

# Hello Kitty's Popularity and Its Change of Representation

Miho Tsukamoto

**Abstract**—Since “Hello Kitty” was manufactured in the market in 1974, the manufacturer, Sanrio Co., Ltd. gains high profits not only Kitty’s products but also Kitty license, which gives us a picture of Sanrio’s sales strategy in the global market. Kitty’s history, its products, and Sanrio’s sales strategy are researched in this paper. Comparing it to American Girl, and focusing on KITTYLAB, a type of attraction where you can enjoy games with Kitty, and choose its parts to build your own Kitty, the image of the cultural icon can be altered.

**Keywords**—American Girl, Change, Kitty, Popularity

## I. INTRODUCTION

AFTER its mass market introduction in 1974, the “Hello Kitty” [1] figure, a fictional white cat, has become a Japanese cultural icon and thought of by many Japanese people as being “kawaii” (“cute”). The “Hello Kitty” character also known as “Kitty” has been used or integrated into many products such as iPods, PCs and laptops, Nintendo 3DS Gameboys, Play Station, games, telephones, televisions, buses, jewelries, watches, clothing items, edible products such as macaroni, stationery items, postal stamps, golf balls, coins, etc. Many international celebrities such as Cameron Diaz, Mariah Carey, Lady Gaga, and Britney Spears have purchased Kitty products and displayed them openly. Although Kitty is just a fictional character, its notoriety has helped to serve as an “ambassador” to UNICEF three times, and to the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

The manufacturer, Sanrio Co., Ltd. sold the Kitty license to Walmart in the US, and maintains a Kitty character brand office in Milan, Italy [2]. It endeavors to promote Kitty brands all over the world. This gives us a picture of Sanrio’s sales strategy in the global market. Moreover, the third-generation creator of Hello Kitty, Yuko Yamaguchi, reveals that she intentionally changes its styles every five years so that consumers will never get tired of Kitty’s appearance. Although Kitty’s successors recommended keeping Kitty’s original appearance, Yamaguchi has drastically changed its shape and form through time. After the opening of “KITTYLAB,” a new type of attraction, in 2011, the concept changed further. In “KITTYLAB,” you can enjoy games with Kitty, and choose its parts to build your own Kitty. You can select parts of its hair style, its eyes, its nose, its ribbon, and outfits, which totally alters the image of the cultural icon. In this respect, Kitty’s history, its products, and Sanrio’s sales strategy will be examined. Moreover, Kitty’s popularity in terms of its distinct characteristics and its changes in its

Tsukamoto Miho is a graduate student of Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Kyoto, Japan. (phone: (81)-978-33-3264; fax:(81)-978-33-3264; e-mail: miho-tu@ asahi.email.ne.jp).

image, as impacted by “KITTYLAB” with a comparison of American Girl by the Pleasant Company, will be analyzed.

## II. KITTY’S HISTORY AND ITS POPULARITY

Kitty’s products are vast ranging from food items, cosmetics, furniture, buses, cars, PCs, jewelry, stationary goods, and other collaborated products like stickers, plates, and lunch boxes. We, in Japan, are inundated with various Kitty’s products. If you live in Japan, you can easily purchase Kitty’s goods naturally as you would go to McDonald, or Kentucky Fried Chicken to buy fast food. Its appeal and popularity resulted in Sanrio opening an indoor amusement park called Puteri Harbour Family Theme Park in Malaysia and BLACK WONDER in Hong Kong in 2012 related to consumers growing awareness and acceptance of Kitty products outside of Japan.

Now we see Kitty’s history and its popularity through the eyes of a Kitty fan, and “Kittyler.” Kitty is popular to many Kittylers because Kitty and its numerous products are affordable, and its simple designs are captivating to many people. Kitty has been popular since its creation by Sanrio Co., Ltd. Although Sanrio has created many fantastic characters including Little Twin Stars (Kiki & Lala), Patty and Jimmy (a couple of a girl and a boy), Bad Batsumaru (bad penguin), Usahana (a rabbit), Osaru no Monkichi (a monkey), etc. [3], Kitty has been most popular among them. However, Kitty has been changed periodically to maintain its consumer appeal.



Fig. 1 Sanrio’s Characters

### A. Kitty’s Change and Its Production

Firstly, we analyze Kitty’ change as it changes remarkably, and focus on its production as we have more products than ever. Almost every five years, Kitty has been renewed. The following shows Kitty’s changes.

The biggest change is Kitty’s face line. Even without a black outline, we can still distinguish Kitty. In addition, without it, we can have variation of Kitty’s products. The original 1974 Kitty wears blue clothes and a red ribbon. Primary colors have also

added light pink and more varied colors. After 1987, Kitty wears different types of more varied clothes. Kitty's ribbon, her trademark, also changes with different colors and shapes such as flowers, and cherries. To represent Kitty's biggest change, Sanrio creates Kitty's new boyfriend, Daniel, because Kitty never has a boyfriend before.

TABLE I  
KITTY'S CHANGE

Year	Change
1983	Kitty's outline was taken away
1985	Kitty's body became larger
1987	Kitty became fashionable
1994	Kitty's ribbon changed
1999	A new boyfriend, Daniel, was created



Fig. 2 Kitty's Change from 1974 to 1994



Fig. 3 Kitty's Change from 1997 to 2014

Currently, the 50,000 Kitty's products outnumber Disney's products on the market, and are sold in 60 countries. Sanrio depends on 80 percent of its profits on Kitty's production in-house. In 2012, Sanrio sells Kitty's license to 3,000 stores in the US Walmart [4]. Moreover, they enthusiastically work for license business in the European market, and now they are serious about going into the Chinese market to establish Asian companies. These products include not only daily use products such as food, clothes, cosmetics, furniture, but also stock certificate and financial products such as gold coins, and transportation vehicles such as taxis, buses, and train. In Japan, Kitty's labels can be found in food, cosmetics, furniture, buses, cars, PCs, jewelry, stationary items, just to name a few. You can say we are saturated with Kitty's products nationwide.

While most Kitty products are affordable, there are some Kitty which is more expensive such as PC, Robot, Cristal Dog House, Handbag, and Platinum Jewelry. PC Hello Kitty LaVie Laptop Swarovski is decorated with precious stones on the PC which costs \$1,825. Kitty Robot can communicate and recognize faces with a CMOS server with a price tag of \$6,299.

Hello Kitty Cristal Dog House costs \$31,660 which was decorated with gorgeous crystals, with Kitty's face designed on the bottom surface. The Hello Kitty Handbag costing \$100,000 is decorated with Swarovski crystals. The most expensive Kitty is of Platinum metal made to commemorate the 35th anniversary of Kitty created by Austria's Glass manufacturer, Swarovski at the sum of \$152,585 [5].

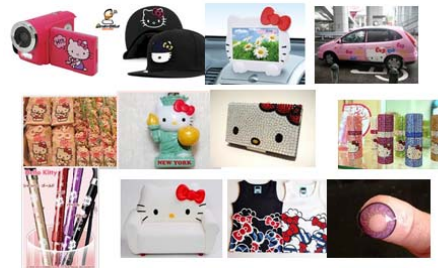


Fig. 4 Kitty's Products (Right Bottom: a Contact Lense with Six Kittys)



Fig. 5 Expensive Kitty

If you live in Japan, you can easily collect Kitty's goods just as you frequent a McDonald, or Kentucky Fried Chicken fast food restaurant, you can find Kitty's items such as dolls, stickers, plates, lunch boxes in collaboration with other companies. Kitty's shows and movies have produced and shown. Kitty also remade the world great fairy tales such as Thumbelina, Cinderella, White Snow, Hansel and Gretel, and etc. In addition, board and card games and Nintendo DS electronic games featuring the Kitty character were also created.

Moreover, Kitty celebrated its anniversary by collaborating with works with designers such as Anna Sui, and Leatherette. In addition, in KITTY EX, an exhibition of art and fashion, as a Kitty's thirtieth anniversary in 2004, more than 100 artists participated in the event. As a memory of 50th anniversary of Sanrio's establishment in 2010, they publish Vogue with a Hello Kitty's key chain as an extra free gift, and designers such as Dior and John Galliano have designed Kitty's products.

#### B. Kitty's Popularity and Kittler

What makes Kitty so popular? There were several reasons to Kitty's popularity. Kitty is popular among people in all generation, all females and males, any nation, and any ethnicity. It is especially popular among teenage girls in many nations. Indeed, Sanrio is paying attention to produce Kitty products for people in diverse generations. As the US writer,

Mark McVeigh, cites, “through its marketing of Hello Kitty, Sanrio has made a concentrated effort to tie together within a single individual different modes of self-presentation that chronologically correspond to girlhood, female adolescence, and womanhood: ‘cute,’ ‘cool,’ and ‘camp’” [6]. This implies that most teenage girls see Kitty as ‘cute,’ and indeed, Kitty is a symbol of “cute” representation, “female adolescence” sees Kitty as “cool,” and womanhood “camp.” The company creates different Kitty productions with different designs. For example, Sanrio makes a metal pink leather wallet with small illustration of Hello Kitty for womanhood, while they create a bright pink enamel wallet with the large Hello Kitty logos and a small illustration of Kitty for female adolescence, and for girlhood, they make a red plastic wallet with a huge Hello Kitty figure. Accordingly, Sanrio identifies products to those whom to be targeted to.

Now, let’s take a look at the reasons for Kitty’s popularity. Firstly, Kitty’s products are extremely affordable, so even elementary school children can afford to buy them with their pocket money. Almost every girl in Japan has some kinds of Kitty’s products at home or workplaces. Secondly, through mass marketing, publicity and public acceptance, everybody knows Kitty. The country is filled with Kitty’s goods. Kitty shares so much with us in our daily life that we can naturally purchase and have them at home and in public. Even if we go to souvenir shops in every service area on highway or train station, or even at the airport, we can see Kitty’s good luck charms, handkerchiefs, key chains, pencils, erasers, and etc. In other words, Kitty can be a good model of mass production in society. Japanese will purchase the latest iteration of Kitty and related products, and anxiously wait for new Kitty introductions with different versions to purchase. It is similar to the Apple fans waiting for the newest IPAD to hit the market. Not only can we buy Hello Kitty PCs, cameras, car navigation systems, suitcases, shoes, clothes, and etc., but also we can buy color contact lenses. We see the repeated Kitty “supply and buy” cycle in our capitalist society. Thirdly, one of the reasons of popularity is that Kitty brings us comfort. Kitty’s round face and a round body give us a sense of ease, soft and fluffy images, and this is one of the reasons that Kittyler collects a lot of Kitty’s stuffed animals, cushions, pillows, futons, and etc. Finally, Kitty shows its simplistic form. Its facial expression is simple, and is easy to make a change of face and appearance such as attaching a mouth or a hair. Kitty is popular because its face is simple without a mouth. Without a mouth, Kitty has a multitude expressions and emotions such as delight, anger, sorrow, and pleasure.

In fact, Kitty was extremely popular during 1990s. Many people think Kitty is “kawaii.” According to Oxford dictionary, “kawaii” defines “the quality of being cute, or products that are cute.” There are many celebrities who were lovers of Kitty. Thus, enthusiasm of Kitty’s collector is called “Kittyler” who wears Kitty’s product and coordinate with Kitty’s belongings. For example Mariah Carey is a Kittyler who has a Kitty’s electric guitar, and fills her room with Kitty’s products. With an increase of Kittyler, we will examine the Sanrio’s market strategy in the next section.

### III. SANRIO’S SALES STRATEGY & BUSINESS MODEL

Sanrio tries to gain more and more profits in the market under favor of Kitty’s popularity. Higher profit objective there is Sanrio’s corporate strategy. Although Sanrio has gained high profits in Japan, they try to globalize their sales in the world market and compete with the likes of Disney through licensing. Because Disney gains 25 percent of its profit rate in the world whereas Sanrio targets 27 percent in March, 2015, now Sanrio establishes in Italy, and sells its license to European countries.

Looking at the increasing growth of profit rate is shown by Mark McVeigh: “Sanrio’s profits are enormous, totaling 120 million yen in 1998. In 1999, that equals approximately one billion US dollars” [7]. As he shows, its profits rapidly grew in 1999. Furthermore, the sales in 2007 were higher than in 2009, the sales profits are 6.2 billion in 2007, and 14.9 billion in 2011. Unfortunately, Japan’s national budget was 1.5 billion in the red with decrease of sales in Japan. However, total sales profit increased to 8.7 billion due to positive overseas sales and production growth. Moreover, strong yen is an opportunity of acquisitions. Sanrio’s profit rate was 25 percent in September, 2010, and their objective to attain 27 percent of sales profit in March, 2015 was within reach. As they establish license business in Milan, Italy, Sanrio changed its sales business to license business of “Hello Kitty” brand and has sold its license to other European countries. In 2012, Sanrio also sold the Kitty’s licenses to 3,000 Walmart stores in the US. Moreover, they are serious about going into Asia especially the Chinese market to promote their Kitty brand products.

According to McVeigh, there are 15,000 Hello Kitty products. Sanrio receives 3% in royalties every time a company sells a product bearing a Sanrio character” [8]. As much of these products, Sanrio gains royalties which make the company more profitable. Indeed, rapidly enough, the Kitty brand spread all over the world. Now Sanrio develops business in the field of intellectual property. Sanrio also considers to acquisition of other characters in the future.

### IV. COMPARISON WITH AMERICAN GIRL

As we have seen, Kitty is a character which has a variety of products. Now, taking up American Girl, a doll, which also sells a variety of doll products, uniqueness of both products will be analyzed. Although American Girl is a doll which has Historical Character Doll, and My American Girl Doll, it provides a variety of characters with varied products such as magazines, movies, DVDs, and etc [9]. Thus, comparing two characters, Kitty and American Girl will be meaningful.

Firstly, American Girl, will be introduced. Then, Kitty’s and American Girl’s differences and commonality of their products will be examined. American Girls was produced by the Pleasant Company, a children’s Publisher. The company sold 80 million dolls and more than 90 million books [10]. American girl, an 18 inch size with enamel material elasticity, has rather a human-like appearance. It has two characteristics. One is to manufacture a historical doll. If you buy a doll, a history book of the doll’s era is attached with it. We can see that American



Doll has an important historical element to carry over the US history from the past to the present.

Another characteristic is to choose a doll which is similar to personality. You can choose hairstyles, colors of their hair, eyes, and skin. For example, you can choose colors of skin such as light skin, light skin with freckles, medium skin, and dark skin. For colors of hair, there are light blond hair, honey-blond hair, brown hair, and black-brown hair. Hairstyle are short hair, long bangs style, straight, layer, wavy hairstyles, curly hair, and etc., with sixty variations. For colors of eyes, there are blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes, hazel eyes, and etc. Thus, you can choose your favorite hair style, eye color and skin color, accessories, and costumes. Many girls who buy a doll often change a doll's appearance to look like themselves. Some go to a hair salon in the store to set doll's hair style or have their pictures taken with a doll. Many consumers treat their dolls as their alter ego, as they create, dress and model the dolls like themselves. It is fantastic to purchase a doll which can personifies oneself.

Now, we see the philosophy of two companies and how they target their buyers. Sanrio uses themes such as respect, love, and express as a social communication philosophy. A Media assistant manager of Sanrio Co., Ltd., Mr. Kato says that it is a company of creation of characters, planning, development, and communication of gift productions [11]. Based on Sanrio's website, it is a license business company which produces, raises, and lends characters to other companies. Moreover, Sanrio targets a growing relationship with others by giving small gifts which are Sanrio characters.

Pleasant company's corporate philosophy is "to enrich the lives of American girls by fostering pride in the traditions of growing up female in America and celebrating the lifestyle of girls today" [12]. In other words, by possessing a doll, they wish to take pride in the tradition of their country and lead abundant life.

In the below, Kitty and American Girl are compared to see commonality and differences.



Fig. 6 American Girl

Considering the above, both American Girl and Kitty give consumers an option of their new creation of their products. Thus, creative access to products provides possibility of unique characteristics of objects. In the case of Hello Kitty, you go to KITTY LAB, answer a brief Kitty quiz, and then select your favorite Kitty's head, eyes, hair, ears, whiskers, palms, body shape, ribbon, and accessories. In this way, consumers have creative inputs to creating their version of its original form in

accordance to their preference. At the discretion of consumers' option, original products easily alter its shape, and consumers can even take pictures as a record of their creation.

TABLE II  
COMPARISON OF KITTY AND AMERICAN GIRL

Products	Kitty	American Girl
	Character	Doll
Corporate Philosophy	Respect, love, and express as a social communication	To enrich the lives of American girls by fostering pride in the traditions of growing up female in America and celebrating the lifestyle of girls today
Average consumers	Teenage Girls	Teenage Girls
Uniqueness	Mainly Female of all ages KITTY LAB	American Girl Doll
Option of Products	Choice of parts of Kitty's face	Choice of colors of hair, eyes, skin, and hairstyles



Fig. 7 Variation of Kitty

## V. CONTROVERSY TO ARRANGEMENT

Although Kitty has been popular, there has been a lawsuit of character, facial expression and body appearance. Unlike American Girl, Kitty can be arranged its facial expression with a permission of the third Kitty creator, Yuko Yamaguchi, also an executive of Sanrio. With the advancement of Kitty's facial expression, now consumers create their own Kitty with digital character. Thus, Kitty has more discretionary flexibility for customers to choose their options.

### A. Lawsuit and Controversy

There is a lawsuit of Sanrio rabbit character, Cathy. In October, 2010, Dick Bruner, an illustrator of the rabbit Miffy, sued Sanrio for similarity of a character of a rabbit, Sanrio's Cathy, Kitty's friend. In November, 2010, Amsterdam Court judged to accept a claim of Bruna, and ordered Sanrio to prohibit selling its production in three Benelux countries. Moreover, they ordered indirect enforcement to Sanrio if the company would appeal against a sentence [13]. However, in November, 2011, Sanrio and Bruner both dropped a demand and settled a lawsuit with, and they compromised to use law costs of reconstruction support to The Great East Japan Earthquake [14]. Another dispute was in January, 2013, when Kofu city shopping district decorate Kitty's stone statue. Since they haven't made an agreement with licensing, the statue was taken away [15]. Later, with license, it was resettled.

The other dispute was Kitty's fundoshi, G-string, in June, 2013. It was criticized because Kitty's bare hips were shown

though it is a style of wearing during Yamagasa festival in Fukuoka. The sale company suspended sales, and the model line was abandoned [16]. It is true that since Kitty outline was taken away in 1983, its shape has changed remarkably and its face became more flexibility. Because of its flexibility of shapes, another dispute related to Kitty's tongue was occurred. Kiss Kitty's tongue and Kitty's fundoshi became controversies, but producers admitted its change. With their acceptance, there became more variation of Kitty's production.

Kitty is popular because its face is simple without a mouth. But what happens if there is a Kitty with a mouth? Do you think you prefer with the version with a mouth or without it? Some animation has Kitty's mouth to show its expression of emotions such as delight, anger, sorrow, and pleasure from one situation to another. Because of its flexibility of shapes, another dispute related to Kitty's tongue was occurred. Kiss Kitty's tongue and Kitty's fundoshi became controversial, but produces relented to the change and additional variations to Kitty were added to production to broaden appeal and increase sales.

In a TV program, NHK special titled "Pursuit! Mystery of Hello Kitty's Creates a Furor" broadcasted on May 29, 2012, Kitty's Milan office collaborated with Kiss, a music rock band [17]. The band members wanted to attach a tongue to the character which was one of the member's trademarks [18]. This caused consternation to an Italian designer, because she knew that it was a company's principle not to alter the face of Hello Kitty. However, due to the persistent demand from the client, the designer relented and added a small tongue, and resigned from her designer position shortly. Seeing a tongue on Kitty's face, the creator of Kitty, Yuko Yamaguchi, concurred to put a tongue on the face. Thus, the "KISS × HELLO KITTY" character with an added tongue was created.



Fig. 8 Kitty's Controversy

#### B. Arrangement and KITTY LAB

With the ability to morph Kitty into different expressions, shapes and styles, a KITTY Laboratory known as Kitty LAB for customers, was created. KITTY LAB is a rotary attraction in Puroland and Harmonyland in Japan. To get Kitty's DNA called KTA, you play games and get Kitty's facial parts to create your own Kitty. KTA embeds RFID Chip, and every data of the games have been recorded. In the games, you answer questions on the screen, or wave at a camera, speak on the microphone. Since the time limit is short and if you don't answer soon, the game decides your options. After answering all the questions, take a picture with your created Kitty character illustration at a photo shop, which costs 500 yen. It is

a unique attraction to create your own Kitty with computer activities in that Kitty and American Girl give a choice for customers to arrange their preference of representation of objects. Considering consumers' choice of facial expression, American Girl can select colors of skin, eyes, and hair styles. However, in Kitty's case, there are different types of shapes such as no hair, only ears, blond hair, black hair, and etc..

It is unique that consumers can choose and change product's facial expression with their own choice because usually because of trademarks, character's shapes or faces are restricted as we can see Snoopy by Charles Schultz. Kitty's choice of its face gives consumers flexibility and enjoyment to create their own Kitty. In this way, we can interpret consumers realize their own autonomy by selection of products, which can lead their representation of identity.



Fig. 9 KITTY LAB

#### VI. CONCLUSION

In the above, it is clear that Kitty's and American Girl's cases show consumers' choice of detailed parts of face not only to choose to create a new character, but also to show their preference and their own image. To be more precise, a sociologist Roberta Sassatelli defines, "modern consumers are asked to actively participate in the process of de-commoditization, producing themselves as the source of value" (150), consumers need to establish their own value rather than depending on commodities. Moreover, "not simply having actively to choose, but having to choose in ways that enhance your identity as a source of value" [19], consumers have to choose and find their identity by choosing commodities. This also fits in the case of Kitty and American Girl that consumers make self-choice with their own value because both products can offer consumers' preference by making them select the parts of faces.

When consumers purchase products, they make choices. As a brand strategist, Thomas Gad, and a brand researcher, Annette Rosencrantz, define that commodities represent consumers' points of view and desire of products and they call it personal branding [20]. This means that consumers see themselves through products in a certain brand which they can match their brand image. Knowing their preference and trend of consumers' products, producers also know consumers' own choice and preference to increase their sales. Moreover, they can improve their images as consumers have their own flexibility to determine own preference.

Now people make their own version by using company's characters. As a culturist, Celia Lury, says, "consumer choice"

is indeed one of the most important means by which our society thinks about individual agency and autonomy, and makes judgments about individuals” [21]. Consumers can make a choice of their favorite parts and can make their own brand. In other words, they can personify themselves in creating a new or modified version of the original character which will express their own individual identity. In other words, the ability to shape dolls appearance represents consumers’ self-identity as evident in the Kitty and American Girl.

#### NOTES

Images of the paper are used from the related websites of American Girl, Hello Kitty, Kiss, etc. respectively.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] 国民金融公庫調査部『日本の身の回り品小売業』中小企業リサーチセンター 1983年. p. 62.
- [2] Sanrio. Web. 28 November 2012.
- [3] Ibid. Web. 28 November 2012.
- [4] 朝日新聞『スモールギフト・ビッグスマイル』p.6. 2011年7月8日.
- [5] Divirgilio, Andrea. “Most Expensive Hello Kitty Items.” Web. 6 July 2011.
- [6] McVeigh, Mark. “How Hello Kitty Commodities the Cute, Cool and Camp.” *Journal of Material Culture*. 2000. pp.226-7.
- [7] Ibid. p. 226.
- [8] Ibid. pp. 229-230.
- [9] American Girl. Web. 15 September 2011.
- [10] Morriss, Andrew. “Selling History with Dolls.” *Foundation for Economic Education*. May 2003. p.5.
- [11] 朝日新聞『スモールギフト・ビッグスマイル』p.6. 2011年7月8日. p. 6.
- [12] Medina, Veronica. *Theorizing American Girl*. Columbia: University of Missouri, 2007. p.1.
- [13] 産経新聞『著作権侵害でサンリオ提訴』2010年10月22日. p. 2.
- [14] 日経新聞『訴訟の費用、震災の寄付に』2011年6月7日. p. 2.
- [15] 朝日新聞『甲府のキティ神社、3日で撤去』2013年1月29日. p. 4.
- [16] 産経新聞『ふんどしキティ商標法違反か』2013年6月28日. p. 3.
- [17] NHK. “Pursuit! Mystery of Hello Kitty’s Creates a Furor” *NHK*. 29 May 2012.
- [18] *Everything Kiss*. Web. 23 October 2013.
- [19] Sassatelli, Roberta. *Consumer Culture*. London: Sage, 2007. p.150.
- [20] Gad, Thomas, and Annette Rosencrantz. *Managing Brand Me*. New York: Momentum, 2002. xxii.
- [21] Lury, Celia. *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011. p.214.