumption, and the pretensions of cultural theory. We first collaborated on a study of the tensions between music retailers and record labels – an article that wrote itself almost spontaneously during hours spent wandering around record shops (du Gay and Negus 1994).

This led to an invitation to contribute to the D318 Culture, Media and Identities programme, which Paul was working on at the Open University, directed by Stuart Hall. The requirement that teaching materials needed clarity and a conversational quality to engage with mature students studying in their spare time provided a focus, and a framework for the *Production of Culture/ Cultures of Production* collection, edited by Paul (du Gay 1997), and a study of the Sony Walkman. This would become *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (du Gay et al. 1997), adopting the Walkman as a motif to introduce Open University students to cultural artefacts and practices through the pedagogic device of the 'circuit of culture.'

I had conducted some tentative research on the Walkman during a visit to Japan in 1993 when I had met Kuroki Yasuo, who led the development team at Sony and presented me with his book *Walkman Style Planning*. At the time I was more interested in Sony Music, and my vague ideas and notes, along with insights from the work of Shuhei Hosokawa (1984), were taken on and developed in conversations with Paul. These were then extended and adopted to explore the circuit of culture by the team working on the book, with myself and Paul joined by Linda Janes, Hugh McKay, and Stuart Hall who directed and chaired the project. I remember it as an exciting time, when ideas flowed during meetings and often overflowed onto the platform of Milton Keynes station as I waited for the train back to London. I had never experienced a room of people, sitting around a large table, pulling apart, critiquing, and also complementing my drafts. It was daunting and energising, and improved my research and writing immeasurably. I can only echo the comments of many others who have remarked upon what an inspiring, considerate, insightful yet modest mentor Stuart was to many people. The book on the Sony Walkman was given shape by Stuart, through his idea of 'articulation' as applied to production and consumption, experience and identity, people and politics. It was condensed into the idea of the circuit of culture.

For me, the concepts of articulation and mediation were crucial for understanding the interplay between economics and culture, media production and consumption, and the links that connected popular musicians, the recording industry, and audiences. In retrospect, a slip in the agenda led many – well, certainly me – to switch from Hall's model of articulation (and the social relations of power implied) and towards Bourdieu's vague musings on 'cultural intermediaries.' That route led to a conceptual cul-de-sac where we too often found repetitive studies of occupational groups involved in providing 'symbolic goods and services' rather than rigorous research addressing the more difficult task of investigating the intermediary moment – the tensions, struggles, and relationships that occur when production meets consumption; a task that demands studying producers, consumers, *and* intermediaries rather than just observing intermediaries in action.

During this period I was involved in the networks of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), and I spent time hanging out at the Institute of Popular Music, Liverpool – the first institution of its kind in the UK, formed in 1988. At the Institute and in many local pubs, we would endlessly debate the tensions between musicology and sociology, musical expressions and industry structures. For me, the challenge was to move across the division that separated orthodox political economy, with its emphasis on the ownership of the means of production

and controlling of consciousness by false ideologies, and the romanticism of active audience theories that celebrated the free will of individuals, and the creativity of marginal subcultures. In different ways, the ESRC Media Economics and Media Culture programme, the Open University D318 Culture, Media and Identities course, and the events facilitated by IASPM and the Institute of Popular Music, provided institutional spaces for grappling with and arguing about these issues – environments for extending, exploring, and elaborating on the interplay between cultural practices, identities, experiences, and economic imperatives, structures, and relationships.

The cultural economy workshop was one moment in this story. Ironically for me, it came at a point when I was beginning to have doubts about the direction of my own research. The idea that ‘culture produces industry’, and ‘industry produces culture,’ and the notion of ‘production of culture/cultures of production,’ began striking me as rather too neat and tidy; like a refrain that went round and round, endlessly looping in the circuit of culture. It had started life during discussions with Paul, as a hook, as a light-hearted phrase to get students thinking about issues. Yet, it seemed to have transmuted into a ‘model’ or theory. Lost in my circle, I was having doubts about just what ‘theory’ is and what it does. I was also pondering criticisms – from a self-anointed high theorist as much as modest ethnomusicologist – of a book that I forever regret calling ‘popular music in theory.’ This was and is a misleading title (and rather too pompous). It was invented in desperation because the publisher did not like my oblique poetic proposals, and I wanted to avoid the dreary suggested alternatives of ‘debates’ and ‘perspectives.’ I was looking for an exit, and wanting to write more about music and musicians. For better, and for worse, I joined a music department and got re-labelled as a musicologist.

There is a much longer history that allowed all this activity to take place. This traces back, most obviously, to the emergence of cultural studies and influential work of Raymond Williams and the founding of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University by Richard Hoggart in 1964. This was an important context within which debates about cultural economy and studies of everyday objects could happen. CCCS was part of a longer history of critical analysis of culture and economy, shaped by the writings of Max Weber, and the polemics and experiences of those affiliated with the Institute for Social Research, established in Frankfurt in 1923, and forever known as the ‘Frankfurt School.’ As is well known, their concern with the role of culture and media in maintaining social obedience, and inhibiting personal development, was a response to bearing witness to the rise of National Socialism, the National Fascist Party, and the Spanish Falange, and concurrent with the political adoption and commercial exploitation of recorded sound, film and cinema, radio broadcasting, and television.

Now that it is no longer necessary to defensively value vast quantities of popular culture on the grounds that Frankfurt School theorists were ‘elitists,’ we can, I hope, recognise the legacies that continue to echo in our contemporary efforts to understand the relationships between culture and economy, production and consumption, industries and consumers, political systems and daily life. Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School created a theory of culture to move away from the limitations of reductionist Marxism, and to offer a rationale that sustained forced exile in the face of barbarism and brutality. Maybe we too created a theory of culture, but for different reasons. This was to find value in our assimilation, and to escape the bland banality of John Major’s Britain. The Frankfurt school pinned their hopes on modernist, challenging, avant-garde art and ended up far too pessimistic about popular culture. We put our trust in the undemanding artefacts, production routines, and everyday pleasures of popular culture and ended up far too optimistic. Over twenty years later, in a world grappling with big tech and digital conglomerates ever more in thrall to AI, data, and smart things, we see once more that science has returned to myth, so presciently narrated by Horkheimer and Adorno (1979) in the 1940s. The dialectic of enlightenment continues ...

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Keith Negus is Professor of Musicology, Goldsmiths, University of London. He entered higher education after spending a few years playing keyboards and guitar in various pop groups. He taught at the Universities of Leicester and Puerto Rico before joining Goldsmiths. He is the author of the various books mentioned in the article in this Journal, and is currently conducting research on the music industry in China with Dr. Zhang Qian, and on Wham! in the UK with Dr. Adrian Sledmere.

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