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Popular culture and 'the turn to Gramsci'

Tony Bennett

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Why study popular culture? It's tempting to answer: why not? To do so, however, would merely be to lend hostage to fortune, for many reasons have been advanced as to why popular culture should not, or at least need not, be studied – on the grounds that it is too slight and ephemeral to be worthy of any sustained inquiry, for example – and, for the greater part of this century, such arguments have largely carried the day. Moreover, even where they have not prevailed, the grounds upon which the study of popular culture has been justified have been mainly negative: to expose its morally corrupting influences and aesthetic poverty, for example, or, in Marxist approaches, to reveal its role as a purveyor of dominant ideology. In the context of such assumptions, to study popular culture has also meant to adopt a position against and opposed to it, to view it as in need of replacement by a culture of another kind, usually 'high culture' – the view not only of reformist critics, such as F. R. Leavis, but, oddly enough, equally influential in Marxist circles too, especially in the work of Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and the other members of the Frankfurt school.

It is one of the quirks of history that these arguments, which once nowhere had quite so much sedimented cultural weight as in Britain, have been overturned perhaps more decisively in Britain than anywhere else over the course of the last 20 to 30 years. The study of cinema, popular music, sport, youth sub-cultures and of much else besides has now developed to the point where these are well established fields of inquiry, with considerably developed bodies of theory and highly elaborated methodologies, in which debate is no longer stalked by the ghost of Leavis – or by the gloomy prognostications of the Frankfurt school, for that matter. Equally important, significant advances have been made in theorizing the sphere of popular culture as a whole. The term had previously been used quite loosely to refer to a miscellaneous collection of cultural forms and practices having little in common beyond the fact of their exclusion from the accepted canon of 'high culture'. In more recent debates, by contrast, the many and diverse practices which are typically grouped under the heading of popular culture are more usually regarded as being systematically interconnected by virtue of the parts they play in relation to broader social and political processes, particularly those bearing on the production of consent to the prevailing social order in both its patriarchal and capitalist dimensions. These theoretical developments finally, have been accompanied by a sureness of political purpose as the study of

popular culture has been defined as a site of positive political engagement by both socialists and feminists in their concern to identify both those aspects of popular culture which serve to secure consent to existing social arrangements as well as those which, in embodying alternative values, supply a source of opposition to those arrangements.
[...]

Debates in the area during the 1970s were often deadlocked around the polar opposites of structuralism and culturalism represented, respectively, as the 'imported' and 'home-grown' varieties of cultural studies.¹ In the perspective of structuralism, popular culture was often regarded as an 'ideological machine' which dictated the thoughts of the people just as rigidly and with the same law-like regularity as, in Saussure's conspectus – which provided the originating paradigm for structuralism – the system of *langue* dictated the events of *parole*. Focusing particularly on the analysis of textual forms, structuralist analysis was concerned to reveal the ways in which textual structures might be said to organize reading or spectating practices, often with scant regard to the conditions regulating either the production or the reception of those textual forms.² Culturalism, by contrast, was often uncritically romantic in its celebration of popular culture as expressing the authentic interests and values of subordinate social groups and classes. This conception, moreover, resulted in an essentialist view of culture: that is, as the embodiment of specific class or gender essences. In the logic of this approach, as Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock put it, many feminists were led to look for an authentically female culture as if this could 'exist isolated like some deep frozen essence in the freezer of male culture',³ just as many socialists rummaged through popular culture in search of the authentic voice of the working class, as if this could exist in some pure form, preserved and nurtured in a recess immune to the socially preponderant forms of cultural production in a capitalist society.⁴

These theoretical divergences were accentuated by their association with different disciplinary perspectives, structuralism being most strongly present in the study of cinema, television and popular writings while culturalism tended to predominate within history and sociology, particularly in studies concerned with working class 'lived cultures' or 'ways of life'. Given this division of the field – a division that was sometimes provocatively and needlessly deepened, particularly by E. P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*⁵ – there seemed little alternative but to pay one's money and take one's choice. Worse, it seemed as though, depending on one's area of interest, one was constrained to be either a structuralist or a culturalist – the former if one studied cinema, television or popular writing, and the latter if one's interests were in sport, say, or youth sub-cultures. It was almost as if the cultural sphere were divided into two hermetically separate regions, each exhibiting a different logic. While this was unsatisfactory, it was equally clear that the two traditions could not be forced into a shot-gun marriage either. The only way out of this impasse, therefore, seemed to be to shift the debate on to a new terrain which would displace the structuralist-culturalist opposition, a project which inclined many working in the field at the time to draw increasingly on the writings of Antonio Gramsci, particularly those on the subject of hegemony.⁶
[...]

Put in the most general terms, the critical spirit of Gramsci's work totally shunning the intolerable condescension of the mass culture critic while simultaneously avoiding any tendency toward a celebratory populism, both avoids and disqualifies the bipolar alternatives of structuralism and culturalism. However, this is less a question of style or of Gramsci's mode of address – although these are important considerations in Gramsci's writing – than one of theory. In Gramsci's conspectus, popular culture is viewed neither as the site of the people's cultural deformation nor as that of their cultural self-affirmation or, in any simple Thompsonian sense, of their own self-making; rather, it is viewed as a force field of relations shaped, precisely, by these contradictory pressures and tendencies – a perspective which enables a significant reformulation of both the theoretical and the political issues at stake in the study of popular culture.

Politically speaking, both the structuralist and culturalist paradigms subscribe to a rather similar conception of the structure and organization of the cultural and ideological spheres viewed in relation to the antagonistic economic and political relationships between social classes. Although, importantly different in other respects, both paradigms regard the sphere of cultural and ideological practices as being governed by a dominant ideology, essentially and monolithically bourgeois in its characteristics, which, albeit with varying degrees of success, is imposed from without, as an alien force, on the subordinate classes. Viewed from this perspective the main differences between the two perspectives are largely nominal or ones of orientation. In structuralism, 'popular culture', 'mass culture' and 'dominant ideology' are usually equated through a series of sliding definitions. In consequence, the chief political task assigned to the study of popular culture is that of reading through popular cultural forms and practices to reveal the obfuscating mechanisms of the dominant ideology at work within them, thus arming the reader against the occurrence of similar mechanisms in related practices. In culturalism, by contrast, popular culture, in being equated with the 'autochthonous' culture of subordinate classes, is explicitly distinguished from and opposed to dominant ideology in the form of mass culture. Where this conception prevails, analysis is dominated by a positive political hermeneutic: that of, having found the people's authentic voice, interpreting its meaning and amplifying its cultural volume. To be sure, the consequences of these contrasting orientations are by no means negligible. In spite of these, however, the two approaches share a conception of the cultural and ideological field as being divided between two opposing cultural and ideological camps – bourgeois and working class – locked in a zero-sum game in which one side gains only at the expense of the other and in which the ultimate objective is the liquidation of one by the other so that the victor might then stand in the place of the vanquished.

For Gramsci too, of course, cultural and ideological practices are to be understood and assessed in terms of their functioning within the antagonistic relations between the bourgeoisie and the working class as the two fundamental classes of capitalist society. Indeed, Gramsci's insistence that these antagonistic class relations form the ultimately determining horizon within which cultural and ideological analysis must be located constitutes the outer limit to the programme of theoretical revision he inaugurated in

relation to classical Marxist theories of ideology.⁷ Where Gramsci departed from the earlier Marxist tradition was in arguing that the cultural and ideological relations between ruling and subordinate classes in capitalist societies consist less in the *domination* of the latter by the former than in the struggle for *hegemony* – that is, for moral, cultural, intellectual and, thereby, political leadership over the whole of society – between the ruling class and, as the principal subordinate class, the working class.

This substitution of the concept of hegemony for that of domination is not, as some commentators have suggested, merely terminological; it brings in tow an entirely different conception of the means by which cultural and ideological struggles are conducted.⁸ Whereas, according to the dominant ideology thesis, bourgeois culture and ideology seek to take the place of working class culture and ideology and thus to become directly operative in framing working class experience, Gramsci argues that the bourgeoisie can become a hegemonic, leading class only to the degree that bourgeois ideology is able to accommodate, to find some space for, opposing class cultures and values. A bourgeois hegemony is secured not via the obliteration of working class culture, but via its *articulation* to bourgeois culture and ideology so that, in being associated with and expressed in the forms of the latter, its political affiliations are altered in the process.

As a consequence of its accommodating elements of opposing class cultures, 'bourgeois culture' ceases to be purely or entirely bourgeois. It becomes, instead, a mobile combination of cultural and ideological elements derived from different class locations which are, but only provisionally and for the duration of a specific historical conjuncture, affiliated to bourgeois values, interests and objectives. By the same token, of course, the members of subordinate classes never encounter or are oppressed by a dominant ideology in some pure or class essentialist form; bourgeois ideology is encountered only in the compromised forms it must take in order to provide some accommodation for opposing class values. As Robert Gray remarks, if the Gramscian concept of hegemony refers to the processes through which the ruling class seeks to negotiate opposing class cultures onto a cultural and ideological terrain which wins for it a position of leadership, it is also true that what is thereby consented to is a negotiated version of ruling class culture and ideology:

Class hegemony is a dynamic and shifting relationship of social subordination, which operates in two directions. Certain aspects of the behaviour and consciousness of the subordinate classes may reproduce a version of the values of the ruling class. But in the process value systems are modified, through their necessary adaptation to diverse conditions of existence; the subordinate classes thus follow a 'negotiated version' of ruling-class values. On the other hand, structures of ideological hegemony transform and incorporate dissident values, so as effectively to prevent the working through of their full implications.⁹

Although an over-rapid and somewhat abstract summary of a complex body of theory, the main points, perhaps, clear enough: that the spheres of culture and ideology cannot be conceived as being divided into two hermetically separate and entirely opposing class cultures and ideologies. The effect of this is to disqualify the bipolar options of the structuralist and

culturalist perspectives on popular culture, viewed as either the carrier of an undiluted bourgeois ideology or as the site of the people's authentic culture and potential self-awakening, as unmitigated villain or unsullied hero. To the contrary, to the degree that it is implicated in the struggle for hegemony – and, for Gramsci, the part played by the most taken-for-granted, sedimented cultural aspects of everyday life are crucially implicated in the processes whereby hegemony is fought for, won, lost, resisted – the field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavour. As such, it consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which – in different particular types of popular culture – dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are 'mixed' in different permutations.

In sum, then, the 'turn to Gramsci' has been influential in both disputing the assumption that cultural forms can be assigned an essential class-belongingness and contesting a simply 'bourgeois versus working class' conception of the organization of the cultural and ideological relationships. These reorientations have resulted in two decisive shifts of political emphasis within the study of popular culture. First, they have produced a perspective, within Marxism, from which it is possible to analyse popular culture without adopting a position that is either opposed to it or uncritically for it. The forms of political assessment of cultural practices which the theory of hegemony calls for are much more conjunctural and pliable than that. A cultural practice does not carry its politics with it, as if written upon its brow forever and a day; rather, its political functioning depends on the network of social and ideological relations in which it is inscribed as a consequence of the ways in which, in a particular conjuncture, it is articulated to other practices. In brief, in suggesting that the political and ideological articulations of cultural practices are *movable* – that a practice which is articulated to bourgeois values today may be disconnected from those values and connected to socialist ones tomorrow – the theory of hegemony opens up the field of popular culture as one of enormous political possibilities.

Equally important, the Gramscian critique of class essentialist conceptions of culture and ideology and the associated principles of class reductionism enables due account to be taken of the relative separation of different regions of cultural struggle (class, race, gender) as well as of the complex and changing ways in which these may be overlapped on to one another in different historical circumstances. Apart from being an important advance on classical Marxism, this has also served as an important check on the Foucauldian tendency to view power and the struggle against it as equally diffuse and unrelated. Most important, though, it has offered a framework within which the relations between the cultural politics of socialist movements and those of, say, feminist or national liberation struggles can be productively debated without their respective specifications threatening either to engulf or be engulfed by the others.

This is not to suggest that Gramsci's writings contain the seeds of an answer to all problems in the field of popular culture analysis. There are specific and detailed technical and theoretical problems peculiar to television and

film analysis, popular music, the study of lived cultures and the field of popular writings which no amount of general theorizing might resolve. Likewise, questions concerning the relations between culture and class, culture and gender and culture and nation remained vexed and complex, requiring separate and detailed attention if progress is to be made. The value of the Gramscian theory of hegemony is that of providing an integrating framework within which both sets of issues might be addressed and worked through in relation to each other. By the same token, of course, it is liable to the criticism that it is too accommodating and expansive a framework, over-totalizing in its analytical claims and ambit. The charge has certainly been made often enough, and it seems one likely to be pressed with increased vigour, particularly in the area of cultural studies.

Notes

1. While the term 'structuralism' has a more general currency, the concept of culturalism and the structuralism/culturalism polarity are mainly attributable to the collective work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. For the classic statement of this position, see Hall, S. (1980) *Cultural studies: two paradigms*. *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 1, shortened version in Bennett, T. et al. (eds) (1981) *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*, Batsford, London.
2. The heyday of structuralism, in this respect, is probably best represented by Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader*, Hutchinson, London, 1981 (first published in Italian in 1979). In addition to providing rigorous structuralist analyses of the ideological encoding of a range of popular texts (Superman, the James Bond novels, etc.), Eco's approach to the processes of reading is one in which such processes are conceived as entirely regulated by textual structure. For critical discussions of this aspect of Eco's work, see Chapter 6 of de Laurentis, T. (1984) *Alice doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Macmillan, London; and Chapter 3 of Bennett, T. and Woollacott, J. (eds) (1986) *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*, Macmillan, London.
3. Parker, R. and Pollock, G. (1982) *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Pantheon Books, New York, p. 136.
4. The most pronounced recent example of this approach is David Harker's *One for the Money: Politics and Popular Song*, Hutchinson, London, 1980.
5. Thompson, E. P. (1978) *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin Press, London.
6. See, especially, Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Lawrence and Wishart, London. The more recent translation and publication of Gramsci's writings on culture and politics seems likely to strengthen the Gramscian influence on contemporary cultural theory: see Gramsci, A. (1985) *Selections from Cultural Writings*, Lawrence and Wishart, London.
7. There have however, been a number of attempts recently to go beyond these 'outer limits' although whether the resulting formulations are meaningfully described as Marxist is debatable. See, for example, Laclau, E. (1983) *Transformations of advanced industrial societies and the theory of the subject*. In Hanninen, S. and Paldan, L. (eds) *Rethinking Ideology: A Marxist Debate*, International General/IMMAC, New York.
8. The failure to appreciate this is one of the most conspicuous shortcomings of Abercrombie, N., Hill, S. and Turner, B. S. (1980) *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, George Allen and Unwin, London.
9. Gray, R. (1976) *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 6.

- (1976a), 'Communications as cultural science', in C.W.E. Bigsby, ed., *Approaches to popular culture*, Edward Arnold
- (1976b), 'Notes on British Marxism since the war', *New Left Review*, no. 100
- (1977a), *Marxism and literature*, Oxford University Press
- (1977b), 'The paths and pitfalls of ideology as an ideology', *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 10 June

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Power, Hegemony, and Communication Theory

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But anyway, on this particular summer day Bernabé Montoya walked out of Rael's just as Onofre's mottled-green, 1953 Chevy pickup with the three-legged dog on top hiccupped to a stop at the town's lone parking meter and, with a dispirited — call it a lonely — "Ai, Chihuahua!" the sheriff reached for his citation pad. Bitterly he began to write, thinking as he did so that if ever all the cantankerous streaks in people like Amarante Córdova, Joe Mondragón and Onofre Martineze were united behind a common cause, there would be much more than all hell to pay.

John Nichols, *The Milagro Beanfield War*

Introduction

Shortly after the airing of the ABC mini-series polemic, *Amerika*, a viewer wrote to the TV Guide editor: "*Amerika* was thought-provoking, challenging and debate-inspiring. . . . Unfortunately, one of the premises of democracy is that people not only be able but *willing* to think about and discuss things for themselves. If this is an unrealistic expectation, then the best we can hope for is an efficient and relatively enlightened tyranny, whether of the right or the left. The point of the show, after all, is that we get the government we deserve."¹

This viewer, probably innocently and unwittingly, in just these few simple sentences, provides a theory of "power," one which is strikingly close to what Martin Carnoy has called the "official ideology of capitalist democracies" — pluralism.² Put briefly, the pluralist thesis of power says that power is a diffuse and empirically verifiable outcome of healthy conflict among competing interest groups, usually manifested as individual consumer-like decisions; and even though based on "conflict,"