

Culture and Popular Culture: A Case for Sociology

By
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The study of popular culture has a long and intimate relationship to the field of cultural sociology, being both a subcategory of the field and a separate arena of inquiry taken up by other disciplines. This article examines the intellectual traditions that have shaped the sociology of popular culture, traces the points of connection and difference between sociologists and other scholars studying popular culture, and argues for the continued relevance of cultural sociology for addressing key issues and concerns within the realm of “the popular,” broadly conceived. These developments include the rise of new media/communication technologies and the increasing interdependence between popular culture and other arenas of social life.

Keywords: popular culture; media; production; consumption; populism

Perhaps more than any other sociological subfield, popular culture has a long and intimate relationship to cultural sociology. Indeed, it is both a subcategory of cultural sociology and a separate arena of inquiry taken up by other disciplines. This article on popular culture has multiple aims. After addressing the long-standing debates over what constitutes the terrain of “the popular,” I examine the intellectual traditions underpinning sociological approaches to popular culture, making an analytic distinction between those focusing on institutions and markets and those focusing on consumption/interpretation. I then discuss two developments shaping the contemporary character of popular culture scholarship, both of which tend to marginalize sociologists. One is

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the extreme interdisciplinarity of the field (including the rise of cultural studies as a distinct program of inquiry), and the other is the bias toward conceptualizing popular culture as mass-mediated culture, which has shifted the core of contemporary scholarship to media and communications departments. Nevertheless, I argue, cultural sociology has theoretical and methodological tools for making important contributions both to the new media environment and to popular culture scholarship as a whole, particularly as popular culture seemingly becomes more influential in arenas of social and political life beyond the realm of entertainment/leisure.

The Terrain of Popular Culture

The challenge of defining popular culture is reflected in the diverse ways that scholars have conceptualized it for analysis. Raymond Williams (1983) identified four common uses of the term “popular”: that which is well liked by many people, that which is deemed unworthy or inferior, work deliberately seeking to win favor with people, and forms of culture made by people for themselves. These meanings are clearly embedded in some of the more familiar approaches to studying popular culture found in current books and anthologies on the topic. Storey (2003), for example, provides comprehensive chapter-by-chapter overviews of popular culture as folk culture, as mass culture, as the “other” of high culture, as an arena of hegemony, and as the basis for identity formation, both personal and collective. Of course, different approaches are not mutually exclusive; nor do they map neatly onto specific disciplinary traditions or methodologies; rather, they represent different—and often historically specific—ways of conceptualizing the relationship between popular cultural forms and the society that they both shape and reflect.

Different definitions clearly embody different assumptions and political orientations about popular culture as well. As has been well documented, traditional distinctions between high and popular culture have been fueled as much by political concerns as by defensible moral, aesthetic, or intellectual ones (see Levine 1988; Kibler 1999; Gans 1974/1999; Fiske 1989; DiMaggio 1982). Similarly, equating popular culture with mass culture often assigns to it the negative valuations characterizing the concept of mass culture/society itself: that such culture is alienating, atomized, formulaic, and unable to nourish “true” creativity or critical judgment (see Rosenberg and White 1957; Adorno and Horkheimer 1947/1979; for a critique of this position, see Gans 1974/1999). Even folk culture, by some accounts, was largely a “discovery” made by social and political elites in the late nineteenth century within the context of emerging European nationalist discourses (Carey 1992; Martin-Barbero 1993).

Most cultural sociologists today would likely concur with Mukerji and Schudson’s (1991, 3) inclusive definition of popular culture as referring to “the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are

widely shared among a population.” This is not unlike Levine’s (1992) definition of popular culture as the folklore of industrial society, provided we adopt a catholic understanding of what counts as “industrial” (and “postindustrial”). These definitions are useful because they encompass objects and practices rooted in both local traditions and large-scale markets and commercial systems; they include “elite” forms that have been popularized as well as popular forms that have been “sacralized” (Levine’s term). Consequently, they sidestep prickly terminological disputes to focus less on what pop culture is and more on what it does: How is it produced and consumed? How is it read and understood? How does it intersect with other aspects of cultural, political, and economic life? What are its sociological “effects” and implications, broadly speaking? In addressing such questions, cultural sociologists take cultural systems, institutions, objects, and practices to be significant in their own right and not merely derivative or epiphenomenal of other social forces. They also consider popular culture legitimate intellectual terrain, although its study is less central to the field of cultural sociology than one might think (more on this later) and although disciplinary barriers to such study remain in terms of grants, fellowships, and job opportunities.

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Probably the best-known strand of sociological research on popular culture is the “production of culture” perspective, which refers to the empirical study of culture-producing organizations within specific institutional contexts. Using the tools of analysis developed in the study of organizations and occupations, production-of-culture scholars treat culture as a social product like any other and examine “how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved” (Peterson and Anand 2004, 311). They are less concerned with interpreting culture than with understanding the characteristics of the industries that produce it. Howard Becker’s *Art Worlds* (1982) is a canonical example, but the empirical studies representing this perspective cover a range of cultural phenomena, including news-making (Altheide 1976; Tuchman 1978; Gitlin 1980; Fishman 1980; Kaniss 1991),

prime-time television (Gitlin 1983; W. Bielby and Bielby 1994), tabloid talk shows (Gamson 1998; Grindstaff 2002), the fashion industry (Crane 2000), art museums and symphony orchestras (DiMaggio 1982), book publishing (Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 1982; Powell 1985; Thompson 2005), country music (Peterson 1997), popular music (Peterson and Berger 1975; Frith 1978), and gastronomy (Ferguson 1998).

According to DiMaggio (1977), the emergence of the production-of-culture tradition was in part a reaction to the politicized debate over popular culture as mass culture: whereas leftist mass culture critics assumed a monopoly situation in which corporate elites determined mass cultural content, and whereas right-wing critics assumed that free market competition gave consumers exactly what they desired, production-of-culture scholars suggested that mass culture was shaped more by the attributes of specific industries than by the operations of capitalism *per se*. In DiMaggio's words, "The extent of diversity and innovation available to the public—and, conversely, the degree of massification of culture—has more to do with the market structures and organizational environment of specific industries than with strongly felt demand of either the masses or their masters for certain kinds of homogeneous cultural materials" (p. 448). It is not that production-of-culture scholarship is necessarily apolitical, only that scholars draw conclusions from the empirical study of (observable) social processes. The early news-making studies of the 1970s, for example, generally concurred that standard reportorial practice in U.S. news organizations serves the interests of social and political elites even as it allows for occasional challenges to their power. In my own study of daytime talk shows, which situates production-of-culture concerns within an interpretive, ethnographic context, I conclude that the genre "gives voice" to ordinary people, but only a certain kind of voice and only under rules and conditions that ultimately reinforce class inequality.

The shortcomings of the production-of-culture approach for the study of popular culture have been catalogued elsewhere (see Mukerji and Schudson 1991; Harrington and Bielby 2001). The most relevant here is the inattention to issues of meaning and aesthetics vis-à-vis cultural forms themselves. To paraphrase Mukerji and Schudson (1991), adherents of this tradition study the production of cultural objects, and these objects become a part of, and contribute to, culture, but they are not culture as such. Nor are they *popular* culture as such, if one subscribes to the notion that popular culture is, in the final analysis, only identifiable through its use—that is, if one believes that only *people* can take up and popularize the cultural resources made available to them through the culture industries (see Fiske 1989). Crane (1992) agrees that popular culture is a site where meaning is made and not simply given or assumed: "For a text to be popular," she writes, "Its messages must fit the discourses used by readers to make sense of their experiences. A popular text reassures the readers that their worldviews (discourses) are meaningful" (p. 94). Of course, one need not valorize meaning/consumption to acknowledge its importance in understanding popular culture.

Working in different traditions, then, are sociologists interested in issues of consumption and interpretation, either alone or in concert with a focus on production. If the production-of-culture paradigm aims for the macro level of institutions and markets, the constructionist/interpretivist perspective is often more micro in focus, relying on interview-based, textual, and/or ethnographic methods to give analytic emphasis to the expressive and symbolic dimensions of popular culture set within larger institutional contexts; the range of research encompassed by this approach is quite broad and arguably accounts for the bulk of sociological research on popular culture in recent years.

One strand of interpretivist work might be broadly characterized as “textual analysis” and would encompass studies of media genres (King 1999; Bulman 2005); narrative analysis (Jacobs 2000); and scholarship that focuses on what I would call “the politics of representation” (see Gray 1995), in which popular culture is viewed as a commercial institution that, in producing objects and practices, also produces (and proscribes) social representations and ideas about the world, particularly as they relate to identity formation (race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth). Reception studies focus on the reception or practice of popular culture by individuals and groups. Both Press (1991) and Manga (2003), for example, use interviews to highlight class differences among women with regard to their consumption of television, while Griswold (1981) traces the forces shaping the popularity of American novels. Related to the concept of reception is the concept of fandom. Harrington and Bielby’s (1995) multilevel analysis of soap opera fans remains one of the most nuanced and comprehensive fan studies. Influenced by Diana Crane’s concept of “culture worlds” and employing multiple forms of data from field notes to industry documents, they see the “fan world” as constructed both by organized social activity (on the part of the soap industry as well as fans themselves) and by the more private, personal engagement of dedicated viewers. Recently these authors have turned their attention to the phenomenon of “global fandom” (see Harrington and Bielby 2007).

More purely ethnographic research (involving fieldwork alone or in combination with interviews) typically investigates how and why particular cultural forms or practices work as they do; examples here might include Little League baseball (Fine 1987), daytime talk shows (Gamson 1998; Grindstaff 2002), women’s book clubs (Long 2003), or cultural rituals such as proms (Best 2000) and beauty pageants (Craig 2002; King-O’Riain 2006). Historical research on popular culture is somewhat less common though no less important. Schudson’s (1978) social history of American newspapers remains a classic example. DeNora’s (1995) insightful analysis of Beethoven’s rise to fame at the end of the eighteenth century also comes to mind; she investigated how aesthetic values were operationalized and cultural distinctions made during this period. Lopes (2002), too, is interested in the history of cultural hierarchy; employing Bourdieu’s notion of cultural fields, he examines the racialized transformation of jazz from “lowbrow” vernacular to a “highbrow” art form in the early twentieth century.

Recentering Cultural Sociology

The broad paradigms I have sketched here obviously are not exhaustive, and there are scholars whose work cannot be neatly characterized in these ways, such as the survey-based research on cultural omnivores (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Rossman 2008) or approaches to popular culture that rely primarily on a political-economy framework (Benson 2004). The point is that cultural sociology encompasses a diverse range of scholarly traditions.

Much of the new and interesting work on popular culture today, however, is taking place outside of sociology. Cultural sociology might be the second largest (and fastest-growing) section of the American Sociological Association, but only a small portion of the total research on popular culture is conducted by scholars within that domain. One reason is the interdisciplinary nature of the field. As virtually everyone who writes about popular culture has noted, the study of popular culture is and has been, even before its institutionalization in the academy, a highly interdisciplinary endeavor. In their comprehensive overview of popular culture scholarship, Mukerji and Schudson (1986, 1991) charts the work of the early *Annales* school of French historians, the influence of both structuralist (e.g., Victor Turner, Mary Douglas) and interpretivist (e.g., Clifford Geertz) traditions in anthropology, the importance of the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture in spurring developments within sociology and cultural studies, and the application of semiotic analysis to popular forms in literary studies (e.g., Roland Barthes). For Mukerji and Schudson, disciplinary breadth has made for a vibrant intellectual scene because of the wide range of issues and methodologies at play, but it has costs for students in that the field lacks systematicity and coherence.

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This may be changing somewhat with the growth of cultural studies as a distinct program of inquiry and with the shift toward cultural studies as a major “home” for pop culture analysis. Cultural studies from its inception, particularly

the variants associated with the Birmingham School in Britain, took *as its central focus* the study of popular culture seen through the lens of youth cultures, sub-cultures, and working-class communities (see, for example, the body of work developed by Dick Hebdige, Paul Willis, and Angela McRobbie). Drawing on the theory of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci, cultural studies placed meaning, ideology, and power relations at the heart of its theorizing; this has been enormously influential in shaping the field of popular culture as it has been taken up within communication departments, film and media studies, American studies, the various ethnic studies programs, and the humanities generally. In recent years, cultural studies appears to be morphing away from its British origins, incorporating psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and other theoretical frameworks that have given the study of popular culture a distinctly textual cast. This makes for important and interesting work, but it also means that popular culture scholarship may be becoming more “disciplinary” methodologically, with humanities scholars less inclined to reach across traditional boundaries for inspiration and dialogue. The result, somewhat paradoxically given the diverse roots of the field, is an increasing tendency toward intellectual and methodological introversion that marginalizes cultural sociology. According to Couldry (2000), current tensions between cultural studies and cultural sociology partly reflect this dynamic: while cultural studies scholars often see sociologists as apolitical and inattentive to power relations, sociologists lament cultural studies’ lack of methodological rigor.

Another trend or development that I see characterizing the field of pop culture studies has also tended to marginalize sociologists: the bias toward conceptualizing popular culture as mass-mediated culture. Of course, I am speaking of a general pattern here and not dismissing the sociologists, anthropologists, and historians who are studying everyday lived practices related to such topics as food, fashion, dance, sports, leisure, travel, and so on. My own current work on gender and cheerleading is a case in point, in that the media, while significant, are not the main object of analysis; the media are context and backdrop to the ways in which young people involved in cheerleading make sense of what they are up to and the ways in which *I* make sense of *that* (see Grindstaff and West 2006). Other examples here might include Montemurro (2006) on prewedding rituals, Best (2006) on adolescents and car culture, and Zukin (2005) on shopping. But the majority of pop culture scholarship today *is* tied to the media, particularly television. The prominent role given media is understandable, given the proliferation of media technologies and the expansion of media systems both within the United States and abroad. But it also means that communication departments and media studies programs have tended to more strongly influence how popular culture gets studied and why. As a general rule, I attend communications or media studies conferences rather than sociology conferences to converse with a critical mass of pop culture scholars.

I do not lament the interdisciplinary nature of the field or the primacy of place assigned the mass media, particularly since the media are more and more connected to other cultural pursuits. But I do see certain gaps in the field that

sociologists are well equipped to fill with the theoretical and methodological tools provided by cultural sociology.

To begin, if the media environment is changing rapidly, this clearly has tremendous implications for both the consumption and production of popular culture. Even if we limit ourselves exclusively to television, the reception/uses of television are undergoing dramatic shifts. Today, the average U.S. home receives more than one hundred channels via cable or satellite. People receive additional “television” via computer Web site streams; on hand-held DVD players; on personal digital video recorders (PVRs); through audio Internet podcasts; on cell phones; and in a whole host of public spaces where television is used not just for entertainment but also surveillance and social control: airports, bars, laundromats, fitness clubs, hospitals, malls, and retail stores. “Television” now includes phenomena such as video games, non-industrially produced videos available over the Web (e.g., YouTube), and video clips linked to online text. Just as there are multiple forms of television there are also multiple ways of engaging it (watching “live” images versus recorded ones, playing video games, editing camcorder footage, listening to music, etc.). Most profound, perhaps, the new developments make possible computer-driven interactivity—situations in which viewers can respond to programs in real time as they are streamed over the Internet.

All of this contributes to the emergence of what Ivey and Tepper (2006) call “the curatorial me”—the capability of curating one’s own cultural experiences through savvy Internet use and new devices such as the iPod or TiVo. Although some popular culture scholars have long considered consumption to be active and participatory, even an aspect of production itself (see Jenkins 1992), new technologies are forcing a fundamental reconsideration of what it means to consume. To paraphrase Spigel (2004), as sounds and images multiply on a variety of delivery systems and platforms, who knows what consumers are hearing and seeing—much less doing—any more. The immersive, almost intimate potential of new media might be best described as affording a type of “embedded consumption” (my term) in that the boundaries between consumer and consumed are increasingly blurred. Yet, very few ethnographic studies have examined new media, even allowing for the challenges of conducting fieldwork on media reception outside of organized fan communities (see Seiter 2004). The issues grow more complex still when we consider the transnational character of new media, as consumption practices are shaped by both local contexts of reception and larger political-economic forces. The availability and uses of new media are of considerable sociological relevance; not only are they implicated in the consumption of other cultural forms—toys, books, games, music, and so on—but they also have the potential to widen the “digital divide” on the basis of age, race, gender, and, especially, social class.

Sociologists have even greater potential contributions to make in the production sphere. Again, just taking television, the production-distribution-marketing chain has become incredibly complex even in the face of convergence and consolidation. Networks and syndicators exercise cultural influence not just through making programs but also through their distribution to exhibitors—local stations,

cable operators, satellite firms—which then relay programs to audiences. These activities are tied to complex funding mechanisms that depend on advertising, cable and satellite subscription fees, and ancillary revenue streams—for example, deals with broadcasters outside of the United States, DVD retail sales, and rentals by airlines. If the leitmotif of the production-of-culture school is understanding the characteristics of the industries that produce cultural goods, then adherents of this school are well positioned to examine the industry processes related to the production, distribution, and marketing of television, in both a domestic and international context. Indeed, Richard Peterson's six-facet model of the production nexus, initially deployed in his analysis of rock music (Peterson 1990) and extended to a broad range of work (see Peterson and Anand 2004), would seem especially useful here. Peterson and Anand (2004) argue that by attending to developments in six distinct but interrelated facets of the production nexus—technology, law/regulation, industry structure, organizational structure, occupational careers, and the market—one can explain a great deal about how, when, and why particular cultural forms emerge and catch on as they do.

Yet, relatively few contemporary studies examine the meso-level processes at work in the production chain, an important exception here being the recent work of D. Bielby and Maloney (forthcoming) on the global media industry and processes of worldwide syndication. Nor have the classic production-of-culture ethnographies on news-making been updated to reflect the new media environment in which journalists and other media professionals work. If organizational constraints and journalistic conventions help shape the what and how of news—thereby promoting certain versions of reality over others—then how do new digital modes of accessing, organizing, and disseminating information alter the work journalists do and the news they produce? A related question is what counts as “news” at all, given that young adults increasingly reject newspapers and traditional TV news programs in favor of “alternative” information sources such as personal weblogs and topical comedy programming (see Delli Carpini and Williams 2001).

If the production/consumption of new media is one arena ripe for sociological analyses, a related arena has to do with the cultural hierarchies being created and reworked as communication technologies emerge and are taken up by different constituencies. Tepper (2008) provides an excellent overview of the issues at stake, both positive and negative (see also Ivey and Tepper 2006). On the positive side, today's cosmopolitan consumer culture is not bound by old hierarchies of status and distinction. Invoking Peterson's model of the cultural omnivore (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Rossman 2008), he charts an “explosion of cultural choice” generated by new technologies and the intermingling of high and popular art. The concept of omnivorousness is important here because interest in a diverse array of cultural styles and pursuits has largely replaced highbrow exclusiveness as a marker of cultural status (see also Erickson 2008). Tepper sees the new cultural environment as highly participatory, allowing for a “thickening” of opportunities for cultural expression and creativity. Because technology has both reduced the cost of artistic production and lessened the challenge of reaching audiences, increasing numbers of people are spending much of their leisure

time in amateur art-making, be it in the realm of music, photography, filmmaking, blogging, graphic art, creative writing, or video game design. In fact, Tepper indicated that “professional amateurs” vastly outnumber professional artists in the United States and that the combination of amateur art-making, the explosion of choice, and the sophistication of Internet-savvy consumers will create new micro-markets, challenging the dominance of the twentieth-century mass markets.

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On the negative side, the established media/entertainment industries have converged and consolidated, creating a growing monopolization of popular culture. Media giants like Time Warner, Disney, and Viacom control the majority of cable and broadcast viewing, while large international corporations have bought up local radio stations and newspapers. Such trends are narrowing the gates, crowding out local and independent voices. Working largely within a political-economy framework, media critics who document these trends argue that “consolidated ownership, centralized control of content, and bottom-line pressures in public companies . . . are leading us toward less diversity, less risk, and fewer opportunities for emerging artists or art forms to find audiences” (Tepper 2008, 371; see also McChesney 2004).

Both sides of the debate are correct, Tepper (2008) insists, because the United States is facing a growing cultural divide. Those with the education, skills, money, and time needed to plumb the rich, expressive possibilities of the new cultural environment will be the curators of their own cultural lives, while people with less education and fewer resources will increasingly rely on limited/homogenized forms of culture provided by consolidated media conglomerates as accessed through large portals like Wal-Mart, Clear Channel, and basic cable. According to Tepper, the result is the creation of a new cultural elite and a new cultural underclass whose differences cannot be captured by the notion of a “digital divide” separating people on the basis of technology per se; rather, it is a

divide based on how and where citizens get information and culture (see also Ivey and Tepper 2006). Tepper implies that the cultural underclass is composed of low-wage service workers; although Wal-Mart, Clear Channel, and basic cable attract middle-class consumers, too, the middle classes are in a position to be more omnivorous than their low-income counterparts because their time and cultural repertoires are less constrained. One need not buy this argument wholesale—after all, scholars have long documented the creative uses and meanings garnered from the “boring” products of corporate media giants—to appreciate the general point. At stake are long-standing sociological concerns about the role that culture, and cultural hierarchy, play in generating and sustaining social inequality. And these issues are as important to explore abroad as at home. Global markets may be less predictable than domestic ones because they are subject to a variety of forces outside corporate and political control, including the existing cultural contexts of “host” countries as well as the growth of national/regional media production outside the West (see Miller et al. 2001; Parks and Kumar 2003).

A final area in which sociologists of popular culture could be making inroads is in examining the connections between popular culture and *populism* in the United States, which has shifted from a historic association with the left to characterize a growing brand of working-class political conservatism (see Frank 2004). If the cultural underclass is made up primarily of service-sector workers, and if their options are limited to the “big-box” cultural fare made available by virtue of convergence and consolidation, and if the political/economic forces driving consolidation are fundamentally conservative, then it is important to consider the degree to which, and the ways in which, big-box media content and big-box media consumption interrelate. One need not subscribe to behaviorist assumptions about media “effects” to be interested in the cultural narratives that are directed toward, and presumably hail, conservative working-class constituencies. Yet while the political influence of neopopulism has garnered systematic attention in Europe (see Mazzoleni, Stewart, and Horsfield 2003), its emergence and growth in the United States has been largely ignored by scholars of popular culture. Media mouthpieces such as Bill O’Reilly and Ann Coulter represent a complex circuit of exchange between political discourse and popular discourse; they harness a worldview in which conservative corporate and political elites—and their economic and social policies—are perceived as the champions of “average” working Americans.

The phenomenon of conservative populism is important precisely because the consequences to the working classes of privatization, deregulation, and de-unionization have been so devastating, inviting the revival of nineteenth-century patterns of wealth distribution. As Frank (2004, 6) argues, the primary contradiction of conservative populism is that “it is a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people.” Frank and others see culture—including, most importantly, *popular* culture—as the vehicle for waging what is essentially an economic war. It is all well and good for popular culture scholars to

perform queer readings of *Harry Potter*, or to celebrate the active participation of *Big Brother* fans online. But we must also pay attention to the places and spaces that produce populist narratives about who we are and where we are going as a nation.

There is a production and consumption dimension to all of this, too; on one hand, we can examine the networks and connections between conservative organizations and think tanks and the production of media content; on the other hand, we can look at how conservative narratives are taken up and understood by ordinary people. Generally speaking, the sociological literature gives us little sense of who, as a group, working-class conservatives are. Social movement theorists have mostly studied how journalists and their sources construct the meaning of issues and events in media discourse, not how these meanings are taken up and understood by ordinary people or how the views of ordinary people might influence the rhetoric of savvy politicians. This would seem to be a pressing arena of inquiry, given the apparent paradox presented by conservative populism.

Lamont's (1992, 2000) concept of symbolic boundaries provides a powerful analytic tool for such work, particularly as it relates to working-class morality (see Lamont 2000). Although not tied to popular culture specifically, her research suggests that the cultural/moral dimensions of class consciousness are as important as material/economic ones—if not more important. According to Lamont (2000), working- and lower-middle-class men in the United States place tremendous importance on “keeping the world in moral order.” Unlike their professional-class counterparts, working-class men value morality above socioeconomic status because it offers an alternative set of criteria for defining dignity and self-worth in the face of economic uncertainty and lack of autonomy. Class is a highly salient identity category for these men, but they resent people “above” less for their money or exploitative behavior than for their perceived moral flaws, chief among them their perceived arrogance and disregard for traditional authority. It is hardly coincidental that, over the past decade or so, big-box news and public affairs programming has increasingly constructed liberal culture as radical and liberals themselves as uppity/elitist and immoral. It is a feat of *popular culture* when conservative ideas are considered populist and liberalism is successfully branded as a threat to everything “real” Americans hold dear. Politicized narratives—about politics and the economy, about the environment, about the “war on terror”—have to be “tried on” and then “sold” to ordinary people, and popular culture is crucial to this effort. To quote Mukerji and Schudson (1991, 36), “We can happily celebrate discoveries in popular culture of sociability, fellowship, and creative resistance to exclusionary cultural forms; but that should scarcely blind us to popular traditions of racism, sexism, and nativism that are just as deeply rooted. This is popular culture, too.”

At the same time, when scholars leave the world of big-box culture to examine the amateur artistry of the so-called cultural curators, they would do well to remember that “alternative” is not synonymous with “progressive.” Media scholars have been adept at balancing the domination model of media with evidence

of consumer “resistance,” but clearly domination is not limited to sites of production nor to particular types of culture, just as resistance is not limited to particular moments or modes of consumption. All are at play in the ongoing “circuit of culture” (du Gay 1997) that characterizes contemporary society.

Conclusion

In the complex cultural environment in which the production, distribution, and consumption of so much of our popular culture occurs, no one discipline has a monopoly on addressing the issues at stake, political or otherwise. Nor would a monopoly be desirable, for different intellectual approaches and methodological competencies are crucial for a “thick” understanding of any social phenomenon. Cultural sociologists have played a smaller role than one might expect, however, particularly given the important (and often interdisciplinary) analytic tools developed in the field and the applicability of these tools to studying the changes wrought by new technologies. Sociology itself emerged within the context of the Industrial Revolution to make sense of the conflicts between traditional and modernizing social forces, so cultural sociology is well equipped to make sense of the popular practices and institutions emerging in the context of the current “revolution,” both at home and abroad.

Spillman (2002) considers cultural sociology to be first and foremost about processes of meaning making, with different traditions or approaches within the field reflecting different ways of thinking about, and studying, meaning-making. Her discussion of these approaches is roughly parallel to my own vis-à-vis pop culture scholarship: we can make meaning in everyday life (as in ethnographic or interview-based research), the institutional production/organization of meaning-making activity (as in the production-of-culture approach), and the shared interpretive frameworks that inform the basis of meaning-making, whether individual or collective (as in the interpretation of specific texts or analyses of particular narratives/discourses/genres). As we have seen, these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and scholars may draw on multiple intellectual traditions, including Marxist theories of cultural domination, Gramscian theories of hegemony, structural analyses of cultural “fields” (Bourdieu 1993), Peterson’s six-facet model of the production nexus, and analyses of symbolic boundaries as deployed by different groups in different cultural contexts. Heuristic cultural concepts abound: “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1984), “taste cultures” (Gans 1974/1999), “culture worlds” (Crane 1992), “cultural diamond” (Griswold 1994), and “cultural toolkits” (Swidler 1986), to name a few.

Few other fields have more methodological and theoretical breadth, yet because so much popular culture is mediated by new technologies and because the study of new media has been most systematically institutionalized elsewhere, cultural sociologists, as a group, are not at the forefront of pop culture scholarship, either in its empirical or more theoretical guises. One might argue that this

is of little consequence, if scholars in communications and cultural studies programs, for example, are addressing questions of sociological import. On one hand, I would agree: sociologically relevant work can be (and clearly is being) done outside the bounds of the discipline. On the other hand, as I have tried to demonstrate, cultural sociologists have too much to offer to take a back seat. As the site of “an outpouring of innovative research” (Spillman 2002, 1) and as the home to a rich and diverse set of analytic traditions, cultural sociology can benefit, and benefit from, the field of popular culture. Disciplines and fields are always defined at least in part by the substantive concerns of their members; to the degree that cultural sociologists are concerned with cultural hierarchy and inequality, with the characteristics of culture-producing industries, with technological innovations and their “effects,” with issues of representation, and with the formation of individual and collective identities, they are potentially concerned with popular culture.

Mukerji and Schudson (1991, 26) remind us that early sociologists like Robert Park and Thorstein Veblen evinced a “strong and unembarrassed interest in popular culture” and that sociologists, more than most other social scientists, took for granted the legitimacy of studying popular culture. In closing, I wonder if the current slippage between cultural sociology and the broader arena of pop culture scholarship might reflect residual contemporary pressures on sociologists to adopt either a high-theory mode of analysis or forms of inquiry legitimated in the “serious” realms of economic and organizational sociology. Despite the movement of popular culture scholarship in recent decades from “academic backwater” to “swift intellectual river” and although scholars “have come to take popular culture more seriously as a terrain of political and social conflict” (Mukerji and Schudson 1991, 1), applying “soft” methods to “trivial” cultural phenomena (day-time talk shows, reality TV, comic books, cheerleading, etc.) may yet be risky business for sociologists, even if one attends to institutional context and even if one eschews a celebratory “resistance” model of analysis. Whether a focus on new media and communication technologies will mitigate the risk is unclear; my hope and expectation is that cultural sociology will continue to be guided by an omnivorous rather than an exclusionary spirit when exploring cultural life.

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