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Popular Culture

by Jochen Hung and Rachel Gillett

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FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

Popular culture is a slippery concept and scholars continue to argue over its definition. How scholars define it depends on their assumptions about "the popular." The following text focuses primarily on the concept as it has unfolded in Western scholarship. In an influential introduction to the topic, John Storey (2008) identified six ways of defining popular culture, which can be condensed into three main approaches: folk culture, mass culture, and pop culture.

The first approach, drawing on folk culture as the source of popular culture, sees it as originating "from below," as in from non-elite groups such as the peasants or working class. In this perspective, "popular" means "of the people for the people" (Storey 2008: 9). This folk culture is often seen as "authentic"—a natural, collective form of expression produced by a group rather than by self-conscious creators for an elite audience.

The idea of "mass culture" is very different. It defines popular culture as thoroughly commercialized, produced "from above" (by self-conscious producers working within an institutionalized production model such as a radio, record, television, or film company) for passive and easily manipulated consumers (Storey 2008: 8–9). In this context, "popular" means favored by the majority and suitable to its tastes. This consumerist culture is seen not only as clearly inferior to elite culture, but also as a site of power relations between dominant and subordinate groups in society. The elite, or dominant group, use popular culture to reinforce ideas and practices that support their position of power and influence. This definition of popular culture can appear very cynical as it implies culture is used to create consent and conformity. However, this perspective also opens the possibility that consumers can resist and negotiate the meanings in the cultural product.

The conceptualization of popular culture as "pop culture" is rooted in a postindustrial and postmodern blurring of the distinction between "high" and "low" culture (Storey 2008: 12). Both audiences and producers question the categorization of some cultural products as elite and others as designed for mass consumption. This definition identifies "popular" as having a specific style—irreverent, jaunty, accessible—rather than showing a qualitative difference to elite culture.

Historians have used all three of these approaches to popular culture. However, with the development of cultural history from the 1960s, the focus on popular culture as an important site of negotiation of power relations and of identity formation has come to the fore.

The Concept Over Time

People in ancient, medieval, and early modern times already had a sense of “the popular” as in the culture of the many rather than the elite (Parker 2011: 149). However, scholarly interest in this traditional popular culture was sparked by its perceived decline: with the unfolding of industrialization and nationalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, scholars such as J.G. Herder and Jakob Grimm began collecting fairy tales and Volkslieder, traditional folk songs, as expressions of a supposedly natural, communal, organic culture of ordinary people that was beginning to disappear (Burke 1978: 3–4). Herder contrasted this “culture of the people” with the elite culture of a learned minority (Parker 2011: 148). It was often seen as morally superior, as it seemed to express the “true” spirit of “the people” who were the foundation of the nation.

With the growth of modern media such as the penny press, film, and radio in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the idea of a “mass culture” took hold. This notion was very different to the idea of organic folk culture: it denoted a culture “subject to purely commercial influences and implicitly designed to neutralise political consciousness” (Hewitt 1999: 353). This commercialized popular culture initially targeted “the masses,” as in the working-class urban populations of the Western world, but it was soon embraced by a middle-class audience. The idea of a mass culture transcending social differences and homogenizing cultural tastes sparked fears among conservative and leftist critics alike. The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, for example, described it in 1929 as the “barbarism” of the mass, which “crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select” (1957: 18). Marxist theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer described mass culture as “products of the culture industry,” produced on an industrial scale for easy consumption, which bound people’s leisure time into the capitalist system of labor, while distracting them from their exploitation: “The products of the culture industry are such that they can be alertly consumed even in a state of distraction. But each one is a model of the gigantic economic machinery, which … keeps everyone on their toes, both at work and in the leisure time which resembles it” (2002: 100).

After the Second World War, rising levels of prosperity and leisure time meant that commercialized popular culture came to dominate the cultural life of many societies. This process changed the meaning of popular culture itself, which scholars began to link to processes of cultural production and consumption, rather than to the cultural practices of a particular community (Hewitt 1999: 356). This new meaning was reflected in the term “pop culture.” Still, the interwar tradition of viewing popular culture as stupefying “mass culture” persisted after 1945. In his influential study on British working-class life, The Uses of Literacy, published in 1957, Richard Hoggart described illustrated magazines, pop songs, and milk bars as “candy-floss world” and “shiny barbarism” that eroded traditional, communal popular culture (1971: 171–223).

In the 1960s, however, the concept of popular culture began to change. Intellectual and cultural movements such as postmodernism and pop art attacked the traditional distinction between “high” and “low” culture (Storey 2008: 182–4). The foundation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in 1964 and the Journal of Popular Culture (JPC) at Bowling Green State University in 1967 affirmed popular culture's value as an object of academic study. In 1972, the JPC's founding editor, Ray Browne, suggested that it consisted of "all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally, though not necessarily, disseminated through the mass media," including folk and mass culture and ranging from Shakespeare's plays to jazz and Las Vegas shows (2006: 21). Mukerji and Schudson, working in the field of cultural sociology, came to a similarly broad definition, that popular culture refers to "the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population" (1991: 3). These conceptualizations still contrasted popular and elite cultural forms, but they emphasized the centrality of popular culture in modern society and thus the importance of studying it.

This expanded definition and engagement with popular culture emphasized the agency of its audience, an idea forcefully explicated by Stuart Hall, one of the founders of the CCCS. Hall acknowledged the influence of commercial popular culture and the asymmetric power relationship between its producers and consumers. However, he showed that the audience was not helpless. They had the ability to "recode" the "dominant or preferred culture" that is to infuse it with their own meanings (Hall 2002: 187). Hall shifted the focus in studies of popular culture from content, venues of dissemination or mode of production, to power relations (Harsin and Hayward 2013: 202). This was further developed by other CCCS scholars who examined the importance of youth in popular culture. In his influential 1979 study of British subcultures Dick Hebdige emphasized the "creative impulses" of teenagers who recoded the meaning of consumer items such as ornamental rocker jackets (Hebdige 1979: 128). John Fiske, similarly, rejected the idea of a manipulative "mass culture" by defining popular culture as "made from within and below, not imposed from without or above" (1989a: 3). Objects of popular culture, such as TV programs, jeans, and shopping malls, were not just passively consumed, but functioned "as a cultural resource to be used" (Fiske 1989b: 10–11). In sum, as the 1990s dawned, popular culture was seen as site on which people constantly negotiated and contested the commercial interests of the "culture industry" while simultaneously consuming the products it created (Fiske 1989b: 32).

At the same time, a new feminist approach reconceptualized popular culture as a field that perpetuated "the prevailing sexual division of labour and orthodox conceptions of femininity and masculinity" (Strinati 1995: 167). Angela McRobbie ([1980] 2002) critiqued the normative focus on male youth culture and consumption in the work of fellow CCCS trained scholars. Turning to modern mass media content, such as films and soap operas, Laura Mulvey and Gaye Tuchmann (Mulvey 1975; Tuchmann 1979), among others, shed light on how popular culture constructed and disseminated gender norms and patriarchal ideology. The early feminist analysis was very much rooted in the idea of "mass culture" and the field has evolved since then, shedding the ideas of a "simple, direct and causal relationship between the media and their audience" and that "the media … represent genders in a direct and uniform manner" (Strinati 1995: 188). Another issue feminist approaches to popular culture are grappling with is that of intersectionality and "the extent to which gender can be studied in isolation from other social inequalities" (Strinati 1995: 207).

Since the reconceptualization of popular culture as an important site of negotiation of power relations in the second half of the twentieth century, the modes of production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture have changed dramatically. First of all, pop culture has gone global, “generating new forms of cultural hybridity” (Storey 2008: 209). Much of what has been discussed above relates mostly to Western popular culture. Cultural globalization has often been described as “cultural imperialism,” the imposition of that culture on the rest of the world (Miller 2015: 5). However, many scholars reject this view: while there might be “dominant” and “subordinate” cultures, their interaction is characterized by “reciprocal exchanges, diffusion, and conditioning” (Canclini 1993: 26). The consequence, as Néstor García Canclini has pointed out, is that we need to think of “popular cultures” in the plural, rather than of one homogenous popular culture (1993: 27).

Second, cultural content is no longer defined and shaped by its channel of dissemination, such as books, cinema or television. In our current “convergence culture,” flows of content are distributed across different platforms in a process that involves new technologies, new distribution models, and the active participation of consumers (Storey 2008: 210–11).

Interpretations

The historical changes described above offer some insights into scholarly controversies about popular culture and how to study it. Debates still rage over what counts as popular culture, over its aesthetic worth, and its value as a serious object for academic study. As the field has developed, scholars have attached differing importance to examining the content of the cultural product versus its use-value within communities. They have stressed processes of production and dissemination over content. More recent debates include the role of the consumer-fan in shaping popular culture, and the accusation that the concept and the domain of study is dominated by left-wing analysts and has ignored right-wing popular culture.

An early interpretive controversy arose from the definition of popular culture as subversive folk culture that contested elite oppression and social change. E.P. Thompson (1963) argued “rough music,” literally the loud clashing noises (sometimes musical) used by peasants and the fledgling working class to signal disapproval, was a backward-looking yet politicized response to emerging industrialization. This “popular-culture-as-resistance” interpretation challenged the Frankfurt school’s “popular-culture-as-production” one.

Critics, however, argued Thompson’s conception imagined a static folk culture. Raymond Williams, in contrast, stressed the dynamic interplay of production, consumption, feeling, and meaning-making in his understanding of culture, which opened the interpretive field further than Thompson. He also stressed the importance of taking desire (and its manipulation) seriously. Others suggested that a careful study of cultural processes showed a negotiated acceptance of industrialization and even argued that popular culture could be defined as the folk culture of industrialization rather than a reaction to it (Levine 1992).

Stuart Hall’s intervention was a sophisticated conceptualization of popular culture that stressed the interactions between top-down production that reinforced social norms, active consumption, and the audience’s agency in receiving and contesting or negotiating the messages of popular culture (reception). From the groundbreaking work of Simon Frith (1990) to Karim Hammou’s (2016) recent analyses of how French rap found mainstream acceptance, scholars following Hall understand there is an interaction between how popular culture is produced (who governs access to the means of producing it) as well as the audience’s agency in consuming it. Hammou’s work exemplifies the influence of Bourdieu’s analysis of taste in popular culture and in some ways retreat's from Hall's emphasis on agency, showing how "taste-makers" have limited the role of the "grass-roots" participants in creating popular culture (2016). Scholars of film similarly pay attention to the "greenlighting" process of major Hollywood studios as well as of video games (Sepinwall 2021).

The pronounced focus on material conditions of production in popular culture, however, shifts away (sometimes intentionally) from a focus on textual analysis that raises the question of whether and how scholars should interpret content. What weight can we give to the intention of the creators and the meaning they wanted to convey versus the text as a series of signs that the audience has the power to actively interpret? What is the balance between this and the role of industry and marketing in controlling dissemination? Some scholars passionately defend the need to interpret the text, rather than the structures of production or its reception (Traube 1996). Some continue to doubt our ability to register the influence and impact of cultural products on audiences and social mentalities (Grandy 2019).

The role of reception and the "use-value" of popular culture for the group producing it, is another area of debate. Emphasizing these aspects blurs high/low art distinctions. It suggests that studying popular culture is as essential to understanding society as studying elite culture. It therefore merits scholarly examination. Lawrence Levine (1988), in this vein, argued that there were multiple variants of popular culture that shaped American identity/ies so the idea of a universal cultural "canon" was inadequate. In the early twenty-first century this claim does not seem controversial. Yet ferocious argument between Allan Bloom and Levine on this front shows how fiercely some scholars resisted the inclusion of popular culture in scholarly study (Painter 2006). Levine's theorization of "middle-brow" culture as a component of popular culture has also generated skepticism.

The question of who is included in analyses of popular culture, and who it represents is an ongoing point of critique. Early formulations of the concept relied heavily on the English and European context and generalized from them, missing complexities of racialization and ethnicity that Stuart Hall partially addressed. This limitation in the field has drawn fire from many different directions. Paul Gilroy's (1993) work on a Black Atlantic conception of identity-formation involving and relying on popular culture accused (popular) cultural studies of being so dominated by English scholars working from a nationalist and Marxist viewpoint that it had ignored transnational and racializing processes. Tricia Rose (20071994), among other scholars of rap, exposed the false binaries of commercialization/authentic "folk" creation. Both (among others) illustrated the importance of popular culture for Black diasporic representation. They show that representation has a political dimension and articulates political concerns. The sales figures of Marvel's Black Panther confirm the power of representation and yet the ongoing inextricability of audience agency, resistant potential, and capitalist production. A parallel development has been to acknowledge complex lateral relations of power and difference between nondominant groups in popular culture production (Cancilini 1993; Limón 1983; Lipsitz 1990). Many of these scholars also engage in a broader academic debate over how, whether, and when scholars should position themselves and their own experience in their work.

The concept of popular culture and the issue of whose experiences are included has reemerged in discussions in celebrity studies. Cynicism about the aesthetic worth of the new social media and reality TV stars is a recent version of long-standing conflicting evaluations within popular cultural and cultural studies that ironically echo former debates over high/low culture. Recent work, designed for students as well as scholars that explores both the debates and the genres which spark them reflects the evolution of popular culture as a vital subfield within history and history education research (De Groot 2016; Grever and Van Nieuwenhuyse 2020; Haydn and Ribbens 2019). They begin to address the fact that Star Wars, Monty Python, Twin Peaks, punk music, and even heavy metal have been accorded more attention in popular culture studies than more popular and populist works such as the Brady Bunch, Game of Thrones, or Britney Spears, or Kim Kardashian and Donald Trump. The skepticism with which some cultural studies scholars and audiences view these figures does not offset their enormous sales figures/viewership, their media saturation, and thus their presumed reach. Middle-class and elite audiences can exhibit an Adorno-esque dismissal of their cultural worth. The emerging field of fan studies, with its focus on extremely active communities of consumers of popular culture, could be seen as both the pinnacle and a reaction to this process. Ignoring the impact of celebrities and reality TV on audiences and upon the zeitgeist, risks neglecting major societal processes and influences. In the field of International Relations, for example, Donald Trump's reality TV origins and his populist appeal has been used to illustrate how vital popular culture is for understanding world politics (Crilley 2021).

This scholarly elitism is also evident in critiques made in the 2000s, by former champions of popular culture studies, such as Lawrence Grossberg (2006) and Angela McRobbie (2000), who argued that the intensive focus on representation and the importance ascribed to cultural studies by that stage had impoverished academic (and societal) engagement with the domains of society more likely to achieve meaningful change such as economy and politics (Grossberg 2006). This critique has been echoed in authoritative summaries of the field, which charge that it has drifted toward a "cultural populism," the uncritical celebration of any kind of cultural expression, without much concern for economic and technological determinations (Storey 2008: 213–16). Old debates, new bottles.

This critique is related to one in which many popular culture scholars are, themselves, implicated. Popular culture studies often generates analysis by scholars who are politically left-wing and who share some of the Marxist-derived assumptions of the CCCS. Recent graduate work and funded projects have argued for the need to give more serious attention to the popular culture of the right wing and to gauge the influence and innovation of right-wing fascism and white supremacy in the same way as scholars have tackled the complexities and nuanced intersection of other groups and with processes of popular cultural production.

Conclusion

The three approaches to popular culture, as folk culture, mass culture, and pop culture, still inform the field. They have been enriched by attention to practices and processes of production and dissemination as well as attention to audience agency, power relations, representation, emotion, and transnational and digital modes of circulation. Across a range of disciplines scholars now consider popular culture as a serious avenue for understanding the past. Digitalization, globalization, and the continued recognition of the blurring between "high" and "low" has greatly expanded the concept of popular culture. In the age of Trump and Instagram, everything seems to be popular culture, and this poses deep challenges to how previous definitions and interpretations by historians might offer a useful guide once our present has become the past. Historians and history education scholars interested in popular culture will need to innovate and reach beyond their own discipline to meet the challenge.

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