

POPULAR CULTURE

A.N. Valdivia

Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, USA.

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Summary

There is no agreed definition for the concept of popular culture. Since it began to be discussed, popular culture has often been defined against something else. It is deployed as a discriminating tool. Whether it is elite, folk, authentic, mass culture, or even just culture, these opposites of popular culture signal to us what are the concerns and hopes of a particular era.

Also, the discussion and study of popular culture often involve a reaction to the present, as well as a longing for a past that is not rooted so much in history as in nostalgia. As popular culture becomes a more prominent component of both people's lives and the global economy, there is much more at stake in defining it and controlling it.

As a result popular culture is an area of symbolic and material struggle on a local and global scale.

1. Introduction

Popular culture is a highly debated and contested concept. Some scholars contend that it is an empty concept, filled at different times by different people for different purposes. This observation is astute, as many scholars have defined it, and continue to do so, in different ways. Certainly, definitions vary depending on how one defines "culture" and how one defines "popular", and the former has a much longer history than the latter. Also, definitions depend on the status and location of those doing the defining. We find that often those from elite classes define the terms differently than those from the working classes, regardless of political or ideological stance. Therefore we inherit historically competing definitions of the concept of culture. In contrast, the attention to the popular is quite recent as is the academic study of popular culture, though critiques of it date back to the nineteenth century. The development of technologies and cultural forms which enable the creation and circulation of popular culture globally and, very often, nearly instantaneously, makes the current situation qualitatively and quantitatively different from that of the past when there was more of a possibility of local production, creation and consumption with spatial and technological barriers to circulation and transportation. Contemporary analyses, especially in post-industrial, information economy countries and regions, locate popular culture at the center of the economy and of identity construction. Some analysts see popular culture as *the* site of struggle over meaning and identity in the contemporary world. (See *Identity Formation and Difference in Mass Media*.)

2. Historical Genealogy

To begin to understand the complexity and elasticity of the term "popular culture", it is necessary to trace the development of each of its component words, "culture" and "popular". The earliest definitions of the term culture, dating back to the seventeenth century, related it to basic animals and crops as in agriculture and horticulture. This early "natural growth" definition was later extended to the social world as in the cultivation of ideas and morals. Currently what was originally termed "culture" is actually seen as "nature", the binary opposite of culture.

2.8. Arnold and MacDonald

In the mid-eighteen hundreds, reacting to twin processes of industrialization and urbanization, Mathew Arnold proposed that culture was a pursuit of human perfection and therefore a civilizing agent. Arnold included both knowledge and moral goals in the pursuit of culture and perfection. In Arnold's vision Culture -- that is, elite culture -- was held up as exemplary of that which is best in any given time, and popular culture was denigrated as that which is produced and consumed by those who do not know better. Contemporary examples would be opera as opposed to rap. The Arnoldian formulation actually juxtaposed "culture" to "popular". Arnold saw culture as the civilizing agent of the masses who tended to engage with things such as popular literature. In Arnold's framework of analysis the concept of "popular culture" would have been an oxymoron as the two words contradicted each other. Shakespeare was literature and culture whereas more popular forms of fiction actually worked against civilization. The fear of

anarchy was very much rooted in a loss of control over people's cultural practices and consumption.

Arnold began a long tradition of locating culture in the realm of the elite classes who, in turn, needed to guide and protect the masses from their popular tendencies. As an educator, Arnold also privileged education as the vehicle for teaching culture to the masses, which otherwise would lead society to anarchy, the opposite of civilization. The masses were posited as unable to discern between cultural texts, and as easily manipulated. The culture produced and consumed by the elite classes, which included literature, music, art and sculpture, was deemed the unifying element for the survival and continuity of the modern nation state. The culture produced by the masses was not seen as culture but rather as worthless trash and therefore something to be eradicated or, at least, overcome. The learned classes had a mission to educate the masses, and the latter had the possibility of learning but not necessarily of producing any culture on their own. Clearly Arnold was implicitly setting up a tiered society where a small group would lead and a majority would follow. Arnold's writing was based more on personal reaction to the historical changes of urbanization and industrialization rather than on any empirical or hermeneutic analysis either of institutions or texts. Nonetheless theoretical components, derived from his observations, are still very much alive today in popular discourse and public policy.

Later, in the mid-twentieth century, theorists such as MacDonald in the United States extended this framework of analysis by singling out advertising as the vilest form of the culture aimed at the masses. Strong metaphors of addiction, and moral and physical deterioration were used to describe the relationship between the masses and their cultural practices. MacDonald serves as a link to both Arnold, with his predictions of the end of civilization, and to neo-Marxist scholars, with their concerns about the growing commercialization of culture. (See *Mass Communication and Society*.)

2.9. Frankfurt School

Another powerful formulation of the relationship between culture and the popular stems from a group of scholars writing in the historical period following the First and Second World Wars. Frankfurt School scholars wrote in a climate where they, as Jewish émigrés to the United States, were trying to explain the rise of fascism and the support, or at least the lack of opposition, the working classes apparently gave to the wars and the holocaust. Frankfurt School philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, drawing on Marx and Engels, saw popular culture as the element that diverted the working classes from joining together and taking up their revolutionary struggle against capitalism. Instead they saw the working classes dying on the battlefields killing each other, as sexual, ethnic and religious minorities were being systematically eliminated. A rather watered-down contemporary analogy would be that the revolution would have happened were it not for the fact that the working classes were watching television. Frankfurt scholars, though deploying a leftist framework of analysis, were nonetheless still quite elitist. They did not have much faith in the ability of the working classes to resist the lure and diversion of commercial culture. They offered the concept of "false needs" to refer to people's fulfillment of material desires rather than revolutionary goals. Their critique of popular culture included a neo-Marxist

aversion to culture being industrially produced for profit, as well as disillusionment that those in power had turned the liberatory promise of the enlightenment into controlling and surveying institutions, which limited rather than extended personal liberty. Still, Frankfurt scholars attempted to develop what they saw as the under-theorized component of culture within Marxist thought. They proposed the concept of "cultural industries" to refer to the production, distribution and consumption of culture in a manner similar to other commodities such as flour or cars. A representative essay, written by Adorno, extolled the virtues of classical music as opposed to what he called the repetitive, predictable, and commercially packaged musical form of jazz.

2.10. Gramsci

Proposing a theory of ideology which somewhat restored human agency, Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci claimed that popular culture is *the* arena wherein modern democratic societies struggle over power and meaning. In the absence of force exercised by traditionally repressive regimes, modern so-called democracies employ a far subtler means of control, especially through the social and cultural institutions of education and the mass media. We are rewarded by adhering to rules which maintain the status quo. So for example, getting high grades in school is not so much an indication of learning but more so an indication of how well we have followed the dominant classes' rules. By accepting the common sense of the time, or following the rules of order, as it were, we are essentially contributing to our own oppression. In fact, Gramsci brought the institution of education into the contested arena of popular culture.

In terms of popular culture, we can consume what is centrally and institutionally produced, or we can work to create alternative culture, or struggle over the meaning and uses of that which is available. A film such as *They Live* presents a Gramscian vision in that oppressed peoples attempt to intervene in institutionally produced and controlled broadcasting. Gramsci's formulations returned human agency, especially to the oppressed classes, and presaged other neo-Marxist theorists of culture who would attempt to come to terms with issues of culture from the perspective of the working classes. As such, Gramsci turned the research focus from the masses to the elites whom he saw as indoctrinating and freedom-restricting. This is quite a different perspective from that of Arnold, MacDonald and the Frankfurt scholars who thought the elite culture could save the masses, often from themselves, whereas Gramsci posited that the masses needed to defend themselves, and struggle, especially over the terrain of popular culture, for their autonomy and survival.

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Biographical Sketch

Angharad N. Valdivia is research associate professor at the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Her books include *Geographies of Latinidad: Latina/o Studies into the Twentieth Century* (Duke), *Media Studies Companion* (Blackwell), *A Latina in the Land of Hollywood* (Arizona), and *Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Media* (Sage). Her research focuses on issues of gender, multiculturalism and popular culture especially as they pertain to Latin American and US Latina/o Studies.