Celebrity CEOS and the cultural economy of tabloid intimacy

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Scenes from the recent media coverage of two CEOs:

One: An advert for Britain's first branch of the clothing store American Apparel graces the back of London's *Time Out*. American Apparel markets itself as 'sweatshop-free', as all its LA-based workers get more than the minimum wage. The ad features a grainy, amateur-style photo of the company's CEO, Dov Charney, standing with his back to the camera, his bare butt poking below a t-shirt. 'This September' the ad proposes, 'Come see what we're doing at our community store and gallery'. Clearly, American Apparel wants to be seen as doing *more* than paying decent wages. The ad is part of a wider campaign: other include Charney and an unnamed woman lying in bed, gazing languidly at the camera, and female American Apparel employees in provocatively 'everyday' poses. They also follow a feature in the American glossy women's magazine *Jane*, in which journalist Claudine Ko describes how Charney masturbates in front of her during the interview. This scene tends to be mentioned in most subsequent media interviews.[i]

Two: The front page of May 2nd 2005's *Daily Mail* announces 'Exclusive new series; ALAN SUGAR – My guide to help YOU become a success'. Inside, prominent businessman Sir Alan gazes - unsmiling, bearded and pinstriped - at the camera. The double-page spread features extracts from his new book, *The Apprentice*, a tie-in to BBC2's 'surprise hit of the season'. Based on a US format starring Donald Trump, the reality show follows 12 hopefuls as - by demonstrating their superior entrepreneurial acumen, marketing savvy and corporate promise - they vie to become Sugar's apprentice for an annual salary of £100,000. Over in *The Mirror*, Sugar can be found dispensing financial advice in his regular column, whilst his thoughts on the TV programme appear in the news pages. As with his large number of broadsheet and tabloid interviews, Sir Alan mentions his working-class background and the importance of hunger and hard work if you're going to make it to 'the top'.[ii]

In their very different ways, Sir Alan Sugar and Dov Charney are both 'celebrity CEOs'. The function of such famous Chief Executive Officers are, in Hamish Pringle's words, to act as 'walking talking brand stories that provide their companies with a compelling narrative drive' (Pringle, 2004: 72). In this respect, Sugar and Charney are but two in a long string of business leaders whose persona has been deployed in order to augment a company brand image. This is not in itself a new phenomenon, and a number of familiar figures will probably spring to mind, from Gordon Selfridge to Henry Ford, from Victor Kiam to Richard Branson to Anita Roddick and beyond.[iii]

At the same time, the functions they have and the positions they occupy seem to be particularly and interestingly of their moment. Sir Alan Sugar's pinstriped persona is fairly traditional; but the main reason for his celebrity status - his key role in a reality TV series - is less so. Dov Charney is not the first corporate leader to have a sexually salacious image; but to foreground this in an ironic fashion in an advertising campaign and to launch a sophisticated, high-profile PR strategy around it seems to imbue his persona with a more contemporary feel.

In this article, I suggest that it might well be fruitful to analyze the figure of the celebrity CEO by bringing it into contact with work from the field of media and cultural studies on celebrity, a field which has both a rapidly expanding present and a sizeable past (for example, Austin and Barker, 2003; Dyer, 2003, 1998; Gamson, 2000; Gledhill, 1991; Holmes, 2005; Littler, 2003; Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004). In the context of media and cultural studies, what stands out is that celebrity business leaders are simply not discussed very much. Indeed, in early accounts of the cultural industries, they often function as the pole against which the expansion of 'celebrity' – meaning celebrities from the frothy field of entertainment – can be measured. To some extent, we might say that they act as 'real' celebrity's repressed double.

The CEO in celebrity context

Leo Lowenthal's seminal 1944 Frankfurt School study 'The Triumph of Mass Idols', for example, charted the rise of entertainment celebrity since the beginning of the century through a

content analysis of prominent figures in magazines and newspapers. Lowenthal concluded that a shift had taken place from 'idols of production' to 'idols of consumption':

> When we turn to our present day sample we face an assortment of people which is both qualitatively and quantitatively removed from the standards of the past. Only two decades ago people from the realm of entertainment played a very negligible role in the biographical material. They form now, numerically, the first group. [..] The proportion of people from political life and from business and professions, both representing the 'serious side', has declined from 74 to 45 percent of the total. (Lowenthal, 1984: 207-8)

In contrast, in the early stage of the study, Lowenthal observes that most prominent figures in magazines and newspapers:

> are idols of production, [in] that they stem from the productive life, from industry, business and the natural sciences, There is not a single hero from the world of sports and the few artists and entertainers either do not belong to the sphere of cheap or mass entertainment or represent a serious attitude toward their art (Lowenthal, 1984: 206)

In Lowenthal's account, business figures, like political figures, become what these mass idols are pitted *against*. The idols of production featured in this media, who were 'representing the "serious side"' of public life, had declined from 74 to 45 percent'; and instead, for Lowenthal, the pages of these magazines and newspapers were being flooded with terrifying idols from the world of cheap entertainment.

The investments Lowenthal's writing betrays - an anxiety towards the possible power of the lower classes, towards pleasure, and towards women - no longer appear so hidden in the wake of cultural studies' extended engagement, in the intervening years, with the writings of the Frankfurt School. Lowenthal's framing of a 'dreamlife of the masses', in which distracting consumption is female, and important, powerful production is male, and in which 'serious' culture is defined against the apparently frivolous delusions of lower class consumers, today stand in stark relief against the backdrop of the long legacy of critiques of such arguments (Bowlby, 1985; Husseyn, 1986; Storey, 1994).

Yet what is interesting here is that Lowenthal's account not only betrays anxiety towards feminized mass consumption, and valorizes 'serious' middle-class culture against 'base' lower class culture, but also normalizes the category of business celebrity as somehow *allowed* and *respectable*. Business celebrities are not the distracting figures of mass entertainment; they are somehow not 'real' celebrities, not the real false idols. The categorizations made by Lowenthal, in other words, not only betray an anxiety towards feminized mass consumption; they also normalize the category of business celebrities, like other political and 'professional' celebrities, as serious and legitimate. In the rush to decry the feminized dreamworld of consumption, there is also a strange seed at the heart of a Marxist text: a problematic implied validation of capitalist business leaders.

This is also interesting in terms of how it indicates a kind of *ur*-history for thinking about celebrity CEOs in the context of media and cultural studies. For dividing celebrities up into frivolous entertainment celebrities versus 'serious' figures was to continue in mid-century critical and cultural analysis. Even the more sociologically-orientated C. Wright Mills, for example, in his 1956 work *The Power Elite,* reproduced this binary to argue that institutional and showbusiness celebrity forms were becoming increasing indistinguishable (Mills, 1959: 91). Drawing on similar terminology, Francesco Alberoni (1972) focused upon the category of the 'especially remarkable' world of idols and divas which, he suggested, constituted a 'powerless elite'. A tradition was in place in critical writing on celebrity in which celebrities were being defined as the opposite of figures with serious institutional power. The productive, serious business figure, as part of a broader category of institutional celebrity, was to become the unconscious standard according to which entertainment-based celebrity could be judged frivolous.[iv]

A lack of interest in cultural and media studies in how business production stylizes itself might be described, to adapt Mica Nava's usage of the phrase, as a kind of 'disavowal'. Nava (1996) writes of how the historical lack of serious attention to feminized spheres of consumption was part of the same disavowal which came to shape the very theoretical tools inherited by media and cultural studies. Clearly there are some pretty crucial differences here, namely that corporate CEOS are hardly a disenfranchised and oppressed minority. But there is a parallel in the *lack* of

analytical attention (as well as their interconnected inheritance). Indeed, on a broader level, we might say that this legacy directly inheres in some of the current attacks on cultural studies, particularly Thomas Frank's bitter attacks on the discipline for not paying attention to the role of business cultures in shaping cultural discourse (Frank, 2001: 276-306). More positively, this legacy of 'disavowal' also relates to some of the interests being developed in the burgeoning work adjacent to cultural studies, such as the nascent interest in cultural economy (Amin and Thrift, 2004; du Gay and Pryke, 2002).

From my own disciplinary standpoint it therefore seems potentially fruitful to use the tools of media and cultural studies to analyze the role of contemporary CEOs. It seems to me that they should not be left alone as an unproblematic norm, but rather their various forms of power, including their media image, should be better understood and interrogated. This issue might be approached in a number of ways, and I want to suggest here that it might be beneficial to situate recent manifestations of the figure of the celebrity CEO in relation to both current tendencies in media culture and the particular cultural-economic context of which they are part. In what follows, drawing on the personae of Alan Sugar and Dov Charney, I attempt to sketch some shared key tendencies in the construction of media cultures and the corporate interests of the celebrity CEO, by drawing on business commentaries alongside traditions and tools from media and cultural studies.

Contemporary CEOs, 'tabloid culture' and cross-promotion
How might we begin to conceptualize the nature of the relationship between current modes of media and celebrity CEOs? One fairly obvious point is that celebrity CEOS are chief executive officers whose profiles extend *beyond* the financial or business sectors of the media. Their dissemination through a broader field of media culture is inherent to their very definition, and their imbrication within entertainment and showbusiness is present from the outset. The two examples of contemporary celebrity CEOs I began with throw this point into some relief. Charney's image as an entertaining and ironic hustler is used as a hook for feature articles and to directly advertise American Apparel's brand; Sugar's persona as gruff guru is used as a basis for columns and interviews. Their location *within* and *across* a range of media sites and genres works

- together with the particular kinds of identity and white masculinity they represent (both louche and 'hard') - to construct their celebrity status.

We could think about this issue of the extended profile in the context of a post-Fordist promotional climate in which corporations have extended their pursuit of new forms of promotion beyond the demarcated boundaries of advertising - enlarging and reconfiguring the realms of public relations and branding in the process. To make this point is not to argue that there was some halcyon, pre-commercial era prior to the present. Rather, it is to recognize not only the increased significance of branding, and the breadth of its role across media forms, but also the reconfiguring of the promotional industries, in which a greater premium is placed on below-and through-the-line publicity and on the continual process of accruing added value through new forms of cross-media coverage (Brierley, 1995; Dyson, 2000; Lury, 2004). Simply put, a very cheap and high profile route via which American Apparel can generate publicity (such as the major interview in *Jane*, which generated a skein of internet discussion and numerous follow-up features), is through the managed flamboyancy of its CEO (Morford, 2005; Sauer, 2005).

Using Dov Charney for promotion and generating a tabloidesque story around his image, then, provides the company with a culturally extensive, through-the-line reach. Such cross-media appearances might also usefully be understood in relation to the concept of 'tabloid culture'.[v] Writers such as John Langer and Kevin Glynn have encouraged us to think about how attributes traditionally ascribed to the 'tabloid' - particularly entertaining forms of news, and human interest stories with strong elements of sensationalism and intimacy – occupy a wider variety of media sites, and a broader cultural field, than the study of tabloid newspapers alone (Glynn, 2000; Langer, 2000). As Glynn puts it, whereas tabloid media 'prefers heightened emotionality' and sometimes 'makes heavy use of campy irony, parody and broad humour', official journalism 'stresses, among other things, objectivism and a proper distance – critical and emotional – from its subjects' (Glynn, 2000: 7).

Whilst the parameters of the term 'tabloid culture' raises as many questions as answers, it also opens up new possibilities for thinking about the changing roles of celebrity CEOs, in particular

the forms of social and cultural mobility they are often required to demonstrate. For the media profile of celebrity CEOs crosses genres both in terms of media sites *and* in terms of discursive/symbolic registers. Sir Alan Sugar, for example, has featured in both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers (being interviewed in *The Observer* as well as *The Express*). Similarly, Dov Charney becomes newsworthy because his persona crosses media registers and forms. His 'respectable' figure as a CEO is used to generate sensational stories and salacious images which clearly draw on tabloid conventions. In other words, the persona constructed around Charney is one through which high, middle and lowbrow cultures are blended, enabling the extraction of tabloidesque elements in 'artistic' advertising codes for its middle-class target market. The publicity around him, in these terms, both draws on conventional distinctions around 'tabloid culture' and indicates something of the extent of its contemporary breadth.

Contemporary celebrity CEOs can therefore accrue a fairly expansive media profile by inhabiting a cross-section of media discourses, some of which include or draw from imagery which is intimately or sensationally tabloidesque. Both routes lead to gaining the appearance of social fluidity, providing the celebrity CEO with a reach which is crucial in today's ostensibly 'meritocratic' culture and society (Littler, 2004). To explore this issue further, and to pursue the questions of power it raises, we can turn to the changing dynamics of celebrity in contemporary business culture.

The corporate bottom line: from fat cats to cool cats
If placing celebrity CEOS in the broader context of tabloid culture and post-Fordist cross-promotion is one way of understanding how they accrue their power, another is to locate them in the context of changing corporate cultures. In business commentaries, the widespread emergence of CEO superheroes is often connected to the 'new populism' of 1980s business culture in the Reaganite US and the Thatcherite UK. The restructuring of finance capital at this time meant that whilst the provisions of the welfare state and the Fordist deal were being shrunk, regulations on business trading were redefined to encourage entrepreneurialism and the rise of 'investor capitalism' (Castells, 1996; Brenner, 1998). As Constance L. Hays puts it in her history of the leaders of Coca-Cola company, during the 1980s:

[a]n information industry burst forth to spread and share information about the business world. If you were a broker, you had to confront a suddenly more aware clientele, and at cocktail parties people talked about their stocks and their rates of return the way they had once talked about pennant races and vacation plans. CEOs who posted superb results lost their facelessness and became celebrities, their photographs featured on the covers of magazines and their names dropped on talk shows. It was a startling shift, for them and for the public (Hays, 2005: 146-7).

The American business academic Rakesh Khurana argues that it was to a large extent this increased role and visibility for investors which spawned the lionization of superstar CEOS (Khurana, 2002). By the 1990s, one Burston-Marsteller survey found that 95% of respondents had become influenced in stock selection by the CEO's profile, as 'personalising a company, concept or creation was often the only way to nail it down' (Haigh, 2004: 97-8). And so CEOs became celebrities both within and beyond the expanding realm of business media. As Hays puts it, they 'lost their facelessness and became celebrities'. The celebrity as 'face', as Jeremy Gilbert has recently argued, revisiting Deleuze and Guattari's work on faciality, can be located in the long history of capitalism and Western modes of individualism as both its effect and symptom (Gilbert, 2004). To adopt these terms, the celebrity/face as both territorialized locus of power and despotic figure might be perceived as achieving a kind of apogee in the figure of the celebrity CEO, which had come to acquire dizzier heights of media recognition in the 1980s.

However, whilst the dominant image of corporate leaders and workers in the 1980s was one of brashly thrusting up the corporate ladder, the 1990s also came to be identified with alternative models of maximizing profit. 'Soft capitalism' sought to harness interpersonal relationships, cultural bonds alongside informality, emotion and 'creativity' in order to produce economic success (Heelas, 2002; Ray and Sayer, 1999). Nikolas Rose has persuasively traced the slow evolution of this process from the 1970s, when organisations began to become more interested in how an 'emotional, more primitive side of human nature' could be utilised to generate both an increase in workers' self-governance and productivity (Rose, 1999: 114-116). From the 1990s the informality of soft capitalism and the cultural turn could be witnessed across a wide spectrum of workplace contexts in varying levels of intensity, from dress-down Fridays and office parties, through to the collectivist hedonism of dot.com entrepreneurs, and advertising agencies like St Lukes, where employees worked together in informal environments and creative ways for private

profit. Or, to put it in televisual terms: from the occasional, officially-sanctioned carnivalesque moments in *The Office* to the torturously insistent informality of *Nathan Barley*.[vi] The 'top-down' model of conspicuous authoritarian hierarchies became distinctly old school, and in its place scores of management books discussed how to harness worker consensus and potential from the ground up. Business writer James Surowiecki comments that this spawned 'one of the deep paradoxes of the 1990s' in that 'even as companies paid greater attention to the virtues of decentralisation and the importance of bottom-up mechanisms, they also treated their CEOs as superheroes' (Surowiecki, 2004: 216).

I would suggest that many celebrity CEOs seem to offer a means of reconciling this paradox, by intertwining the twin imperatives of being a 'corporate superhero' with the bottom-up mechanisms symptomatic of the cultural turn. Or, to put it in more graphic terms, many contemporary celebrity CEOs are trying to turn 'fat cats' into 'cool cats' by employing or appropriating discourses of bottom-up power and flaunting them across an expanded range of media contexts.

Such a process has become important because, by the end of the 1990s, dislike of 'fat cats' grew alongside CEO salaries, which had expanded from an average of 50 times their average worker's pay in the 1970s to close to 500 times by the early 2000s in the US (Castells, 1998: 130; Haigh, 2004: 11; Ertuk *et al* 2005: 54). As John Kenneth Galbraith pithily put it, 'nothing in my lifetime or yours has happened more completely than the loss of confidence in corporate leadership' (Terkel, 2005: 88). By far the fastest loss of confidence occurred in what Haigh calls the 'days of rage' of the 1990s and early 2000s, when anger became registered in protests against CEO pay increases: in the UK in 1994/5, for example, protestors paraded a squealing pig at British Gas's AGM in reference to chairman Cedric Brown awarding himself a 75% pay hike (Haigh, 2004). It was also registered through a more widespread general dissatisfaction with the conduct of CEOs who had 'rigged the books to enrich themselves in the short term', thereby contributing to the collapse of companies including Enron and WorldCom (Hoopes, 2003: xxix). In the US, Jeffery Skilling became known as 'the most despised CEO of his generation' due to his role in Enron's 2001 collapse (Haigh, 2004: 91; 7).

It is in relation to this context that contemporary celebrity CEOs attempt to marry discourses of heroism with those of bottom-up power through both an expanded media field and the broader context of 'tabloid culture'. There are various ways such 'bottom-up' mechanisms' can be articulated to celebrity CEO heroism, with different political implications.

Entrepreneurial meritocracy, customer intimacy…and power to the people?
Sir Alan Sugar's persona articulates the celebrity CEO and 'bottom-up power' by enacting the very contemporary neoliberal parable of entrepreneurial meritocracy: a framework which illustrates the possibilities of social mobility whilst creating new forms of inequality. In the first BBC 2 series, *The Apprentice,* Sugar is presented as providing grassroots 'empowerment' by 'giving something back' to the community, a phrase he repeated in many media interviews surrounding the series (Webb, 2005). His image as a white 'working-class boy made good' dramatizes this idea. Like the winner of *The Apprentice* Tim Campbell - who repeatedly spoke of winning for his mother who didn't want him to end up as another black male statistic – Sugar's persona suggests that anyone, from *any* background, can rise to be successful by destroying the competition if only they show the right qualities combined with hard graft.[vii]

Sugar's persona illustrates how a sense of social mobility has become integral to contemporary capitalism, but is used in turn to create new stratifications of social division and self-worth. For instance, as Christopher Holmes Smith has written in a different context, discussing hip-hop moguls, the hip-hop mogul 'needs the spectacle of the more impoverished masses for they given him the raw material, the literal human canvas, for which, and upon which, his ascent can be made emblematic' (Holmes Smith, 2003: 85). Sugar's success is similarly predicated on the existence of 'failures' who remain poor. In this way *The Apprentice* can promote the notion of class mobility, and reflect the more widespread nature of anti-racist discourse, whilst sustaining and reinscribing inequalities of power and wealth.

The cross-media coverage also resulted in a 'brand extension' for Sugar beyond his companies. Well-known on the sports pages as the owner of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, and in a business context as the CEO of Amstrad, the TV exposure and accumulative media publicity

surrounding *The Apprentice* carried Sugar's persona into far wider realms of celebrity. As one journalist put it:

> Before *The Apprentice* came on the telly, I had heard of Alan Sugar, but if I had been asked what he was famous for, and my life had depended on the answer, I would have ventured: "Football?" And then very much dried up. Now, thanks to BBC2, I know that Sugar is the boss of a £700m global empire and so impressive that a bunch of business people have given up jobs (allegedly) to try out for a year-long posting at Sugar Towers (Wilson, 2005).

Already no. 24 in the *Sunday Times'* 'Rich List', Sugar had no particular need to generate more publicity for his company, and the TV programme did not make him as much money as his 'regular work' (Hutton, 2005). What Sugar's newfound celebrity primarily provided was the opportunity for wider public recognition beyond the business sector.

We might make a connection here to Carol Duncan's work analysing art galleries and museums as 'donor memorials', or sites where corporate capital has often historically attempted to legitimate itself. She argues that, historically, business leaders have often donated money in order to use these sites to rid their personal and company name of unsavoury connotations, channelling the fortunes acquired on the backs of other people's labour into memorials for themselves in the process. In doing so, Duncan argues, they refashion their image into that of caring philanthropists providing services for the community (Duncan, 1995: 72-101). *The Apprentice*, we might say, is an analogous form of 'donor memorial' in an updated media context: a way of ensuring images and memories of Sugar as a pragmatic philanthropist reach a larger public. Sugar's 'benevolent' image was augmented by the reality show format, which has tended to dramatize myths of social mobility (Biressi and Nunn, 2005: 144-155), and by the framing of the series as 'educational' as well as entertaining, with frequent references circulating to how the programme helped fulfill the BBC's public service remit (*The Times* 2005).

Equally, however, the attempted marriage of a CEO superhero with 'bottom-up empowerment' can work by evoking the corporate cultural turn's emphasis on informality. The American Apparel advert with which I opened, featuring the company's semi-naked boss, Dov Charney, is clearly trying to tell us that this brand and company is having a good time. We're flamboyantly

informal, it intimates; we're sexual, we're fun, we're irreverent. We're *cheeky*. Relevant CEO precursors to Charney's studied informality include the flamboyant Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca and Richard Branson (who, like his brand, Virgin, portrayed being young and casual as 'revolutionary'). Both celebrity CEOs were facilitated by the decline of corporate deference which accelerated in the 1990s, paving the way for Charney's even more sensationally intimate image.

Such intimacy also relates to how the mantra of post-Fordist corporations, 'know thy consumer', bred a desire, in the words of one marketing bible, to 'get up close and personal' with the consumer (Grant, 2000). As another business book, *Customer Intimacy,* put it, '[t]he largest source of growth, advantage and profit resides in the design and development of intimacy with customers' (Wiersema, 1998: 5-6). For American Apparel to use an image of their CEO showing his butt, to bring the bedroom into the boardroom, is in its wider context part of the broader post-1990s corporate emphasis on using 'bottom-up mechanisms' to reach a consumer base shaped through the decline of deference. Dov Charney takes customer intimacy and casual dressing down to its logical conclusion: he strips off.

Lastly, however, some CEOs might be seen to embody the attempted marriage between 'bottom-up power' in another, somewhat different way, by being associated with marketing-led shifts to pay workers a 'living wage'. Dov Charney and Anita Roddick, CEO of the Body Shop, are both good examples here, and as it is a key selling point for both their companies it to some extent explains the ease with which they generate coverage. As one business manual remarks with evident wonder, at one point Roddick herself generated so much publicity that the Body Shop didn't actually need to advertise (Kotler, 2005: 14). At the same time, the politics of their organisations are fraught with contradictions. For example, they promote fair trade but don't participate in international fair trade standards; they popularize 'decent' wages (paying significantly above the average rate for types of labour that is routinely grossly exploited), but their companies are not co-operatives; and American Apparel, at least, has resisted attempts to organise unions (Littler and Moor, 2005). In this sense, there is an echo of the double-edged emergence of the managerial discourse of 'bottom up power' in 1930s America. As James Hoopes writes, this emerged, together with departments of 'human relations', out of broader

social demands to improve working conditions and democratic participation and simultaneously, as a means to foreclose radical working class calls for a more thorough egalitarian economic and political restructuring (Hoopes, 2003: 97-98). The politics of Charney and Roddick's organisations are similarly double-edged, slipping between 'soft capitalist' paradigms and projecting their sense of progressive democratic possibility. They indicate that even in the most 'power-sharing' variants of the collision between celebrity CEOs and the discourse of 'bottom-up power', the celebrity CEO retains its function as a means to accommodate and not eradicate inequalities through soft capitalism.

Conclusion

In thinking about how we might interrogate the subject Leo Lowenthal both buried and left open all those years ago, I've been sketching two possible ways of understanding the media lives of contemporary celebrity CEOs. First, the celebrity CEO offers a means for a corporation to gain maximum exposure for little cost. This relates to contemporary promotional culture's emphasis on PR, branding and developing 'through the line' publicity. Using 'tabloid culture' is a key way for CEOs to gain celebrity power in a society which now likes to think of itself as meritocratic. Second, in the context of management and business philosophy, the transition from 1980s thrusting entrepreneurialism to 1990s modes of 'soft capitalist' corporate profit-seeking has created a context in which celebrity CEOs are often conspicuous because they foreground 'bottom-up' modes of power (often manifest through 'unusual', offbeat or 'cool' business practices). Contemporary celebrity CEOs can be seen to be using an expanded media field and the widening realms of 'tabloid culture' to attempt to articulate discourses of heroism with those of bottom-up power. Turning the despised figure of the 'fat cat' into a media-friendly 'cool cat' is predominantly a way to encourage customer intimacy, increase promotion and offset the charge of CEO greed.

Recent studies in cultural economy can open up further ways of thinking about contemporary culture, and I have drawn on a variety of such studies here. Yet I am also troubled by how they can sometimes appear to merely offer a descriptive positivism and evacuate or be devoid of an engagement with question of power. I would like to conclude by emphasizing the importance of linking approaches to cultural economy with questions of power which have been so formative to

cultural studies, and to which I am also clearly indebted (see for example Hall *et al*, 1978; Grossberg *et al*, 1992; McRobbie, 2005). In these terms, we can not only think about how the celebrity CEO Alan Sugar becomes a brand through the interrelationship between a wide variety of media formats and company positions; we can also consider how this is connected to a broader and specifically neoliberal cultural-economic discourse of meritocracy. It can be viewed as part of a larger cultural economy, can be connected to the processes which appear to, as Christopher Holmes Smith outlines in relation to hip-hop moguls, build emancipation whilst perpetuating inequalities.

For instance, Sugar's celebrity CEO persona needs to be related to the expansion of 'City Academy' schools which specialize in teaching business skills, cost twice as much as regular state schools, and guarantee a profit for the businesses they have been contracted out to. As is increasingly apparent, such schools have not delivered better grades and have better statistics on progression merely because anti-social students are expelled to nearby state schools which mop up the excluded students (Smithers, 2005). The role of CEOS like Sugar in teaching that corporate competitiveness is emancipatory is part of the same discursive formation of entrepreneurial meritocracy.

At the same time, it is clearly important to stress the range of forms the celebrity CEO might take and connections it might make. Dov Charney's actions continue to reinscribe inequalities between Latina/os and white North Americans and between heterosexual men and women, but they also intersect with a wider movement to pay living wages. If noticing such contradictions illuminates both contemporary complexities and the stealthy perpetuation of social injustice, it might also attempt to beckon towards areas where what Raymond Williams called 'resources of hope' might exist, even where there appear to be slim pickings (Williams, 1988). In the process of connecting to others, the stories of celebrity CEOs might have unexpected effects: Alan Sugar's encouragement of the disenfranchised may result in other actions than that of serving to reinforce late capitalist individualism.

However, at the same time, this should not blind us to the key discourse currently in circulation, which insists that celebrity CEOs need to explicitly demonstrate their support for a 'meritocracy'

to augment their heroic personae. We should also not forget that they do so in the service of corporate profit. We live in a moment when there is an unprecedented number of CEOs in the US cabinet, when the George W. Bush administration is 'more a CEOcracy than theocracy'; as Gideon Haigh puts it, 'seldom in history can a caste have been rewarded so richly' (Haigh, 2004: 10-11). If a new 'bottom line' is that celebrity CEOs currently need to demonstrate some elements of tabloid intimacy in order to win their visibility and status, they are predominantly doing so by bolstering corporate power and reinscribing an underclass in distinctively contemporary ways.

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[i] *Time Out*, 25 August 2004; Ko 2004; adverts can be viewed at www.americanapparel.net [accessed July 2005].

[ii] *Daily Mail*, 2 May 2005; *The Apprentice*, BBC 2, BBC/Talkback Thames, 2005; Sugar, 2005; Alan Sugar, 'A Spoonful of Sugar' is a regular column in *The Mirror*.

[iii] Many such lists appear in business magazine articles; e.g. Benezra and Gilbert, 2002.

[iv] Whilst Lowenthal divides business figures away from the 'mass entertainment' celebrities of media and showbusiness, the very act of describing the *inclusion* of business leaders in media coverage at all, whilst decrying the media interest in novelty entrepreneurs, demonstrates that such categories could not, even then, be divided so rigidly.

[v] I am indebted to the 'Tabloid Culture and Media Spectacle' symposium at Roehampton University 21 May 2005 for encouraging me to think about the broader concept of 'tabloid culture'.

[vi] Both comedy dramas, *The Office* was based in a conventionally formal and hierarchical Slough office, whereas *Nathan Barley* was a satire of groovy young new cultural intermediaries.

[vii] Interestingly, there were conflicting opinions within the business sector over the series. Many disliked its outdated image of corporate life, particularly its presentation of business as 'bloodthirsty', arguing that it should have stressed the importance of teamwork (Kwan Yuk 2005: 5). In other words, for many in the business world the programme had not gleaned all the lessons of the corporate cultural turn and the transition to soft capitalism; its modes of profit-seeking were not 'bottom-up' enough.