

C.C.C.S.

SP12

THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE

by

BRYN JONES

THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE

by

Bryn Jones

Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies  
University of Birmingham.

The purpose of this paper is to sketch very briefly the theoretical background to cultural studies, to emphasise the framework which links the other papers being presented here. It may be best to begin by saying what we believe cultural studies and culture are not.

Currently the field of cultural analysis is dominated by four major tendencies, all of which will presumably have been voiced at one time or another, and all of which correspond to the major forms of bourgeois ideology present in the western world: the conservative, the liberal-humanist, the technical-rationalist, the vulgar-marxist.

A conservative ideology is implicit in the oldest form of cultural analysis, which I call pessimistic cultural criticism. Here the only real and authentic culture is art, against which everything else is set. Theoretically it explains the current state of supposed cultural decline and malaise by a mass society thesis, in which the valued civilized culture of an elite minority is constantly under attack from a majority or mass culture which is inauthentic and a denial of life. Its main task in analysis is evaluation and discrimination, a search for the true values of civilization, commonly to be found in the organic community, the countryside, Renaissance art, the great nineteenth century novels and so on.

A principal opponent of this view adopts a more easy-going and tolerant attitude, but is again concerned first and foremost with evaluation. The liberal humanist perspective is essentially not much different from the conservative view of culture, except that culture is now positively rather than negatively valued. The criteria for evaluation draw on the same source, high art. Similarly, it approaches popular culture in the same way as it does art, in order to appreciate it and usually the appreciation has a sentimental character. So mass culture is now not all bad, or alternatively mass culture is bad but there is some good popular culture or folk culture. At a more theoretical level, its analysis is founded on liberal myths of pluralism, of change through liberal education and so on. Since the analysis begins and ends in evaluation, culture occupies a space in which history, politics, economics and social context are absent.

Set against this arty approach is the technical rationality of positivistic sociology and social psychology which introduces a supposedly scientific quality to its research. It has liberal aims, notably in the sphere of social policy, and employs scientific means. Its classic study is the

scientific analysis of the effects of the mass media on the audience. The cultural object is reduced to its quantifiable elements by content analysis; the participants are reduced to their socio-economic categories or ranged along various axes of sociological variables by such techniques as audience research; and the activities are reduced to clinically isolated simple communication flow models such as those developed in psychology. It has an absent theoretical heart, its place taken by a set of routinised research practices. Its social engineering and reformist outlook imply an unquestioned adherence to consensual aims founded on myths of democratic decision-making, the national interest, the common good and so on.

The conventional wisdom of orthodox Marxism has consistently devalued the significance of culture, seeing it, in the main, as simply the reflection of the base, the economic infrastructure of society. So culture is produced by the economic relations in a fairly direct way, and is this mere illusion or delusion, bourgeois ideology or false consciousness. This economist version of Marxism has its roots in some of the more positivistic assertions by Marx about the place of ideology. What is left out, however, is any sense of the relative autonomy of the superstructure, of the reciprocal determination of the base by the superstructure, which precludes any such undialectical analysis as that conducted by vulgar Marxism.

The perspective on culture and cultural studies presented here draws on this inheritance with considerable reservations but is also influenced by writers of the New Left in Britain, Europe and America, by the new sociology of deviance, by social history, anthropology, linguistics, all within a roughly Marxist framework.

How then do we understand culture? It is not simply either art, or collections of activities or objects, or signs, or even a whole way of life, since all these imply a static definition, i.e. culture is something finite, graspable out there with its own definite privileged space and boundaries. Culture is both becoming and being, both practice and product. Culture is firstly a signification, an attribution of meaning to the world, making the natural world a human world. But this human production of signs cannot be considered apart from the materiality of this activity; signification requires objectivation and objectification.

Both signification and objectification are perpetual works of transformation, of nature and the already given culture, occurring not merely at an individual level but at all social levels - the family, kinship group, youth group, work, class, media, ideology, language etc. etc. - that is, in all the mediations. The production of culture, however, takes place with the necessity for the production of material life as a pre-given. To put it crudely, you can't eat culture. The competition for scarce resources, the development of the forces of production require and produce developments in the social relations of that production. We grant this theoretical priority even if, in practice, the precedence of material production over signification does not show itself in the simple, unequivocal and isolable determination of the superstructure by the base. They mutually determine each other but not freely and equally. In history, the social organisation of material life has meant organisation into relations of domination and subordination. In the bourgeois era these relations are maintained only in the last instance by physical force. Instead the capacity of a dominant social group to reproduce its dominance over time depends more and more on its ability to control the means by which the world is made sense of, i.e. culture and ideology.

Culture then is an instrument of social control, but not just, for all we have done is give a bald account of its function for the dominant class in terms of the reproduction of the existing structure. Having the function of social control does not, though, exhaust the power to signify, to hold meaning. Culture is a site of struggle of conflict, of negotiations which constantly redefine (and usually reproduce in a new form) the existing relations of domination and subordination in the society. But control and the power to create and manipulate culture is variously situated, and variously held. It is not true, however, that there is no pattern there, that all the different powers merely cancel each other out, eventually to produce the ideal free democracy. Overall there are definite patterns of domination and subordination which exert themselves as such in the long run, even though in the specific instance they may on comparison to be quite different, and only accidentally related if at all.

While, then, we stress the importance of structures in any discussion of culture and the relevance of a form of functional analysis, the hermeneutic circle is incomplete unless we refer centrally to the subjective meaning complex of action; that is, we cannot merely talk of completed actions, of

products, of institutions, of functions, of structures without reference to their production in human activity. Subjective meaning, however, should not be taken as simply personal experience, the ideas of an individual, or any man's opinion, for this perspective works from a false and simplifying individual and society model in which the two poles represent the real social forces, and everything else is analytically marginal. Every individual is a social and historical individual, and, in Althusser's words becomes a subject (both subjecting and subjected, determining and determined) an acting subject who experiences not only society as a generality, but society in and through its mediations. Subjective meaning is an essential part of the dialectic of culture but again one must stress that it is not simply an individual matter as it may be situated at all levels of the social structure and be produced socially rather than individually.

As an example of this theoretical outline we might look at the culture of the industrial working class of the nineteenth century in England. Here we are searching not for the 'pure', the authentic culture of that class but rather the mainstream dominant culture of a subordinate class, since we are not dealing with that culture in isolation from its historical, political and social context which, in a sense, decides the subject of the study. The culture of the working class was and always has been a site of intense struggle for the control of their non-work time, what Marx calls a labourer's disposable time. The culture of the working class was a developed response to their existence, to their environment, making sense of it, and making it bearable. But the culture was not pure, in that it developed in a state of intervention by the middle class; not that this negotiation was an amicable compromise, usually the opposite was the case. The institutional products of this conflict remain witnesses to the uneasy truce between the bourgeoisie and the working class in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, in that they are both instruments of social control (legitimate, non-disruptive use of leisure or representation of self-interest), and yet authentic responses to the problems of their circumstances. This is not to say that matters have been settled: the struggle continues, although usually within fairly fixed guidelines. Some of the institutional responses have been Trade Unionism, professional football, working men's clubs, the music hall, etc. Here we see how the culture of a class holds the subjective meaning of that class, often in a displaced form, and yet in a negotiated solution to the problems of existence where their control over their culture is only partial and the form their culture takes is often determined by the action of others in

socially dominant positions.

It would be wrong to describe the development of culture solely in terms of struggle between the middle and working classes, for within each class there are struggles as various class factions fight for hegemony; this is especially so within dominant classes founded on uneasy and contradictory alliances.

The context of this sketch of culture is, then, political, not artistic, and it is necessary to continue to insist this as we move closer to the present day. Whereas the stress previously was on the need to control the activity, the behaviour of the working class, the site has now definitely shifted more to their consciousness which may be produced by a change in the political and economic structures in which the structures have become voluntarist: formal political democracy, and consumerism, themselves negotiated responses to changing general political and economic changes. The dominant group now requires the assent of the subordinate group, an affirmation especially in this continuing development of the political and cultural class struggle; not in terms of immediate opinion formation, but of long-term development of life-styles, and ideologies. An outline of this is given in that misunderstood book The Uses of Literacy by Richard Hoggart where he refers to the mass media manipulating the language and "unbending the springs of action"; unfortunately, the analysis is sometimes obscured by his pessimistic cultural criticism and which has been the main way the text has been interpreted.

Culture, then, is inherently political as is the analysis; they cannot help but be so.