

## Sociological Issues in Culture and Critical Theorizing

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to present and critically discuss the long journey of the enterprise of culture from the modernist condition of “high culture” (or “elite culture”) to the contemporary post-modernist (?) condition of “popular culture” (or “mass culture”). It will particularly seek to illustrate and assess the nature, role and implications of the various “modes of reading and interpreting” culture and explore a broad church of arguments and theoretical approaches around the (underlying) ideological functions and connotations of cultural production, distribution and consumption. In addition, a particular emphasis will be given to the so-called structure-culture-agency debate, on the analytical basis of a number of historically significant intellectual (sociological) currents and traditions such as, the Frankfurt School of critical theory, Marxism, post-modernism and cultural studies.

**Key words:** High/popular culture % modernity/postmodernity % critical social theory

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### INTRODUCTION

Within the immensely varied field of the social and human sciences, the definition of the concept of “culture” constitutes a theme of major theoretical and methodological importance, but also of major theoretical and methodological controversies. The inherently complex, multi-faceted and ambiguous “nature” of this concept has historically led to a huge plethora of scholarly formulations, analytic standpoints, descriptive models and explanatory frameworks that systematically attempted to (somehow) contain its surprising “multi-acculturality”, its different aspects, implications and meanings [1].

In its most general sense, “culture” is assumed to refer to the socially inherited totality of symbolic (or ideational) and learned (by imitation and tuition) characteristics of human societies, such as language, beliefs, customs, values, norms and representations of things. And it is precisely these “symbolic” and “learned” characteristics that overwhelmingly designate the particular (unique) identities, attributes and qualities of human social behaviour and (allegedly) *differentiate* it from that of other primates.

Such a general definitional scheme, which comprehensively views culture as an all-pervasive, unified, internally consistent and integrated “whole”, essentially corresponds to a sort of *functionalist cultural approach*. According to this approach, the “systemic” reality of culture, or of “cultural goods and bads”, is entirely independent of the particular power-ridden sites (or contexts) and conditions of its production, or of particular social interests (such as “class interests”) and institutional or state structures. On the contrary, it has, in a Weberian sense, its own (self-referential) logic of evolution.

In spite of the strong “static” and “diachronic” character of these notions, culture (particularly in the Anglo-French tradition), by its almost synonymous use with “*civilization*”, is also involved with “movement”, in a philosophical-epistemological level. In other words, it has an indispensable *dynamic historical perspective*, which can be more or less conceptualized on the powerful theoretical basis of equating cultural production with the ambitious, teleological (purposeful), modernist *civilizing project* (what modern critics of education have regularly called the “hidden curriculum”).

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That is, a well-respected promethean intellectual project which idealistically sees civilization as a linear, accumulative and continuous “channel” of *qualitative societal change*, a “way forward” that ultimately leads, in a gradually progressive and accelerated manner, to the “cultivation” of humanity (as a whole). This particularly involves the *new middle classes*, which sequentially emerged around the early nineteenth century in parallel with the (classical) modern processes of urbanization and industrialization (Karl Marx), rationalization and bureaucratization (Max Weber), social differentiation and secularization (Emile Durkheim), as well as of the massive introduction of new technological and scientific innovations.

### HIGH CULTURE

Moreover, this highly optimistic, intimate and dialectical connection of culture with a global perspective of spiritual and intellectual development, of “cultivating” human nature and “improving” the quality of (private *and* public) life *through education*, substantially signifies the (Sophistic) idea of “*learned culture*”—that is, of a supposedly “higher” cultural form that can be accessed and acquired only by those who are adequately socialized and skilled to understand it and assess its inherent value.

Such an idea undoubtedly possesses certain epistemological connotations: “culture” is here closely associated with the old Enlightenment conceptions of “knowledge” and “order”. This close association also co-articulates culture with the modern *language of reason*: transpositional or context-transcending “truths” and the “unsituated”, all-encompassing system of objectivity and universal rationality, which profoundly trust “man’s maturity” (Immanuel Kant) and generally reject the chains of tradition, superstition and ignorance.

Under the aegis of these assumptions, “learned culture” is effectively theorized as capable to absolutely fulfil (or to be in touch with) the “highest” standards of cultural expression, or “aesthetic excellence” and to monopolize the exclusive (objective and transcendental) criteria of what is “beautiful”, “correct” or “true”, to privilege in aesthetic or value judgments. It thus entails the hierarchical figure of “*elite culture*”, or “*high culture*”, which actively subordinates “style” (or “form”) to “content” (or “substance”), emphasizes quality, integrity and intellectual challenge, rather than “quantity”, “entertainment” and “marketability” or “profitability” and often claims that its taste and rationale overwhelmingly exceed emotional and sentimental bounds. It additionally (and perhaps most importantly) regards its esoteric complexities and elaborated abstractions as being definitely *beyond* the “here and now”.

Therefore, “high culture” (or “high art”) re-presents itself, in a rather dogmatic, authoritative and self-legitimizing manner, as being “*avant-garde*” (that is, “ahead of its time”), as possessing a both “heroic” and “foundational” character. It does *not* seek to refer to the immediate experience (and gratification) of its lay audience or “consumers”, in direct contrast to the over-simplistic, amusing and intellectually non-stimulating signs, images, sounds, messages, information and styles of popular culture (in its various forms). In fact, the boundaries between high art and popular culture have been clearly “distinct”, absolutely “concrete” and “well-established” by elite groups of intellectuals (or “cultural experts”), who traditionally acted as Olympian “legislators” (Zygmunt Bauman), rather than down-to-earth “interpreters”, of the everyday sensory experiences.

In this strictly hierarchized conceptual setting, the (nationalized) whole of modern culture can be seen as being (systemically) articulated by certain *autonomous* spheres, on the epistemological basis of Immanuel Kant's famous *taxonomy of philosophical realms*: his critique of pure reason, practical reason and judgement. The three “autonomous” and “differentiated” spheres, which *mutually constitute* the enterprise of modern culture (and presumably emerged from a “unity” of universal religious values), are: [2]

- C Science: the sphere that mostly refers to the ascetic, disinterested and impartial pursuit of universally valid (and applicable), objective and holistic knowledge and it is organized around the value of “truth”.
- C Law and morality: the sphere that primarily involves “ethics” and the permanent pursuit of “justice” and it is organized around the value of “goodness”.

- C Art: the sphere that primarily involves the pursuit of aesthetic (self-)expression and representation and it is organized around the value of “beauty”.

However, the “functionalist” modes of reading and interpreting modern culture have been significantly questioned and provoked by directly opposing intellectual traditions and strands of thought. These are largely associated with (or inspired by) Karl Marx’s “humanist-structuralist” and “materialist” approach to modern “commoditized” cultural phenomena, which openly expresses a strong antipathy to the whole body of “transcendental” or “foundational” assumptions (about the nature, character and social role of culture).

### CRITICAL APPROACHES

In specific, the Marxian school of thought objectivistically reduces culture to an “epiphenomenal” level, to the level of the rigid and mystifying state structures of modern capitalist society. That means, culture has in principle a strong *ideological* character (an “ideological function”), as an integral part of the “*superstructure*”: the various institutions, values and beliefs that implicitly reflect, reproduce and legitimate the “*infrastructure*” (the “base”)-the relations of production, the material (economic) interests of the “ruling class” (the dominant social group) and the “real” long-standing relationships of exploitation, oppression, domination and subordination (found everywhere in society).

In Marxian terms, members of the dominant social class actually rule not only as owners and administrators of the means of production, but also as “thinkers”, as competent producers of ideas, theories and culture. So, *culture as ideology* intriguingly conceals, re-constitutes and justifies central political power (and the status quo), distorts social reality (imposing a sort of “*false consciousness*”) and leads members of society to passively accept situations, facts and events which are fundamentally against their “real” and “deeper” class interests as “natural” and “normal”.

Although Marx’s inspiring universal call for “critical awareness” and political “consciousness raising” constituted a radical and greatly influential challenge to the “established” or “received” views of nineteenth-century capitalism, its profound inadequacy to develop a penetrating reflexive understanding of the (active) “subject” and “subject-formation” in bourgeois society, its materialist insistence on the “prison” (Louis Althusser) of the “*last-instance economic determinism*” of cultural ideas, as well as the subsequent rapid and substantial changes in the very fabric of capitalist functioning, inevitably opened up the theoretical space for an (heterogeneous) “neo-Marxist” or “revisionist” perspective.

After the Gramscian conception of *cultural hegemony* (as a complex means of holding bourgeois society together) and Georg Lukacs’s *theory of the reification of culture under capitalism* (a broadly Weberian position), this “theoretical space” was importantly covered by a talented group of German critical theorists, the so-called Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, who became particularly concerned with a radical critique of *both* “advanced capitalism” *and* “institutionalized” Marxism, as well as with the elaboration of a new, more appropriate, critical epistemology. In this context, the term “critical” acquires a double meaning: it connotes *both* the exercise of *negative* judgment *and* the philosophical ideals of “doubt”, “search” and unmasking all existing forms of belief, authority and “bourgeois thought”, towards a *positive* reconstruction and betterment of human societies.

Among the main objectives of the Frankfurt School’s influential theoretical programme, the extensive analysis of the complex role of ideology and culture (on the epistemological basis of a claim to “privileged knowledge”) has indeed a primary significance. This extensive analysis essentially aims to develop an interdisciplinary critical social theory that can radically synthesize a philosophical and social mode of thinking (combining sociology, political economy, psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis) and thus serve as an instrument of transforming social conditions (towards social justice), fighting bureaucracy and increasing social rationalization-which supposedly destroys the basic features of individuality and freedom.

The latter objective concerns an interesting comprehensive critique of “*instrumental reason*” (within the wider environment of the “new industrial state”, technological innovations and new giant corporations in monopoly capitalism),

which actually turns the logic (or the “promise”) of Enlightenment into a nightmare, into its exact opposite—that is, mystification and oppression, the use of science and technology to over-produce commodities and stamp out human creativity and freedom; it is an acute critique that rather draws on Max Weber’s ideas on “bureaucratization” and the “iron cage”.

This “nightmare” is perceptively seen as the outcome of the silent function and organization of popular culture (i.e. television, radio, books, magazines and newspapers, pop music, advertising agencies and sporting organizations) which in a large extent characterizes mature (Western) capitalist societies. Actually, popular culture increasingly poses as a serious “*threat to rational inquiry*” (Douglas R. Hofstadter). In this well-known analytic framework, Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), one of the most prominent exponents of Frankfurt School’s critical theory, emphatically stresses the adverse consequences of what he famously calls *culture industry*: “The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment, in which, as Horkheimer and I have noted, enlightenment ... becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. If the masses have been unjustly reviled from above as masses, the culture industry is not among the least responsible for making them into masses and then despising them, while obstructing the emancipation for which human beings are as ripe as the productive forces of the epoch permit” [3].

In order to fully identify the contradictory character, role and implications of capitalist (power-loaded) cultural institutions, the Frankfurt School sociologists adopt the epistemic standpoint of the “detached” or “free-floating” *public intellectual*, which allegedly offers them the unique possibility (and visibility) for a generalized and systematic critique, as well as for “*reaching an optimum of truth*” (Karl Mannheim). This standpoint is essentially based on the central epistemological (positivistic) assumption that the ubiquitous application of “Reason” (a universal set of rational standards) is the only credible means for uncovering or discovering the ultimate “end” (*telos*) of human existence, which is nothing else but human “autonomy” and “emancipation”.

Therefore, a rational critique to cultural developments, or “culture industries”, which have an overwhelming and pervasive ideological functioning and implicitly dominate, manipulate and “shape” the individual in “*mass society*”, becomes a main theoretical and ethical task. This task signifies *both* a continuing adherence to Marxism *and* a project of revision, renewal, innovation and originality.

On the one hand, “industry” remains as a fundamental element of capitalist productive power and closely relates to the Marxian concepts of “money”, “exchange value” (which always dominates “use value” since production, marketing and consumption of commodities over-determine people’s “real” needs) and “*commodity fetishism*”: the alienating process, characteristic of capitalist societies, in which commodities cease to be produced for social use and become absolute “ends in themselves”, dominating man instead of serving him, becoming the ultimate values in the system of production [4].

In other words, in the same sense that a “fetish” implies an *idol* (a “cult object” of symbolic and mystical or metaphysical character) made by human beings who then worship their own creation as a divine force, Marxist sociology (analogously) uses the term “fetishism” in order to refer to a similar process in capitalist society: the capitalist economy is formed by relationships between human beings, who then misconstrue and misrepresent their own creation as an omnipotent, compelling, external and mysterious alien “thing” (and this is a sort of “*reification effect*”) that has a tremendous power over them. In this (reificatory) way, both social relations and cultural dimensions become *objectified* in terms of money (a fact that dominates people’s consciousness).

On the other hand, the prioritization of culture as a central causal factor “in its own right” constitutes an important *constructionist crack* in Marx’s “structuralist” argumentation (and the so-called “revolutionary momentum” of his socio-political thought). It is exactly in this analytic setting that Adorno systematically attempts to illustrate the basic characteristics of “culture industry” and its hotly debated relationship to the dominant commercial and state administrative systems of neo-capitalism: “The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products ... are manufactured more or less according to plan ... The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The

seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total ... The customer is not the king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object" [5].

According to this revisionist logic, cultural production is an on-going multi-faceted process of standardization (or typification) which silently imposes conformity, impedes critical judgement (through the everyday "manipulation of consciousness"), displaces dissent, promotes obedience and reinforces the latent ideological mechanisms of individualization, or more precisely, pseudo-individualization. Thus, culture industry's ideology is seriously regarded as "dehumanizing", "atomizing", "corrupting" and "manipulative", inducing adjustment and the absolute dominance of the market, commodity fetishism and the neo-capitalist order.

Essentially, the power of culture industry's ideology is such that (critical) knowledgeable citizens are repeatedly converted into (manipulated) *passified consumers*, who unconsciously reproduce and legitimate the political "status quo" and accept the trivialization and glamorization of questions of public concern and interest. This negative shift towards the *pursuit of sensationalism*, the celebration of ephemeral life-styles and identities, the commodification of knowledge and the overwhelming massification of cultural products is also pointed out by Jurgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*: "For to the extent that private people withdrew from their socially controlled roles as property owners into purely 'personal' ones of their noncommittal use of leisure time, they came directly under the influence of semipublic authorities, without the protection of an institutionally protected domestic domain. Leisure behaviour supplies the key to the 'floodlit privacy' of the new sphere" [6].

In line with Frankfurt School's critical thought, Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), in his *One-Dimensional Man*, comprehensively formulates one of the most trenchant critiques on how capitalism competently manages to find (consensual) ways to prevent revolutionary transformation. In a large extent, this trenchant critique is involved with the consumer culture's creation of *false needs*: "False [needs] are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice ... Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs" [7].

Furthermore, another member of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), in his influential essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, carefully seeks to evaluate the neo-capitalist effects upon culture, on the theoretical basis of a particular transformation: *the loss of aesthetic aura*-that is, a special charismatic or sacred quality (of pre-capitalist artistic productions or "autonomous art"), which attributed a sense of "authority" or "uniqueness" and transcended everyday experience. For Benjamin, neo-capitalist technological developments (such as, the mass media) reproduce multiple and instantly transmitted copies of artistic products and, consequently, render them as "mundane", "standardized", "privately consumed" and "non-auratic". But he also discerns a positive (non-pessimistic) aspect concerning new opportunities and possibilities for the transmission of critical and revolutionary ideas, as well as for participation in art's reception and appreciation: "Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art" [8].

## **POSTMODERN EFFECTS**

Nevertheless, the Frankfurt School's "elitist" and "utopian" vision of high art and of culture as a unified and determined ideology (which overwhelmingly captures human agency and dangerously reproduces social structure) has been questioned and seriously challenged by the on-going theoretical debate about "*post-modernism*". This notion corresponds to a rather "everyday" and "constructionist" definition of culture, theorizing it beyond old totalizing or homogenizing tendencies.

Such an anti-structuralistic, anti-rationalistic and anti-materialistic view accepts and celebrates the existence of a non-systemic multiplicity of tastes, voices, values, normative criteria, life-styles or opinions (and alternative choices) and

substantially reflects an absolutely decisive shift in the (already digitalized/virtualized) nature of knowledge itself, *without however any prospect of progressive change*. The latter point is effectively made by the French philosopher J.-F. Lyotard (1924-1998) in his novel work *The Postmodern Condition*: "...the question of legitimation of knowledge is [now] formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" [9].

This "new nature of knowledge", the actual dissolution of cultural production into a vast diversity of context-bound, flexible "language games" (Ludwig Wittgenstein) ultimately privileges performative cultural knowledges over rational Scientific Knowledge, disorder and chaos over order and stability, particularism over universalism, fragmentation and complexity over holism and purity, dissensus and difference over consensus and uniformity, the libidinal self over the Rational Ego, aesthetics and style over Truth and Method, local action and inter-textuality over emancipatory progress and teleology. It thus signals the phantasmagorical reduction of the social to simulacra (Jean Baudrillard) and the "incurable" poststructuralist breakdown of cohesive and homogeneous (logocentric) meaning structures.

It is in this new conceptual setting that popular culture appears to be triumphant (against the received status of high art or elite culture), in parallel with the radical erosion of the sharp distinction (or distance) between culture and society, knowledge and structure (on the very ground of "*discourse*"), everyday life (or everyday practices) and art. In particular, the latter refers to the so-called "*aestheticization of everyday life*", a postmodern phenomenon that clearly signifies the definite decline of the "avant-garde" spirit (and of the "heroic" character of art) and the rejection of any normative rationalistic project of "arbitration" or "legislation" of taste and style (which now takes precedence over content). In a sense, such a phenomenon can be seen as turning the conceptual scheme *society-culture-agency* precisely "on its head". That is, an "anti-deterministic" logic prevails now that mainly has to do with a much more complex and undecidable relationship between social structure, culture and social agency. Our central task here is rather to "just follow the actors" (Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, Madeline Akrich, John Law) and their subjective preferences and interpretations.

Drawing on these stimulating cultural developments, S. Crook, J. Pakulski and M. Waters emphatically stress the emergence of an anti-objectivist/anti-materialist "*post-culture*" (resulting from such "postmodernizing" trends as hyperextension, hyperintensification, hyperrationalization, hypercommodification and hyperdifferentiation), which can be described as exhibiting specific idiosyncratic characteristics: "Postculture [shows] semiotic promiscuity and preference for pastiche and parody which commentators widely associate with postmodernism. A television commercial sells cat food by setting the sales pitch to the music of a Mozart aria Andrew Lloyd Webber writes a hugely successful pastiche of a late Romantic Requiem, the Kronos string quartet plays Hendrix" [10].

So, culture seems to increasingly escape from monolithic, rigid, frozen and absolutist definitional frameworks, towards more flexible and discursive modes of reading and interpretation. Most importantly, the "constructionist" correctives often tend to give culture a fresh politicized and dynamic character: "Culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above" [11]. In this way, it frees the voices of the "unpresentable", the "disempowered" and the "subordinated", leading perhaps to unexpected and unforeseen (aestheticized) ideological battles and domains, where a *neocultural* project may eventually emerge.

### **TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS: STUART HALL, POWER AND MEANING**

Nowadays, it is almost customary to emphasize that neither postmodern culturalism nor modern structuralism can (in the sense of a Horkheimerian totalizing renewal of social thought) provide an adequate cultural paradigm. For Stuart Hall, the hotly debated and contentious problem of the highly complex and diversified relationships between structural power and subjective meaning defines the whole academic field of "cultural studies". In his innovative and widely influential paper "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", he carefully reconstructs two central complementary issues (in an original methodological way).

On the one hand, how the “culturalist” conception of subjective “lived experience” in British criticism can be effectively corrected and expanded through discourse-theoretic accounts and insights. This ultimately ties penetrating structural power analysis to (detailed) empirical descriptive approaches (the “endogenous” or “immanent” perspective).

On the other hand, how the “structuralist” strands of thought can be radically improved through (theoretically-informed) integration into a neo-Gramscian conception of (linguistic) meaning and power. The dialectic argument seeks to somehow balance the necessity of “structural analysis” with an actual (humanist) orientation at *critical reflexive agency*. The issue here is to efficiently understand the symbolic mediation of the (real) objective material conditions and circumstances with the (inescapably situated and contextual) subjective competency to critically and creatively reflect, thematize and re-act [12]. Indeed, this kind of “symbolic mediation” has been variously elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau and British cultural theorists (Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson).

In the famous Raymond Williams’ analysis of culture, a similar synthetic attempt is set forth in order to fruitfully fuse the real and the symbolic aspects of social and cultural life. That is, a comprehensive conception of culture can and should comprise two different, yet dialectically interrelated, elements:

- C “the sum of available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences” [13]. Thus, culture consists of the (virtual) knowledge and meaning-systems within which the self-understanding and self-interpretation of social subjects can demiurgically articulate themselves.
- C “the whole way of life”, which refers to the non-reducibility of culture. This effectively avoids any essentialistic reduction to textualism or textual reification (e.g. the incessant Derridean play of differences and signifiers). We are thus able to productively include *both* symbolic and non-symbolic everyday practices.

In fact, this all-encompassing paradigm anticipated Stuart Hall’s definition of culture as “*both* the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to the conditions of existence; *and* the lived traditions and practices through which those ‘understandings’ are expressed and in which they are embodied” [14]. Of course, Hall does not underestimate or evade the ethical and theoretical task of *cultural criticism*, which is to make explicit the hidden (power-shaped and constraining) mechanisms and contexts that implicitly influence and shape our conscious discursive understanding (or meaning constitution) and thereby to further promote agential reflexivity, self-understanding and self-realization-without however succumbing to a Kantian idealistic model of autonomous, free-floating self-ruling.

According to that groundbreaking perspective, cultural criticism remains “organically” tied *both* to the concrete (life-worldly) experiences, convictions or beliefs of situated subjects *and* to the radical potential to decisively transcend their relatively limited “hermeneutical horizons” (Hans-Georg Gadamer) by reflexively reconstructing discourse and power.

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