

GET A LIFE

A cynical culture of 'cool' is corroding society and replacing one form of conformity with another, warns Simon Titley

It is 9 December 2005. That London icon, the Routemaster bus, is making its final journey in normal passenger service. And as the final bus returns to the depot, a TV crew from the BBC's London regional news is on hand to record the historic event.

How did BBC London report this event? There were several news angles it could have chosen. How would tourists feel about being deprived of a popular cliché? Did disabled people welcome the disappearance of a vehicle with poor access? Were regular passengers pleased to get new buses or disappointed to lose an old friend?

BBC London instead chose an angle that told us little about the event but a lot about contemporary prejudices. That crowd of enthusiasts greeting the last bus outside the depot – well, it's not *normal*, is it? Cut to the studio, where a smug metrosexual presenter is interviewing a psychologist. His first question is to ask what mental problem someone must suffer from to find buses interesting.

The presenter gets short shrift. The psychologist explains that there is nothing wrong with bus enthusiasts or any other sort of enthusiast for that matter. In fact, studies show that people with hobbies are mentally healthier than those without. This obviously isn't the answer the presenter expects so, instead of moving on, he maintains his condescending smirk and asks more or less the same question again. The answer is still not the one in the script. By the end of the interview, you get the impression that this particular expert is not one that BBC London will be inviting back.

MIDDLE CLASS COOL

Not sympathetic? Still think enthusiasms are a bit of a laugh, do you? Try this one for size.

You are at a dinner party. You've done the usual topics: house prices, finding a school place for the children and where you're going on holiday. The conversation turns to the difficulties of commuting. Guests relate their little stories and then someone asks which train you catch each morning.

You're about to say "the 8.13" but you pause in horror. Like most other commuters, you know exactly when your habitual train departs. You have it down to a fine art: precisely when to leave the house for the station; precisely where to stand on the platform to maximise your chance of finding a seat while minimising the walk at the other end.

But you can't say "8.13". It's too exact. Everyone else will think you're anal. So you make a special effort to sound vague. "Oh, sort of, you know, about quarter past eight-ish", you say, praying that you have not committed the ultimate *faux pas* of sounding precise or knowledgeable.

Welcome to the world of British middle class 'cool'. A world where it is no longer permissible to have hobbies or intellectual pursuits. A world where enthusiasm or erudition earns contempt. A world where, if you commit any of these social sins, you will immediately be slapped down with one of these stock sneers: 'sad', 'trainspotter', 'anorak', 'anal' or 'get a life'.

The phenomenon of 'cool' has been examined thoroughly in a pioneering book, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* by Dick Pountain and David Robins. Cool is essentially about narcissism and ironic detachment. Its modern origins can be traced to American black culture of the 1940s, when young black men adopted a defiant posture as a means of defence. It was then picked up by rebellious white icons of the 50s such as James Dean. During the 60s, 'cool' began to be exploited by advertisers as a means of selling consumer goods and in the 70s it moved from the counter-culture into the mainstream. But while 'cool' people today affect an air of rebellion, in reality they are conforming to commercially-driven norms.

RETARDED ADOLESCENCE

'Cool' is not just a fashion but an attitude, a retarded adolescence that is having a thoroughly corrosive effect on our culture and society. Since 'cool' is about cynicism rather than doing anything positive, it follows that most enthusiasms and intellectual pursuits must be stigmatised as 'uncool'.

To illustrate this cultural change, let us return to the topic of transport. Why have railway enthusiasm in general and trainspotting in particular gone out of fashion? Until the late 70s, it was considered perfectly normal to be interested in railways. Indeed, in the post-war era, young boys were *expected* to be interested in trains and large numbers of people pursued this hobby with no risk of shame. Nowadays, this harmless pastime is commonly regarded as only one step removed from being placed on the register of sex offenders.

Liberals believe that no-one should be enslaved by conformity so any assault on diversity should be resisted. What ought to worry Liberals is not just the casual intolerance towards hobbies but also their pathologising as a form of mental disorder. Travel writer Bill Bryson, in a piece on the narrow gauge railways of North Wales in *Notes from a Small Island*, wrote: "I had recently read a newspaper article in which it was reported that a speaker at the British Psychological Society had described trainspotting as a form of autism called Asperger's syndrome."

Or consider a particularly nasty opinion piece written by columnist Cristina Odone in the Observer (10 November 2002), in the wake of a big media story about the arrest of some British plane spotters in Greece. She attacked hobbies such as plane spotting and stamp collecting as a

uniquely British phenomenon (which they are not) and concluded:

“This kind of social autism, regarded as dysfunctional in most societies, is positively encouraged in Britain. Every other nation suspects the solitary citizen as an oddball who could at any moment turn into a sniper, a pervert or an axe murderer; the British instead prize them as individuals with a strong sense of self.” Odone did not seem to realise that British culture had already moved a long way towards the intolerance she craves.

Or consider Lib Dem MP Norman Baker. On 5 January this year, he revealed that the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2000 has been used to stop 62,584 people at railway stations and that another 87,000 travellers have been questioned under ‘stop and search’ legislation. But he added: “The anti-terror laws allow officers to stop people for taking photographs and I know this has led to innocent trainspotters being stopped. This is an abuse of anti-terrorism powers and a worrying sign that we are sliding towards a police state. Trainspotting may be an activity of limited, and indeed questionable, appeal, but it is not a criminal offence and it is not a terrorist threat.”

Why did Baker feel it necessary to qualify his remarks with the word ‘questionable’? Baker is not above hobbies himself, since he has a passion for collecting rare vinyl records. The harassment of trainspotters is not about terrorism but the enforcement of conformity and, with his offhand remark, Baker risks colluding with this intolerance.

Meanwhile, we are subjected to hysterical media reports of an ‘epidemic’ of autism. It is more likely that it is the diagnosis rather than the incidence of autism that has increased, partly because there is greater understanding of autistic spectrum disorders. But another significant reason is that boys whose hobbies would once have been considered healthy and normal are now considered mentally disordered.

DEEP INTOLERANCE

Although ‘cool’ may affect a fierce individualism, it expresses a deep intolerance of anyone different and simply represents a change in our idea of what it means to be ‘normal’. Until the 1970s, normality meant being white and male, but equality for women and ethnic minorities has made ‘normality’ more female and black. Linguist Mary Bucholtz observes that the terms ‘nerd’ and ‘geek’ came into common parlance only as ‘cool’ went mainstream, and that these terms refer to a hyper-whiteness. In other words, nerds are essentially white males who unfashionably refuse to appropriate black youth culture. But black people are not the beneficiaries of this trend.

‘Cool’ may have originated as a way for black men to earn respect but it has become a means for anxious and insecure white people to accommodate to sexual and ethnic liberation. It enables white men to avoid opprobrium by adopting the insouciance of rebellious blacks and the androgynous fashions of gay men. It enables white women to turn the tables on men by undermining what they see as archetypal male behaviour – not the male violence and sexism that deserve opprobrium, but the harmless male behaviour of being interested in things, having hobbies and preferring the rational to the emotional. We kid ourselves that we live in a more tolerant age when all we have done is exchange one type of conformity for another.

Does any of this really matter? Attacking trainspotters may seem harmless enough, until you realise the

consequences. Once upon a time, small boys who collected train numbers matured into adult railway enthusiasts who ran various museums and preserved steam railways, contributing much to our local heritage and tourism, and giving pleasure to many people. It’s not just trains. All over Britain, volunteer enthusiasts can be found restoring and running old windmills, canals and factories. But not for long. They are failing to enlist a new generation of volunteers, because potential young recruits are deterred for fear of being mocked by their peers.

The effects go far beyond preserving our industrial heritage. The overriding need to look ‘cool’ is now recognised as the main reason why boys are underperforming in the state school system. Boys are under huge peer group pressure not to study or be seen as a swot. And now, we are faced with a rash of knife incidents in schools because, apparently, it’s ‘cool’ to carry a knife.

MOST DAMAGING EFFECT

But when behaviour once confined to teenagers becomes an everyday routine for adults, the most damaging effect of ‘cool’ is on democratic politics. Pountain and Robins point out that “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.”

Pountain and Robins caution against politicians trying to harness cool. They applaud political desires “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 warn that “Cool stands for almost exactly the opposite values: it is intrinsically anti-family, pro-drug, anti-authority and admires criminality... What’s more, ironic detachment is a poor adhesive for any society as well as being extremely difficult to harness to any collective endeavour.”

I’ll leave the final word on the cool ‘get a life’ crowd to the inestimable Stephen Fry. On the TV comedy programme ‘QI’, Jo Brand wearily demanded of Fry whether there was any practical use for the information being discussed. Fry lost his cool (in more ways than one): “It’s extraordinary. It’s always the children who say, ‘Sir, sir, what’s the point of geometry?’ or ‘what’s the point of Latin?’ who end up having no job, being alcoholic, and they don’t notice that the ones who actually find knowledge for its own sake and pleasure in information and in history and in the world and nature around us are actually getting on and doing things with their fucking lives.”

It is Quite Interesting that Fry’s outburst was never broadcast. It is available only as an outtake on YouTube. Not cool, you see.

Simon Titley is a member of the Liberator Collective
