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POPULAR CULTURE: A USEFUL NOTION?

In the present state of cultural studies it seems to be very difficult to say anything new about popular culture. This statement of itself directs us to the problems attending the use of this notion. Independently of its common-sense meaning (popular culture as the culture of the masses) and commercial sense, it is claimed and used as a scientifically significant idea by historians, sociologists and cultural anthropologists. Most of them seem to credit it with a kind of empirically self-evident nature. Yet it is hardly an exaggeration to claim that it actually has as many meanings as there are books and articles about it. In point of fact the confusion stems from the notion itself, because it links two general concepts - people and culture - whose sense is not restricted by the connection; nor do the concepts acquire clarificatory meaning from this connection. Both retain their general value, which has subsequently to be defined in a restrictive sense by the user of the notion, thus making it an analytical and indeed an operational concept rather than a general one. In using it the scholar makes it clear what he understands by 'people' and what type of 'culture' or aspects of culture he has in mind.

Actually 'people' is usually a substitute for 'group' or 'class' - however numerically large that may be - and 'culture' means 'subculture', 'particular way of life' or even pattern of 'behaviour'. The elevation of different forms of group subculture to the higher, or at all events more general, standard of popular culture might well derive, albeit unconsciously, from the desire to give these groups greater power in society by claiming a more general validity for them. In any case use of the notion makes its user a participant in the dynamics of power, by encouraging him to define the area of application, opposing groups or group cultures to each other, or at any rate placing them within a certain type of connection. However in doing so he introduces into his analysis or explanation an implicit theory of social action or social evolution of which he is not always aware.

The notion of popular culture itself goes back to the discovery (or the creation, or more probably both at the same time) of a widening gap between the cultural universes of distinct social groups in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and still more to its consolidation and legitimation as the "folklore" of the lower classes by the European bourgeoisies of the nineteenth century. Thus 'popular culture' acquired a very specific sense. As early as 1837 the Frisian Mennonite preacher and folklore-researcher Joost Hiddez Halbertsma formulated an unequivocal definition of popular culture. When calling something popular, he says, "we always speak of the so-called common man. In a moral and a linguistic and partly even in a civic sense the common man is the people. Among notable men language, way of life, habits and manners are a subject of agreement; there is nothing national in them, nor can there be, because they conform to a standard which lies beyond the nation. The higher they climb on the social ladder, the closer they follow that standard and the more the notables of all the countries of Europe resemble each other".
Looking more closely at the actual products of cultural studies we can ascertain that the basic assumption of this definition still underlies use of the notion of popular culture. Indeed, for many researchers popular culture is the local culture, or at least those forms of culture rooted in strictly localised variables, depending on the geographical conditions of the community, the region, the nation (in an ethnological sense). It is an essentially material culture - even convictions and beliefs are symbolised by material artefacts - whereas the opposite forms of culture ('high culture') are characterised by a high level of independence from material and local contingencies.

Perhaps this is the main reason why in recent years a noticeable shift in the use of the notion of popular culture has occurred. Indeed, it has to cope with the new concept of 'mass culture'. Cultural phenomena related to the scaling-up effect of the industrialization process, or to its material output, are ever increasingly labelled as pertaining to 'mass culture'. From our point of view their main characteristic is - employing a Greek term - their a-topia, i.e. the impossibility of relating them to one particular spot. On the contrary, when speaking of 'popular culture', we refer to an ever more strictly localised pattern of cultural practices and beliefs: this tends to be the culture promoted by Tourist Offices as the distinguishing mark of a region or town. Is this perhaps the reason why researchers into culture, bound as they are to an intellectual formation and position placing them on the level of the supranational culture of which Halbertsma spoke, feel obviously much more at ease with mass culture than with popular culture? The latter makes them feel a little uneasy or even ashamed because of the evident impact of social class and historical time upon it. It is the culture of other people with whom they are unable to identify.

Indeed, one may object that mass culture is a culture of our own type of society, the industrial society of our time, whereas popular culture is the culture of past time: the pre-industrial, early industrial or - for the post-industrialists - even the industrial era, nowadays a mere survival bound to disappear in the long run. Yet this is precisely the question. In the last decades historians, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists have adopted a common front towards popular culture. From a descriptive term referring more or less to folklore and remnants of traditional culture, it has changed into a strategic concept and is now mostly used within a dynamic model of cultural change. Popular culture is thus the historical form of the culture of the masses confronted with the civilising strategy of cultural elites. Through these elites 'cultural offensive' popular culture is revealed to itself as in a mirror, but is at the same time doomed to destruction by the power of the mighty who impose the norms, standards, values, practices, and convictions of the now-dominant and indeed supranational culture, which tends to be identical with the standard of European civilisation.

This model of unambiguous struggle between the weak popular culture rooted in the changing conditions of local everyday life and thereby constantly threatened with extinction, and the strong elite culture drawing its inspiration from the power and the
supranational character of the dominant groups simultaneously ru-
ling different societies in a similar way, does not however ade-
quately account for their mutual influence, and still less for 
the elements of continuity in the social process of cultural chan-
ge. The only cultural forms allowed to continue by the new dominant 
culture are labelled as 'survivals'. Yet can we seriously believe 
that the whole universe of popular culture within the industria-
listed societies derives merely from the dynamics of the indus-
trialisation process itself without reference to prior forms of 
cultural organisation or dynamics? The research of historians 
such as Eric Hobsbawm and Hans Medick points to the opposite con-
clusion. It is precisely the cultural continuity between diffe-
rent types of socio-economic organisation that has been respon-
sible for the success of the crucial stage of proto-industriali-
sation, and has helped to shape the basic pattern of the indus-
trial culture that has become ours.
Moreover the hypothesis of the fading of popular culture, lea-
ving us only with some forms of infertile cultural survivals, 
does not pay proper respect to the fundamental unity of the hu-
man pattern of social behaviour - a postulate that underlies and 
supports all the major interpretations of human culture in so-
ciety, organised around such unifying notions as 'system' (cen-
tral to Roland Barthes's semiology of cultural phenomena), 'struc-
ture' (basic to Claude Lévi Strauss's cultural anthropology but 
also to Michel Foucault's cultural epistemology), or 'field' 
(essential to Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture) - to name 
only three or four of the most influential European theories of 
the last decades.

Do these considerations, this criticism of the current use of the 
concept of popular culture, imply that the notion of popular cul-
ture itself is not at all useful? First of all we have to remem-
ber that the whole concept of culture - of popular, elite, mass, 
or industrial culture - is an analytical construct and not a 
reality, even if it works with real elements. Its range depends 
on the way we look at the cultural phenomena, on the point of 
view we adopt. Given this assumption and the indeterminacy of 
the term itself, it is only too evident that different historical, 
sociological or anthropological traditions are conducive to the 
creation of different systems for comprehending cultural reality. 
From this point of view phenomena of popular or elite culture 
can be represented as clustered pairs of opposite elements, each 
of which will be put forward by a different scientific tradition 
as the dominant or determining one. The difference between the 
phenomena proceeds more form the dosage or quantity of the ele-
ments than from the form of the cluster or from the absence 
or presence of certain pairs of elements (figure 1).

Thus in the current uses or definitions of the notion, we can 
roughly distinguish at least six pairs of elements, each formed 
by a complementary or antagonistic pair of terms representing the 
popular and the elite pole respectively.

1. In the most obvious sense of the word popular culture is the 
culture of the people, seen as the common people with ordina-
ry lives, in contrast to 'upper crust' people with their con-
spicuous and out-of-the-ordinary way of life and their High
Cultural tradition. In this sense popular culture is everyday-culture, the culture of the crowd and of the daily routine of life: sleeping, cooking, eating, lovemaking, working, enjoying leisure, talking and laughing together, and so on. Yet insofar as these daily routines are permeated with the ritual and social conventions without which a common life would not be possible, in adopting proper cultural forms they constitute an authentic field for a coherent and (unconsciously) organised popular culture. This will be to a very large extent shared by the elites, albeit unintentionally.

2. In a less diffuse sense popular culture confronts elite culture inasmuch as it is the culture of the uneducated rather than of the educated. It does not matter precisely what kind of education is meant: illiteracy versus erudition, high tradition or low, refinement of manners opposed to the rough manners of the poor. In any case educated people - who in the highly schooled Dutch society, for example, do not necessarily occupy a high position on the scale of the socio-economic hierarchy - have learned to master particular aspects of the social scene. This mastery gives them a tactical headstart in society over the uneducated and enables them to define themselves as belonging to a different group with special powers and, under some conditions, a special mission. They try to impose their own standard and values on others. Thus an 'officialised' culture comes face to face with a popular culture, but it is far from easy to define the exact levels at which the common people would be able to understand or to experience the impact of the 'officialised' culture. So we do not know precisely at which point common people in past centuries were able to share the symbolism and the various interpretative levels of the high culture. Different groups most probably arrived at different interpretations at the same time, depending on their level of education, on the extent of the group's social openness, on its actual cultural practice, and on the extent to which its members circulated in other groups. The emergence of cultural images, values, and practices has been quite thoroughly studied by now, but we know very little about their actual mediation and reception, and what we know derives mostly from indirect evidence that is difficult to interpret. Not every individual or every group possesses the same social, cultural, and intellectual clues to their interpretation. Pursuit of these clues in their social setting is one of the first tasks for genuine comprehension of the relationship between different socio-cultural groups, measured by their level of education and cultural practice.

3. In a still more precise sense popular culture - as opposed to the culture of innovating elites - consists of the whole range of traditional values, rituals, convictions and beliefs which, because of their proven efficacy, have a tendency to resist any insufficiently prepared attempt to change either the cultural system or its whole order of reasoning. In this sense popular culture is the old culture facing the new. It is also the culture of the resisters, the defenders of the old order, justified as a set of traditional values - even if, as Hobsbawm and Ranger have showed in a recent book, this tra-
dition is mostly a new invention for the sake of a particular social cause.

4. Sometimes an attack by some elite groups pushes the representatives of popular culture into adopting a defense strategy: in a new consciousness of their own cultural values they begin to emphasise values regarded as typical of the common people, rather than of the dominating elites. Thus popular culture acquires its own consistency and produces its own legitimation. It becomes the distinguishing mark of certain social subgroups. It is an alternative culture to the dominant, normative, hegemonic one, in the Gramscian sense of the word. We are reminded here of nineteenth-century working-class culture, but we might also remember the emergence, in the eighteenth century, of an authentic self-consciousness among the peasantry of the more prosperous rural areas. This had its own cultural values as opposed to those of the urban population: a peasant pride. Culture ('high culture') after this no longer belonged exclusively to the city.

5. In its fifth meaning popular culture constitutes cultural values and forms of cultural expression created on behalf of the lower social strata by civil or religious elites with the purpose of controlling, educating, or reconciling the masses. It is universal culture fighting the local (or even the regional, or national) in the name of civilization, morality, or decency. Pretending to know what is good for the masses, the elites try to raise them to a universal standard by manipulating their world vision and imposing images, ideas, myths, rituals upon them. Past centuries provide us with numerous examples of such direct intervention in the lower cultural areas, not only by means of novels, pamphlets, broadsheets, popular engravings or paintings, but also by organised amusements and celebrations (such as the royal entries), and so on. As for our own century, I hardly need to point out the cultural strategies of those working in the different mass-media and their contributors. It is culture organised for the people, sometimes in a semi-popular style but always with a certain educational intent. Its outlook may be popular but its propagandistic function betrays its origins. 'Sedimentation', i.e. the superimposition of successive layers of even more civilised cultural forms, is the basic model of the cultural process here.

6. In the sixth sense popular culture is not really popular, but only a politically non-dominant variant of the main cultural stream. In the time of the Dutch Republic for example this was notably the case in what we may call 'escape' cultures, more or less determined by the ideological pluralism of the Dutch state, such as that of the Mennonites - the non-violent wing of the Anabaptist movement - and of the whole Roman Catholic subculture, not to speak of the Jewish. These religious groups did not abandon their cultural identities; on the contrary, they each developed a full elite subculture and tried to accentuate its specificity. In doing so however these subcultures came to be regarded as popular by the dominant elites. A good example of this is shown in the ambiguous attitude of the Catholic clergy which, in a purifying
Tridentine perspective within the Catholic church, opposed clandestine pilgrimages to ruined shrines in Holland and elsewhere considering them to be superstitious. Yet in the presence of the Calvinist elite such pilgrimages were extolled as evidence of the depth and strength of traditional Catholic faith. The Calvinists on the other hand could only regard these practices as twofold superstition on the grounds of their popular (i.e. allegedly magical) and Catholic character. Here we clearly see several pairs of elements clustered together.

In summary, the following six meanings encompass the main dimensions of the concept of popular culture:
1. everyday culture or the culture of the lower social strata;
2. the culture of the uneducated;
3. traditional culture;
4. alternative culture;
5. local culture;
6. politically non-dominant subcultures or escape cultures.

Thus from an analytical viewpoint 'popular culture' does not refer primarily to cultural objects, but to a social process, or more precisely to the field of interpretation we adopt. In its concrete form popular culture will normally contain, simultaneously, several of the six pairs of elements; our analysis will have to determine these before we begin any other operation. Yet our own perception of it is closely related to two major variables, the first being of a more objective, the other of a subjective nature. In the first place then the exact composition of this mixture depends not only on the people involved, but even more on the strategy and strength of the other, socially dominant, element in each pair, although the final result will be influenced or even modified by the response or acceptance at the popular pole. Yet interaction does not exclude final determination or domination by the strongest element. Secondly, our perception depends on the more general theoretical perspective we adopt, which in cultural matters too often interferes with either the collective or the subjective position of the researchers and with the role their respective interests play in this perception.

To conclude: is popular culture a useful notion? I think it cannot adequately serve a proper historical, scientific analysis as long as we continue to handle and apply it in a naively empirical way. Yet it might become an useful tool when, after thorough analysis of the different elements it contains, we succeed in relating it not only to the more general, often implicit theory of cultural change we adopt, but also to the social or personal, subjective position of the cultural analyst, which often predisposes him to perceive particular pairs of elements to the exclusion of others.*

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Figure 1: A MODEL FOR THE ANALYSIS OF POPULAR-CULTURE PHENOMENA

COMPLEXITY OF PERCEPTION,
influenced by interference between elements of a pole
and by its monopolisation of the transmission lines

ELITE POLE

normative universal

innovating dominant

educated (others)
extraordinary ('high')

CULTURAL DYNAMICS,
resulting from
the interrelation
between opposite
elements

POPULAR POLE

level and range
of interaction,
influenced by
strength of poles
(centrifugal
effect)

ordinary
('low')

uneducated

(others)

non-dominant

local alternative

selection of preferential elements,
influenced by researcher's objective world-view
and subjective position (ideology)