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Contents

Introduction	7
1 What is Cool?	15
2 Out of Africa	34
3 A Whiter Shade of Cool	52
4 That's Cool Too . . .	71
5 Cool Cracks Up	94
6 The Look of Cool	114
7 Cool Relations	132
8 Cool Psyche	146
9 Cool Rules	160
References	183
Acknowledgements	188
Photographic Acknowledgements	189

Cool Rules

The fact that the term [Cool] has maintained standard popularity among youth into the '90s may plausibly suggest not only the culture's ongoing potency but also the continued elaboration of its results.

Peter N. Stearns¹

What you've got to understand is that 14 to 16-year-olds will always dictate what's cool and what's not. We dictate what's gonna go on in fashion, music and everything. We're conquering the world.

Will Nicholls, aged 14, 'coolest kid around'²

In a 1998 article for *The New York Review of Books* Mark Lilla of the Princeton University Institute of Advanced Studies pondered the two revolutions that have transformed post-war America – the 'cultural' revolution of the '60s and Reagan's neo-liberal economic revolution of the '80s – and was very critical of the inadequate political responses to their aftermath from both the right and the left of American politics. He

characterizes their responses as 'reactionary' in the proper usage of the term: that is, the right can only react by lambasting the moral laxity bequeathed by the '60s, while the left reacts by railing helplessly against the triumph of Reaganomics. The facts are, as Lilla puts it, that 'the Sixties happened, Reagan happened and for the foreseeable future they will together define our political horizon'. According to Lilla, young Americans have no difficulty in reconciling the two in their daily lives, 'holding down day jobs in the unfettered global economy while spending weekends immersed in a moral and cultural universe shaped by the Sixties'.³

These thoughts then prompted Lilla to pose a dramatic question 'for which neither de Tocqueville, nor Marx, nor Weber had prepared us: what principle in the American creed has simultaneously made possible these seemingly contradictory revolutions? How have our notions of equality and individualism been transformed to support a morally lax yet economically successful capitalist society?'⁴ At the risk of some immodesty towards the shades of de Tocqueville, Marx and Weber we offer a single-word answer to Lilla: Cool.

Far from being a mere matter of fashionable slang, sartorial style, or some passing behavioural fad, Cool provides that psychological structure through which the longest-standing contradiction in Western societies – that between the necessity for work and the desirability of play – is apparently being resolved. In short, Cool appears to be usurping the work ethic itself, to become installed as the dominant mindset of advanced consumer capitalism. According to Peter Stearns, 'With new emotional criteria for work as a fulcrum, American society has been engaged in a significant effort to change the rules of emotionality – an effort not always explicit and often masked by injunctions of emotional permissiveness designed in fact to increase controls.'⁵

The low levels of unionization and the increasing rarity of either organized industrial action or unofficial workplace-based protest testify to the effectiveness of an emotional style more appropriate to the

demands of working in a deregulated economy. By making a decisive break with the work ethic, Cool can cover all the angles. For those in well-paid jobs, the workplace itself can become Cool, with casual dress and little perks like an espresso machine and being on first-name terms with your boss. There may be no pension benefits, but the financial-services sector is queuing up to handle that for you with a smile. As for those with no jobs, well of course Cool (liberally assisted by drugs) has always been the refuge of the underdog – that is after all where it came from.

‘This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body.’⁶ So began Studs Terkel’s classic critique of modern labour relations. Terkel’s message was a traditional Marxist one, namely that no-one will employ you unless they can make a profit out of you, and hence that capitalism inevitably creates wage-slavery, both in the office and on the factory floor. That harsh message is now replaced by the emollient notion of Cool work. Take a look around your local bookshop and it’s likely you’ll find that the business section boasts more hip-sounding titles than the politics or culture sections (for example: *First, Break All the Rules*; *1,001 Perfectly Legal Ways to Get Exactly What You Want, When You Want It, Every Time*) with upbeat messages of radical social change. This new benevolent face of capitalism is a direct consequence of Lilla’s ‘moral and cultural universe of the sixties’.

The counter-culture proved to be an excellent breeding ground for entrepreneurs: Jann Wenner, Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Felix Dennis, all created successful businesses in the burgeoning media, information technology and culture industries whose internal organization and ethos reflected counter-culture values. Ben & Jerry and Anita Roddick did the same in the food and cosmetics sectors, and there are many more examples. This notion that the workplace could be Cool may have originated among a counter-cultural minority, but it has spread to affect many previously ‘straight’ firms as new young management take over from the Second World War generation. Hip entrepreneurs like

‘60s counterculture proved to be an excellent breeding ground for entrepreneurs, including Steve Jobs, Ben and Jerry, and Felix Dennis, shown here.



Branson and Gates retain a belief that they are engaged in socially subversive projects, that they are in some sense ‘anti-establishment’, even after their businesses have become huge and highly profitable. Their success has helped transform mainstream business culture to the extent that, as Thomas Frank puts it ‘What happened in the sixties is that hip (or cool) became central to the way capitalism understood itself and explained itself to the public.’⁷

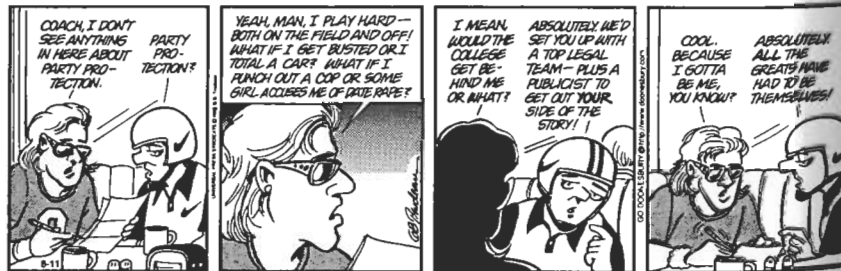
This ‘Cool workplace’ message is rapidly usurping traditional critiques of work relations such as Terkel’s. In the Cool workplace notions like ‘us and them’ and ‘jobs for life’ disappear, as does the notion that workers will have long-standing loyalties to a particular company. Richard Sennet’s *The Corrosion of Character* (New York, 1998) shows how the new enterprise now demands not loyalty but flexibility without which the modern employee is deemed unable to cope with increasing organizational complexity. Significantly, such ideas are not being pushed by the conservative right but by centrist social democratic parties such as Clinton’s Democrats and Blair’s New Labourites. One could argue that the

Cool mindset underlies Tony Blair's promotion of a 'third way' for social democracy in the twenty-first century – a way in which employees and managers act in partnership for the greater good (even if they sometimes overlook rather Uncool disparities in the distribution of the rewards).

The work of sociologist Anthony Giddens is seen by many people as providing the intellectual underpinning for New Labour policies and although Giddens makes no reference to Cool, he deploys a clearly related concept of 'reflexive modernization' by which he means that people are becoming more responsible for steering their own lives and less dependent on outside institutions. As he puts it, 'My relationship to modern society – my social identity – has become unglued from the contexts, communities and expectations that once circumscribed my (and your) knowledge of who I am and how I live. Today I am responsible and liable for my own identity.'⁸ That sounds very much like a description of the positive aspect of Cool detachment. Giddens stresses that this new democratized, flexible form of capitalism creates uncertainty, and that the public welfare services must be reconstructed to act as a buffer if widespread discontent is to be avoided. However, it is by no means certain that employers, who love the flexibility element, are so keen on this side of the equation. Flexibility can mean insecurity and de-skilling, accelerated by the abandonment of unions and collective bargaining as the means to promote the interests of employees.

Doonesbury Flashbacks

BY GARRY TRUDEAU



It is likely that the Cool workplace will be effective in defusing any renaissance of labour militancy and trade-union organization, which mirrors the disappearance of state socialist solutions from the political arena. It might prove more productive for employees instead to take the notion of the Cool workplace to its logical conclusion, by campaigning strongly for employee share schemes, so that what at the moment is a largely cosmetic transformation might progress to a more genuine commonality of interests grounded in economics.

Competitive Consumption

College kids, gently unkempt. They stood between the shelves talking and browsing, going through the product boxes, and others mixed in, slightly older men and women, they had professions and soft slacks and knife pleats and a certain ease of bearing and belonging, the package of attitudes and values known as lifestyle.⁹

It is no coincidence that we have described Cool as almost the antithesis of the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Nor does Cool have much in common with the more specifically Protestant virtues of hard work, thrift and self-discipline – or for that matter the secular virtues of old-time Labourism which one might characterize as compassion, modesty and temperance. Advanced capitalism no longer depends on such sober and puritanical notions of virtue to maintain its labour discipline. Cool is a new mode of individualism, flexible enough to cope with the pace of transformation of work in the deregulated global economy. It is far better adapted to a life of service and consumption than one of toil and sacrifice. It is this that provides the missing 'cement' to fill that contradiction implied in Mark Lilla's question. In other words, Cool enables people to live with uncertainty and lowered expectations,

by concentrating on present pleasures. In short, when the going gets tough, the Cool go shopping.

Cool as an ethic is exquisitely suited to a life of consumption rather than production because the competitive spirit that we see hiding beneath the detached surface presented by Cool can drive new, adventurous and more discriminating modes of consumption, while simultaneously offering a handle by which Cool advertisers can steer the consumer in the desired direction. To characterize the way this new Cool consumer individualism operates, perhaps we could be forgiven for coining a new phrase: the 'competitive consumption of experience'. Everyone is a rebel now, no-one is ordinary, no-one wants to be a face in the crowd, everyone wants intense experiences: indeed everyone wants *more* intense experiences than their friends and neighbours. People have a mental checklist of intense experiences that need to be collected: climb the mountain; watch a volcano erupt; swim with the dolphins; have multiple orgasms. . . The media understand this greed for the superlative, and their hyperbolic coverage of each newly fashionable leisure activity veers toward the condition of pornography, giving us food-porn, travel-porn, garden-porn, car-porn, and decor-porn.

Radical critics of consumerism, from Marcuse to Debord, have always proceeded from the observation that capitalism manufactures false needs and implants them in the passive populace via advertising, consumption being seen as a chore that must be imposed to keep the wheels of production turning and the surplus value flowing. For example, in *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord employed the concept of 'pseudo-needs', as in this formulation:

It is doubtless impossible to contrast the pseudo-need imposed by the reign of modern consumerism with any authentic need or desire that is not in itself equally determined by society and its history. But the commodity in the stage of its abundance

attests to an absolute break in the organic development of social needs.¹⁰

Unfortunately anyone who tries to wield such arguments within practical politics invariably ends up by attempting that 'impossible contrast' and arguing that some social needs are more authentic than others, which in turn raises the deadly question of who will be the judge of such authenticity. Very soon one finds oneself back on the terrain of that terrible old joke whose punch-line is: 'after the revolution you will eat strawberry ice-cream, *and like it!*' By embracing popular culture and loosening up the workplace, Cool businesses can ever more quickly determine what consumers want and adapt and innovate to 'satisfy' them, while the Cool consumers are increasingly in charge of their own consumption and so no coercion is required (unless of course one tries to avoid paying the bill).

Cool has moved from being the pose of a tiny minority and is fast becoming the majority attitude among young people. Far from being a passing fad it is having a major effect on business and even on our political life. Although Cool is deployed by the culture industries and international media conglomerates as 'an aesthetic for the exercise of economic power', that doesn't mean that they invented Cool as an instrument of oppression: on the contrary they find it among the customers themselves, and then only with some difficulty. The price of Cool is eternal vigilance, and advertisers with a young audience play a difficult game, forced constantly to update their campaigns and demonstrate their knowledge about new people, new looks and new music: a whole new profession has arisen, the 'youth consultant' who travels around the country (on expenses) watching the clubs and the streets to discover what is Cool this month. Far from creating Cool, 'TV produces programmes and images for teens that reinforce already forged models of coolness'.¹¹

Advertising is, according to Eric Hobsbawm, the symptom and the

symbol par excellence of living in the material world, and increasingly that world is a Cool, ironic one. The levels of irony and self-reference in current, youth-oriented commercials grant them an irresistible and irrefutable circularity: if you don't like them or understand them, that can only be because you don't 'get' them, because you're not Cool enough. Such is the sophistication of the advertisers' reading of Cool that they are now capable of playing games with it, a highly successful example being the *faux naïf* campaign for the orange-free drink Sunny Delight in which deliberate naffness is now identified by overly-knowing consumers as wholesome and healthy.

Cool elevates personal taste into a complete ethos in which you are what you like, and what you therefore buy, and it's accessible to any kid who can afford the correct brand of trainers (or if not, who can steal them) without requiring any tiresome study or practice. An endless range of advertised products, from cars and computers to mobile phones,



The levels of irony and self-reference in current youth-oriented commercials grant them an irresistible and irrefutable circularity: if you don't like them, it can only be because you don't 'get' them, because you're not Cool enough. A 1994 poster.

promise to alter young people's external appearance and hence change their internal mood. Cool is the liberated way to consume: it implies a critical awareness of the purpose of advertising, the knowledge that 'most of what they are trying to sell me is garbage, but I'm Cool, I know the difference'. Throughout the '90s these Cool values have been disseminated throughout the public language of advertising every bit as vigorously as a hundred years earlier the work ethic was preached to the workers from church pulpits.

Advertisers perhaps do not actually *construct* consumer subjectivity as some radical critics would have it, but they devote enormous effort to *discovering* and *reflecting* consumer subjectivity. The vendors of films, music, soft drinks, snack foods and sports wear – the life-staples of the young – have learned to be Cool and to use Cool. Advertising portrays a constantly updated collage of personal styles, postures and entertainments designed both to reflect and affect the way people think and feel about themselves and their society, and this is not merely a cynical manoeuvre perpetrated by manipulative outsiders whose real interests lie elsewhere. Most of the senior executive positions in our mass-media, marketing and advertising industries are now occupied by that generation that came of age in the late '60s, and this mediocrity knows how to deploy Cool as a selling tool, how to manipulate its icons, precisely because it makes sense to them, it reflects their own values. Marx's axiom that in every age the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class is no less true because the economics did not go quite as planned. Cool has become the dominant ideology of the media professionals. Movie directors and script writers, television executives, record-company chiefs, magazine editors, computer-game designers and advertising creatives all share with their potential audience a taste for cynicism, sensuality, self-obsession, social indifference and ironic cruelty.

Surprisingly this personal adherence to Cool does not prevent the new mediocrity from addressing those sections of the paying audience –

the middle-aged and elderly in particular – who do not aspire, or even understand what it is to be Cool, and who prefer the old culture of sentimentality and easy emotion. A Cool producer can ‘do’ sentimental too, although probably with an ironic tongue in the cheek. Increasingly, touches of Cool irony are creeping into the most unashamedly populist of entertainments: a transvestite presenter here, a gay compère there. Peter Weir’s 1998 movie *The Truman Show* brilliantly parodied the self-importance of this breed of Cool dream merchant, in the central role of Christof, played by Ed Harris, the beret-wearing Cool producer-deity. What could be cooler than having the power to ‘cue the sun’? Crucially, the film does not portray Christof as a phoney or cynic, but as a zealot convinced of his Christ-like mission to inject emotion into the ordinariness of people’s lives. The subtext is that Christof himself lacks the very emotion that he dispenses, a Cool ruler indeed. Just as the official ideology of communism was concerned to suppress all other possible versions of socialism, so the modern version of Cool has at its heart an empty, almost totalitarian quality.

Cool in Politics

Having conquered popular culture, the final step must be for Cool to invade politics. Following the collapse of the ideologies of the left – from Soviet communism and Trotskyism, through new left Marxism to democratic socialism – a whole generation of young people in the UK finds great difficulty engaging in politics because current politics contains nothing to engage them. Faced with politics seminars from college lecturers whose beliefs were formed during the ill-fated renaissance of proletarian struggle in the early ’70s (the miners’ strike, the ‘three day week’), while simultaneously harassed by the threat of unemployment and benefit cuts, their beleaguered state of mind stands

comparison with those disillusioned GIs and never-illuminated black-Americans who invented Cool in the first place.

That perhaps is why there is such a strong revival of interest in everything to do with the ’60s counter-culture, which may have arisen spontaneously among the music-loving young but is currently being fanned by the style press, including the broadsheet daily newspapers, and television. However, the version of the ’60s that the press so obsessively rehashes is a curiously apolitical one, and one could easily forget that at the heart of the counter-culture lay an instinctive revulsion against the fundamental assumptions of consumerism: money was not to be allowed to be the measure of all things; mere products (even drugs) could never bring happiness; culture should not be subordinated to the needs of business; ownership of goods is a fool’s paradise, and so on. What bound together the groupuscules of radical students, underground newspaper collectives and cultural crazies in the ’60s was a curious composite material woven from Cool and anti-capitalist politics. This contradiction did not go entirely unnoticed at the time, but the prevailing enthusiasm was sufficient to keep things from flying apart for a while. In the ’90s re-run, the media have unpicked this rough material and extracted certain threads (obsession with personal appearance, fashion and irony) and thrown away the radical debris.

Cool is never directly political, and politics, almost by definition, can never be Cool. To get anywhere in politics you need to care passionately about something, whether it is a cause or merely the achievement of personal power, and you need to sacrifice present pleasures to the long and tedious process of campaigning and party organization. Nor has any party yet, outside of the lunatic fringe, proclaimed the pursuit of Cool as its election platform – such a platform would presumably have to include legalizing all drugs, abolishing all taxes and yet simultaneously paying generous unemployment benefits, which might make life tricky for the first Cool treasurer.

Nevertheless, Cool has deep implications for politics and politicians. We have already referred to Mark Lilla's observations on the contradiction between right-wing economics and left-wing social attitudes in the USA, and offered Cool as the solution to the dilemma he posed. Not *only* is Cool apolitical but it actively tends to dissolve the categories of left and right, by decoupling economic and social assumptions that have been more or less fixed since the French Revolution. Left has almost always stood for a combination of liberal social policies and state intervention in economics, whereas right has always stood for conservative social policies and laissez-faire economics. Cool overthrows these assumptions by embracing both economic and social laissez-faire, sharing the far right's distrust of governmental spying and meddling, but not their moralism or 'family values'. Cool is by preference apolitical, but if forced to take sides will usually side with the more libertarian option, which may be on the left or right in different historical contexts. There is a sense in which Cool is the inverse of Fascism, which embraces precisely the opposite combination – repressively conservative social policies with corporatist economics. For its part, the Christian right has always recognized Cool as its sworn enemy (or the Antichrist if you will) from the earliest days in the '50s when it railed against the 'jungle music' perverting the youth of the nation, and smashed rock 'n' roll records on television.

In the context of US politics this is of vital importance because it makes the Cool generations the pivotal sector capable of keeping the Democrats in power, since the decline or defection of the white working classes. It is no coincidence that there have only been two truly Cool US presidents, Kennedy and Clinton – both were Democrats, and both effectively harnessed the youth vote. If you doubt that Kennedy was Cool, then stop looking at his policies (except perhaps on Civil Rights) and look instead at the haircut, the smile – and the clandestine sexual liaisons.

Kennedy's term was perhaps the last time that US youth was fully engaged by official (as opposed to fringe) party politics and his

assassination, along with Watergate, made a decisive contribution to that dark and paranoid disillusion that still debilitates Cool culture. Cool youth now votes for the Democrats not because it likes them, but because it detests the moralizing Christian right more. If evidence for this assertion is needed, the American public's reaction to the Monica Lewinsky affair surely provides it: what they told pollsters was that they didn't respect Clinton much (although they didn't think his peccadillo that important), but they *feared* the Special Prosecutor, Kenneth Starr, and despised his informant, Linda Tripp.

The same logic holds true in the UK, and probably in most European countries: Cool youth is unlikely to be actively mobilized in the cause of any sort of traditional socialism, even of the most democratic varieties, but it is nevertheless fiercely opposed to any talk of moral regeneration and family values, and that will pose increasing problems for all right-wing conservative parties. In the UK, perhaps it was a coincidence that the 1997 return of the first Labour Government in eighteen years should coincide with a revival of '60s fashions, music and drug consumption among young people – but then again, perhaps not. Having a Prime Minister who owned a Fender Stratocaster and who invites pop stars to tea (in the '60s Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson invited The Beatles to breakfast) persuaded the UK press to label Tony Blair's New Labour Government 'Cool Britannia' (and the fact that they may have stolen the phrase from a flavour of Ben & Jerry's American ice cream is almost too good to be true as regards our argument). Although Blair has disclaimed the title when asked directly, there is a sense in which embracing Cool would fit his purposes, at least on one level.

The Blair Government embarked on a more radical programme of reform of British institutions than many expected, but it is a programme that seeks to cut out dead wood from both the left and the right: welfare dependency as well as hereditary peers, entrenched anti-business attitudes as well as social exclusion. To the extent that the New Labour

project involves demolishing the legacy of the Second World War and the post-war consensus, Cool might seem to be an appropriate 'branding' for the party. Certainly the Conservatives appear to think so: the main priority for Conservative strategists is not currently to produce vote-winning policies, but to rebrand themselves as the 'Naturally Cool Party'. This is not *quite* as daft as it sounds, since a Conservative Party with softened social policies might be able to attack New Labour from a libertarian direction – perhaps even by promising to legalize drugs, although we wish lots of luck to the person who first tries that out on the ladies of the Conservative Conference.

There is, however, a more serious problem for politicians who attempt to harness the energy of UK youth culture under the banner of Cool. The main planks of the New Labour project are to restore our disintegrating sense of community (by shoring up the traditional family and eliminating drug abuse), to halt the rise of crime and to improve the performance of our education system. But Cool stands for almost exactly the opposite values: it is intrinsically anti-family, pro-drug, anti-authority and admires criminality (it is more than coincidence that criminals say 'he's cool' to indicate that someone is one of them). What's more, ironic detachment is a poor adhesive for any society as well as being extremely difficult to harness to any sort of collective endeavour. The plain fact is that the Cool attitude is an obstacle to several of the more important goals of New Labour's programme: the promotion of work, school and family, and the reduction of violent crime and drug abuse.

Cool retains all its traditional fondness for drugs, spanning the full range from weed and magic mushrooms, through speed, ecstasy and cocaine, to the still fashionable 'junkie chic'. Heroin abuse is on a steep increase today, and among ever-younger age groups. The most heart-breaking news stories of 1999 concerned the overdose of a twelve-year-old heroin addict in Glasgow, and the scarcely believable revelation that the highest per-capita-rate of heroin addiction in the UK is to be found

in Fraserburgh, a fishing village in the north of Scotland, among *trawler crews*. The consequences of drug abuse are strongly affected by economic and social class, so that while a heroin habit might present a severe inconvenience to a London socialite, it is often terminal for kids on a housing project in Leeds or Chicago, for whom jail or the mortuary are the most probable destinations. A triumph of Cool means living permanently with the negative effects of both drug abuse and the penal policies that governments apply in pursuing their futile 'war on drugs'. Among black US youth one-in-six passes through the jail system and a gunshot wound has become the prime cause of death.

So can New Labour recapture young people's hearts and minds without fatally compromising key parts of its programme? It is unlikely that Labour would want (or could afford) to buy their affections by restoring lost unemployment benefits, and the party is equally unlikely to compromise on, say, legalizing cannabis. The only remaining possibility is to discover some 'big idea' that could make caring Cool, but that is almost an oxymoron. Blair's project needs to haul young minds back from the more nihilistic and destructive aspects of Cool, but it is hard to see where it can obtain the traction – trying to encompass Cool within a moralizing, Christian socialist framework may prove too much even for a 'spin-master' of Blair's undoubted abilities. Cool is the philosophy of Hollywood's 'new aristocracy', not of the Labour Party activist. Far from being a friend to social democracy, Cool may prove to be its grave-digger.

Global Cooling

Some might argue that Cool is primarily a Western phenomenon, and that elsewhere in the world there are other equally powerful forces, for example militant Islam, that will check its progress. Another possibility is that in non-Christian cultures the Cool pose does not offer the same

attraction that it does in Western societies – there is, for example, no equivalent expression in the Chinese language. The people of the African continent, the original birthplace of Cool, are embroiled in a seemingly never-ending succession of civil wars. Is Russia perhaps too broke (or too cold) to enjoy being Cool?

Actually we do not believe in any of these counter-arguments. Wherever the standard of living rises to a point where television, pop music and the Hollywood movie are available (and that leaves out very few areas of the globe now) then young people will both recognize and cultivate Cool. What Cool now represents is the influence of the free market in personal relationships and sexuality, and whether politicians like it or not, it is likely that the majority of the younger generation throughout the world now aspire to this degree of freedom. What's more, they are unlikely to be gainsaid by mere moralizing, and it takes a dictatorship, or the military triumph of religious fundamentalism, to divert them from its pursuit.

Cool even flourished as a dissident force under Soviet communism, where Western popular culture was prohibited and could only be seen via the black market: throughout Eastern Europe a Cool pose was recognized as a mark of passive resistance to communism. It is at least arguable that Cool helped eventually to bring down communism, as it represents precisely those 'decadent Western values' that the regime sought to exclude – the black market in Beatles' albums and Levi jeans is what lost the hearts and minds of the whole post-war generation for communism. In 1989 East German youths hoisted the MTV flag over the Berlin Wall as it was being pulled down.

So is Cool then destined to rule the world? To ask this is the same as to ask whether consumer capitalism and parliamentary democracy are destined to rule the world, because if they do then Cool will surely follow. Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* notwithstanding, that is by no means yet a certainty. The 1998 economic crisis in the Far East demonstrated that capitalism is still an unstable and unpredictable system, prone to

boom and bust when least expected. Since the collapse of communism there may be no major political movement offering any alternative to capitalism, but there is serious opposition to legal, global capitalism from the equally global world of organized crime. The manufacture and sale of illegal drugs now rates among the top five worldwide industries by turnover, and in several countries, including Colombia, Thailand and Jamaica, drug gangs are sufficiently powerful to be perceived as a threat by the legitimate governments – rule by drug barons and warlords, although anachronistic, is by no means inconceivable. Cool has always been fascinated by gangsterdom – indeed has been the approved attitude of gangsters – and the mass-market popularity of gangsta rap and movies like *Goodfellas* suggests that nothing has changed in that respect. In short, Cool has a dangerously ambivalent attitude toward the rule of law and could accommodate criminal neo-feudalism just as well as it does consumer capitalism. The uncomfortable truth is that, compared to the excitements of the drug and gun culture, a prosperous, well-ordered society is boring. Fukuyama takes a rather Panglossian approach to such matters: so far as Cool is concerned history isn't just over, it is the ultimate negative, something that is washed up, finished with, as in, 'Bang! You're history.'

So how bad could it be if Cool did rule the world? Certainly, with capitalism unleashed and unregulated the traditional left would experience an absolute defeat. Cool consumer capitalism has discovered, as Thomas Frank puts it, how to construct cultural machines that transform alienation and despair into consent. But the triumph of Cool would be no more comforting to those on the traditional right since it represents the collapse of all their most cherished values. The USA, as Mark Lilla's question makes clear, must be our model for what happens when a society embraces the free market both in labour and leisure, while losing interest in party politics: unprecedented prosperity for the many; misery for the few; Wall Street at an all-time high; jails overflowing and a lack of

any truly oppositional (as opposed to knee-jerk reactionary) politics. The maintenance of a healthy democracy requires a perceptible difference between the parties of left and right, and real confrontations over real issues, and in this light the emergence of an apolitical Cool generation is alarming.

Cool prefers the image of rebellion, as offered by glamorous terrorists, gangsters and wasted rock musicians, to the hard, boring slog of real politics, and we would all do well to remember that Adolf Hitler was also a cultural rebel with artistic pretensions, a distinctive haircut, big trousers and kinky boots. And sure enough, in February 1999 James Brown (founder of *Loaded* magazine, the bible of Cool 'lad culture'), was asked to resign as editor of *GQ* magazine after publishing an article that named the Nazis, and Field Marshal Rommel in particular, among 'the sharpest men of the century'. Not evil, just plain silly.

Cool may once have been an expression of rebellion but it is surely not any longer. The real question is whether or not it can sustain the key elements, the rule of law and freedom of conscience, that make Western democracy the least bad form of government ever invented. The picture is murky and contradictory: on the one hand Cool values personal freedom above all; it hates racism; it is egalitarian and hedonistic in temperament. On the other hand, it is fascinated by violence, drugs and criminality and mesmerized by the sight of naked power. But this book is not an effort to predict the future, rather to explain the past – to make visible the ambiguous influence of Cool in modern life precisely so that people might start to debate such matters, and more seriously weigh the pros and cons of boredom versus excitement, order versus turmoil, tolerance versus thuggery. In the end we shall, as ever, have to wait and see what happens, for deprived of Marxism's historic inevitability the future's not ours to see . . . 'que sera, sera' (Sly Stone's version of course, not Doris Day's).



Cool values personal freedom above all, hates racism, is egalitarian and hedonistic in temperament, but is fascinated with violence, drugs and criminality . . . It remains to be seen how far it values the rule of law and freedom of conscience, which underpin Western democracy.



Five: Cool Cracks Up

- 1 Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro', *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), p. 342.
- 2 Gordon Burn, *Happy Like Murderers* (London, 1998), p. 187.
- 3 Richard Benson, *Arena* (March 1999), p. 78.

Six: The Look of Cool

- 1 Margaret Olin, 'Gaze', *Critical Terms for Art History*, R. Nelson and R. Schiff, eds. (Chicago, 1996), p. 209.
- 2 Bice Curiger, *Birth of the Cool: American Painting from Georgia O'Keeffe to Christopher Wool*, exh. cat., Kunsthau Zurich (Zurich, 1997), p. 9.
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