

High/Mass

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The terms 'high' and 'mass' are key terms in the sociological analysis of *vertical* stratification of culture in industrial societies. A significant problem for the sociology of culture, however, is that the terms are also in everyday use, where they often carry strong ideological connotations. When deployed in the sociological analysis of culture, thus, they demonstrate the tension between sociological theory and ideology referred to in the chapter 'Theory/Practice'. Moreover, they are not the only terms important for the sociological analysis of contemporary culture. They are complemented by a series of related terms and concepts which will be discussed with them. Similarly, vertical stratification is not the only form of social structural differentiation and division of contemporary culture. It is complemented by an increasingly significant *horizontal* stratification of culture to be found in the contemporary proliferation of **subcultures** that occur both within and between modern nation-states and which are, in the latter case, an important feature of the process of **globalization** (see chapter 'Local/Global').

The term 'culture' itself (see chapter 'Culture/Nature') is one which refers to a sociological concept of central analytical importance (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; Kroeber 1963), and yet is in wide everyday use in a variety of descriptive and evaluative senses (Williams 1981; 1984). In his study of the selective tradition of relations between culture and society from the late eighteenth to the mid twentieth century, Williams (1958) identifies culture as one of the two or three most important of the five key words (culture, class, industry, democracy and art) around which that tradition is constellated. The sociological concept refers to the whole way of

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life of a society, or of a significant group within society (hence the term and concept of subculture) – its beliefs, values, shared meanings, routine practices and artifacts. This sense of the term holds also in everyday use where, however, it is more often used to refer in a selective sense (Snow 1959; Leavis and Yudkin 1962) to the aesthetic and epistemological traditions of the arts, sciences and letters. The relation between these two dominant mundane senses of culture is that the latter is part of the whole that is the former. But it plays an important role in discursive debates over the high/mass dichotomy in the sociology of culture, where it represents *high culture* in the vertical stratification of culture.

This dual sense of culture is constituted in a relation between culture as an articulation of the shared meanings of large-scale social groups and as a representation of the structure of interrelations within and between those groups. It is, moreover, a relation between them which is *reflexive*, in the sense that the shared meanings are constructed to legitimate the structural interrelations. Culture is not autonomous of social structure; it is determined by it and reflexive upon it. Thus, the dichotomy between concepts and processes of high and mass culture refers to the legitimation of dichotomous social structures and the oppositions between their attendant political economies. Inevitably, therefore, a critical explication of the sociological dichotomy involves critical examination also of contrasting political ideologies.

HIGH CULTURE

High culture is invariably the culture of a social minority at or near the political and economic apex of a vertically stratified society. It is, thus, both a minority culture and the culture of an elite. Since it is characteristic of elites, as the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) has pointed out, to seek to maintain the exclusiveness of their social position, political power and economic advantage, high culture manifests a strong tendency towards social and political conservatism and the concentration of economic wealth (Pareto 1966). T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) has proposed this clearly by contending (1939; 1963) that high culture is most likely to be sustained in a traditional society, in which there is an established religion, an agrarian economy and an aristocracy of extended families, amongst whose members ownership of the means of agrarian production is protected and transferred through primogeniture (inheritance by the first-born son) – a guarantee, whether intentional or not, that such a society would be patriarchal as well as traditional. In its recommendation of physiocracy, Eliot's is an extreme example of the type of social structure that can determine, and in turn would be legitimated by, high culture. But in its recommendation, from the vantage point of a fully developed, high-modern industrial society, of a

return to a pre-industrial order, it provides a clear example of how strong a dimension of high culture is its conservatism. The concept depends upon a hierarchically stratified society, of which the major historical instances are caste, feudal, mercantile-class and industrial-class societies. As structural types of society, these can be differentiated according to their degree of social openness. The social position of the individual member of a caste society, for example, is fixed ascriptively by birth. This is characteristic of most members of feudal society also, though some mobility through certain estates is possible (Bloch 1961). Class societies, however, are characterized by a degree of social mobility which is intended to be consonant with whatever social philosophy of political equality grounds the dominant legitimating ideology espoused by their ruling groups. Yet in all these types of society are to be found alike selective traditions of high culture manifested in distinctive sets of dominant beliefs, values and communicative and expressive meanings which legitimate and reinforce their hierarchies of social and political order. These traditions are institutionalized in educational academies, religious practices and social rituals to which access is limited, however open the society may purport to be. Eliot, for example, proposes that culture includes 'all the characteristics and interests of a people', suggesting that 'the reader can make his own list' (1963: 31). In making his own version of such a list, however, like most high culture theorists, he recommends the traditional cultural practices of a particular social group as representative of a whole society, in the sense that they are somehow superior to or a more representative selection than those of other groups. Their superiority is real in the sense that, though the practices are differentiated as those of the dominant, ruling upper middle class, they are accepted as representative of those of other class groups, only some of whom also either engage in them or seek to do so (Williams 1958). They are complemented invariably by the intellectual articulation of the traditions through the formal orthodoxies of epistemological codes of discursive method and aesthetic expression.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) uses the term **hegemony** (Gramsci 1971; 1985; Williams 1977; Bennett 1986; Bennett et al. 1981) to characterize this reflexive and legitimating interrelation between the social structure and epistemological culture of ruling groups in class societies. He points out that, although it is an interrelation that extends throughout class society and is often manifest in the mundane culture of common sense, it reinforces and is beneficial to the dominant position of the ruling groups. This indicates that the cultures and social structures of non-elite groups are necessary and important sociological correlates of high culture. One clear formulation of this reinvokes imaginatively the allegedly stable socio-cultural conditions of pre- or non-industrial society in the form of an organic community. In this idea of a traditional society, life and work are integrated in unalienated agrarian and craft production. Sound sociological formulations of this type of pre-industrial socio-economic order are

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to be found in the theories of social change of Durkheim, where it is given the term *mechanical* (as opposed to *organic*) social solidarity, and of Tonnies and Weber, who use the term *Gemeinschaft* or *community* (as opposed to *Gesellschaft* or *association*) (see chapter 'Theory/Practice'). That the non-elite socio-cultural correlates of high culture are usually pre- or non-industrial is a reminder of the socio-political conservatism that underwrites and is legitimated by high culture (see, for example, Williams 1973; 1984; Laslett 1979; Konig 1968). It is a key to the traditionalism that sustains the existing political and economic order and its dominant groups.

But the organic community and its common culture are not only seen as the correlate of *high* culture. An interesting elaboration of the concept of high culture is formulated as *minority culture*, in terms of which an intellectual elite is seen as responsible for safeguarding intellectual culture for its intrinsic worth – for example as a repository of moral values. The literary critic F.R. Leavis (1895–1978) argued that what he termed the 'great tradition' in the English novel, from Dickens to Lawrence, of serious moral concern about the quality of social and cultural life constituted such a repository. To safeguard it required, in Eliot's words, a 'common pursuit of true judgement' (Leavis 1952) by an intellectual minority of critics committed to sustaining the life of a common culture by subjecting its language to the test of literature (Filmer 1969; 1977b). Leavis sees his minority as guardians of and contributors to a selective tradition that originates with Coleridge at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is sustained by Arnold at its close and which constellates in the middle of the twentieth century around himself and his colleagues in the English School at Cambridge University (Milner 1994; Mulhern 1981). This tradition, whilst not anti-industrial in a Luddite sense, is one which insists that the socio-cultural consequences of industrial society have an inevitably subversive effect on the quality of social and cultural life. For all its moral and intellectual tone, the conservatism that ensues is unavoidably political in its implications, arguing as it does that those capable of being entrusted with the stewardship of traditional culture inevitably constitute a minority of artists, critics and educators.

A further instance of a minority committed to the safeguarding of high culture, but one which is not tied to tradition – which seeks, indeed, an outright rejection of tradition as a necessary condition of its own distinct character – is the aesthetic **avant-garde**. It shares with the minority guardians of traditional culture an antipathy towards industrialism, but for the different reasons that stem from the marginalization of the social role of the fine artist. This is seen as resulting from the scientific materialism from which the processes of industrialization have been generated. The particular targets of the avant-garde's critique of modern society are the industrial capitalist market of production and exchange, and the commoditization of works of art implicated in such an economy by the industrial capitalist bourgeoisie (Benjamin 1991; Lowe 1982). Their commitment to absolute

modernity through constant artistic innovation, together with a rejection of both aesthetic tradition and bourgeois convention, is expressed through an espousal of the aesthetics of *modernism* (see, for example, Bradbury and McFarlane 1976), rather than a necessary commitment to a particular social or political theory. Indeed, some of their espousals of social theories and political ideologies have seemed dangerously naive. Such espousals are invariably based upon their need to remain an exclusive minority, but one committed to the overthrow or radical retrenchment of, rather than a stable continuity in, the existing political economic order, which they see as the cause of their social alienation and isolation. But the exclusiveness of their absolute commitment to modernity, and its associated rejection of tradition, make the possibility of sustaining any commitment to social *order* theoretically inconceivable and thus practically impossible. Their orientation to social change, whilst vital to their identity as an elite cultural minority, can generate a version of society no more coherent than that of bohemian anarchy. The political and sociological naivety that is so characteristic of avant-garde high cultural movements exposes a relation between high culture and some theoretical formulations of mass society which will be discussed in relation to the concept of mass in the high/mass dichotomy.

MASS CULTURE

There are two distinct senses of mass culture which are prevalent in sociological discussions of culture: the first is as the culture of *mass society*, the second as the culture of the *mass media audience*.

The phenomenon of mass society, and the conception of the social world that it implies, has been described (Giner 1976: ix–xiii) as an outlook rather than an accomplished type of society. It has a history within Western social thought that stretches back to the earliest systematic reflections on the political order of the societies of the ancient city-states (1976: 1–24), and appears as a focus of debate in social and political thought in the Renaissance, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth and of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This debate, indeed, has intensified as a feature of modern Western social and political theory on two distinct occasions during the twentieth century: between the two world wars and from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. Yet whenever, since the late eighteenth century, the features of social structure and process are identified that are alleged to constitute mass society, their interrelation, and thus its outcome – mass society itself – are always immanent rather than actual. The particular form of mass society which is formulated is only ever about to happen and has never quite emerged as a fully developed societal type. Nevertheless, its characteristic features are instructive in reaching an understanding both of the concept of mass itself as a constitutive feature of contemporary social

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thought, and of the much more substantive practices of cultural stratification that are collected under the term of mass culture.

In the physical sciences, the term 'mass' refers to an incoherent condition of matter – an agglomeration of undifferentiated particles. In all formulations of modern society as mass society since the late eighteenth century, it is this sense of mass that is used to characterize the socio-political condition of the majority of a geopolitical population once they are admitted, through enfranchisement, to individual membership of society. They are treated as if the experience is inevitably bewildering and disorienting. The one exception is Marx's conception of a proletarian mass of the alienated, exploited and dispossessed who recognize, in their common condition of expropriation, a common interest in the revolutionary overthrow of the sources of their oppression – industrial capitalist society and its bourgeois ruling class. The proletariat's realization of their mass identity is seen by Marx as a liberating and revolutionary necessary one, which transforms them from passive victims of material expropriation to active and participating agents of radical and permanent change. But its substantive value is discharged in the accomplishment of the revolution itself and it remains a passing phase in the realization of a new and ideal social and political order. By active participation in revolutionary action, those individuals who make up the mass are able to recover their human integrity as members of a free, open and democratic post-revolutionary society, characterized by equal economic opportunity and the just distribution and exercise of political power.

All other conceptualizations of social majorities as masses are more permanent in character, and are either derogatory or pessimistic in their explicit attributions of, or implications about, the human character of the individual in mass society. From the development of post-feudal and Enlightenment conceptions of republican democracy, which depended on egalitarian theories of popular government, arguments have been put forward repeatedly that popular majorities are composed of individuals who, for largely ascriptive reasons, are seen as cognitively and morally unfit to exercise the judgements necessary for participation in the processes required by responsible government in a modern society. They are seen not yet as masses but as plebs, peasants, crowds, mobs, rabble, the *hoi polloi*, common people (Giner 1976: xi, 28–68). Industrial mass production, particularly under capitalism, lends the sense of massification to this way of formulating the social majority. Industrialization is seen as commodifying human work to the point of automation, and thus reducing workers from the creative craftspeople of pre-industrial society, involved in all stages of the processes of production to which their work contributed, to machine-dominated automata, alienated from the product of their labour. This further depersonalizes individuals into a one-dimensional, anonymous, isolated, immature and amoral condition in which they are easily manipulated by sinister elites who dominate them in order to achieve ulterior

goals. The resulting political condition of mass society is unavoidably either authoritarian, justified by the cognitive inability and political incapacity of the majority for the self-determination required by democratic majority government; or totalitarian, in order to realize in institutional practice the extremist (invariably racist, often genocidal) ideologies of the ruling elites. Mass society holds the prospect of a social condition in which the interactional and interdependent relations between structurally differentiated groups such as classes, status groups and their attendant subcultures are replaced by an increasingly inactive, inept and impotent majority subject to the oppression of an anti-social, self-interested and corrupt elite (1976: 189–93).

The overstatement endemic to these formulations is indicative of why mass society is an immanent rather than a real condition of modern society. It explains also why the concept of mass society has not been grounded effectively in social theory and is therefore referred to more correctly as an 'outlook'. But emerging, as it has, at key points in the development of reflexive thought about the changing conditions of modern society, it is very much a part of its culture. This explains, in part, the **teleological** character of some of the formulations of mass culture as the culture (Kornhauser 1959; 1968) or the cultural correlate (Coser 1964) of mass society. Apparently unenlightening though these attempts at definition appear to be, they reinforce the substantive absence of the phenomenon of mass society itself. The constitutive elements of mass culture, by contrast, are seen as increasingly ubiquitous and burgeoning features of mass society.

The first and in some respects determining characteristic of mass culture is that proposed in the second sense noted above – as the culture of the audiences for the mass media of communication. The term 'mass media' collects within its descriptive and definitional range the broadcast media of electronic and print communication. The sense in which these can be referred to as a *mass* media follows from the economic necessity of the large scale of their audiences and readerships. This is accompanied, from the outset of systematic sociological analysis of their socio-cultural structure, by a series of related assumptions about the homogeneity of the social backgrounds and characters of their members, the low intellectual, academic and educational level of their cognitive abilities and the impersonal character of the social relations between them (Bramson 1961; Elkin 1964; Merton and Lazarsfeld 1957; Vidich and Bensman 1958). All of these elements, inevitably, provide for constituting such audiences as masses in a manner which is much more a projection into sociology of political ideology than it is either adequate as a sociological account of their structures or accurate as a social psychological formulation of their likely behaviours. It is related explicitly to the tradition of political conservatism, referred to above and summarized effectively by Giner (1976), which provides for a characterization of the social and cultural majorities of

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modern societies as crowds, mobs and masses. It is also reinforced by a set of economic practices which require what Williams (1976) refers to as seeing others as masses. Where masses are identified, it is rare that the identifiers include themselves as members of the masses, rather than critics (see Jacobs 1961) or manipulators of them. Even the exception of the Marxian sense of mass noted above tends to disappear in later, critical post-Marxist discussions of mass communication and culture. Indeed, the influential neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School argued, differently from but not unrelated to Gramsci, that it was the seduction of the working class away from the project of revolution by the mass entertainments and diversions of what they term the 'culture industry' that was in part responsible for the failure of what Marx had proposed as the inevitable revolutionary overthrow of industrial capitalism by socialism (Adorno 1957; Benjamin 1968; 1979; Horkheimer and Adorno 1973a; 1973b; Jay 1973; Marcuse 1964). The production of mass culture had become itself a form of industrial work as well as the focus of the workers' leisure. In this dual capacity, it is seen as serving to legitimate and reinforce the passive and quiescent impotence of workers in the face of a system of production and exchange which exploits them.

The mass media, as part of the culture industry, are deeply implicated in the logic of industrial capitalist political economy (see, for example, Williams 1974). The initial capital investment required to establish a broadcast communications medium has been relatively high for most of the history of its technological possibility. Its current technological sophistication, based upon global satellite communication systems, is so costly that the possibility of ownership is limited either to the governments of nation-states (usually for purposes of national security, and not ownership by capital) or to multinational corporations. These broadcasters use the media for the transmission of some news and related content, but mainly for entertainment programmes designed to attract numerically large audiences. The size of audiences dictates the price that can be charged for the media timeslots available to advertise retail consumer goods and services. The revenue from these charges underwrites the current running costs of the media and, most importantly, provides a return on the large initial investments required to finance them.

There is, thus, an economic pressure of global proportions in the contemporary broadcast communications industries to construct audiences with social characters and cognitive abilities which are as homogeneous as possible – in effect, to see large-scale groups of people as masses. To accomplish the construction of such audiences would provide the widest possible reception for a relatively easily produced and narrow variety of informational and entertainment content. It would also establish a market for a relatively narrow variety of mass-produced goods and services to be advertised on the media for mass consumption, thus playing a significant role in the operation of the global exchange processes in which late

industrial capitalist economies are centrally involved (Lash and Urry 1987). They are a part of the processes of globalization of culture (Appadurai 1990; Arnason 1990; Friedman 1990; King 1990; Robertson and Lechner 1985; Robertson 1992; Smith 1990; Wallerstein 1990) discussed below (see also the chapter 'Local/Global'). It is in this sense that a concept of mass culture as the content of the mass media can be identified as the cultural correlate of mass society. For just as the concept of mass society is a recent construction of a tradition of political conservatism, so mass culture is a recent version of some of the changes in political economic orders which are consequences of increased egalitarianism and social mobility (Bauman 1991; Bocock and Thompson 1992; Bourdieu 1984; Kellner 1989; Gans 1974; Haug 1986; Mulgan 1991; Rosenberg 1957; 1971; Thompson 1990).

As the content of the so-called mass media, mass culture is a collection of substantive social phenomena and is thus unlike the idea of mass society. But it is, nevertheless, associated with the unreal character of mass society, because there is no evidential basis to support claims that the audiences that owners and controllers of the broadcast media seek to construct are as socially and cognitively homogeneous as they are required to be to perform the passive and quiescent political conformism required by the mass society outlook. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that they consume everything that is mass produced for them. On the contrary, the sociology of broadcast media audiences suggests that, rather than being a mass culture, they are composed of a variety of socially heterogeneous subcultures (Morley 1992; Hall et al. 1992). The members of these subcultures are not characterized by the social isolation, political impotence, economic exploitation and cultural conformism of individuals in mass society. Confronted by the constraints of a centralized institutional social and political structure, and by uniform material and cultural products for consumption, they respond actively through forms of social resistance and cultural interpretation that reinforce their senses of subcultural identities (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979) and by customizing a wide range of mass-produced consumer goods and services into artifacts which are expressive of the specific identities and collective interests of particular groups (Forty 1986; Hine 1987; Willis 1990; Wolfe 1966; 1969). They are equipped to respond in these active ways, moreover, because of their continuing membership of traditions of social structural differentiation and division by class, generation, region, gender, age, sex, race, ethnicity and nationality which are the sociological bases for their senses of the varieties of subcultural identities in terms of which they identify themselves.

Thus, although the idea of mass culture, like the outlook of mass society, retains a certain rhetorical force, it does so because it is a gross sociological oversimplification of a social process of cultural differentiation that is far more complex and subtle than derogatory formulations of mass culture can possibly allow. For, upon systematic ethnographic investigation as a feature of what has been termed the *postmodern condition* (Docherty 1993; Foster

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1985; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984; Ridless 1984 and see the chapter 'Modernity/Postmodernity'), what has been proposed as mass culture dissolves into a series of other typical forms of culture which are diverse enough to suggest a challenge to the vertical model of cultural stratification itself. Moreover, once these cultural forms are identified explicitly as the implicit cultural correlate of mass society, they can be seen clearly as one resource for countering the negative sociological prophecies made by the proponents of the mass society outlook. For a brief period in American sociology, for example, mass society comes to be formulated as a new societal order in the sense that the mass of people have become incorporated within a form of structural and institutional societal relations which have traditionally been exclusive (Bell 1961; 1974; 1976; Bensman and Rosenberg 1963; Olson 1963; Shils 1972). This is discussed further below, in relation to the horizontal stratification of culture into centre and periphery.

FURTHER FORMS OF VERTICALLY STRATIFIED CULTURE

There are four more specifically differentiated cultural forms in terms of which sociological discussion of the high/mass dichotomy has been developed: folk culture, popular culture, middlebrow or mid-cult, and common culture. The first two of these forms, folk and popular culture, can be distinguished in terms of their location either side of the watershed in social structural change that occurs with industrialization.

Folk culture is, for many social theorists (e.g. Lessa 1964; Redfield 1953; 1956; Sumner 1906; Tonnies 1955), historically the correlate of high culture in pre-industrial, traditional societies. This is the culture of the organic society, referred to above, which Tonnies terms *Gemeinschaft* and Durkheim *mechanical solidarity*. It is a culture which both legitimates the high culture of such social structures and provides a resource for it. Legitimizing in its traditional system of political authority, it accedes to a version of social position based on a hierarchy of ascriptive status and a sacred belief system rooted in myth. Folk culture is a majority culture which integrates a whole way of social life with pre-industrial craft and agrarian modes of production. Its clearest surviving contemporary expressions are in fine craft manufacture, in so far as this can still be differentiated from fine applied arts; in certain forms of youth culture, i.e. some types of traditional popular music and communalist lifestyles; and in the politics of ecology, where these are rooted in an opposition to centrist, corporate economics and large-scale, heavy industrial production.

It is the strength of its traditionalism that leads to the emphasis on folk culture as a resource for minority high culture. In sustaining traditional beliefs, and their oral expression in myth, legend and religious practice, it provides and gradually renews the *prima materia* for a high culture which

insists on the necessity of tradition. This insistence is teleological, since it is the means by which the practitioners and beneficiaries of high culture legitimate the vertical stratification of the class or estate society which they claim is necessary to sustain high culture. The legitimating process is reinforced structurally, as indicated earlier in the discussion of high culture, by restricting access to the skills of literacy required to create, represent and communicate high culture beyond a minority. The dominant patterns of social, political and economic development in modern societies have made such restrictions of access difficult to justify in the face of egalitarian philosophies, and counterproductive to the skills required by secondary and tertiary industrialization. Thus, attempts to revive or retain forms of folk culture, on any other than the sorts of marginal and esoteric terms in which their survival has been indicated above, have often been specious representations of social majorities for the purpose of racial or ethnic nationalism and are, as such, linked to pathological features of the mass society outlook, such as fascism (Nolte 1965).

Popular culture emerges as the majority culture of Western society with the dissolution of the traditional societal forms that sustained the firm distinctions between high and folk cultures. Its occurrence is, in effect, coincident with that of modern society itself (Lowenthal 1961), though it is most often associated with the onset of industrialization. But wherever it is identified, it is related to the social majority's conception of itself as a people or populace (Arnold 1960). It is for this reason that some critics (e.g. MacDonald 1957; Tumin 1957; Van Den Haag 1957) treat the term as interchangeable with mass culture. Either the relative affluence and increased leisure that accompany secondary and tertiary industrialization, or the egalitarianism that marks the spread of liberal, social democratic politics, or the progress towards universal literacy and increased educational opportunities that accompany all these processes, are seen as exposing the majority as either uninterested in or somehow unfit for the appreciation of the traditional high culture which is now accessible to them (Inglis 1988). Some of these critics see the situation as exacerbated by claims that such access to minority culture is or should be a right of the majority, and that the means of mechanical industrial mass production are utilized to reproduce fine art and literature. For in doing so, it is proposed, the works of high culture are reduced to the condition of mere commodities, goods for exchange and consumption. Two further contentions are implied by this. The first is that the mass reproduction of works of art predicates the construction of a mass audience, according to a logic directly comparable to that of the economic argument for the necessity of a homogeneous mass media audience, which has been discussed earlier. The second is that the intrinsic aesthetic worth of the works themselves are thereby reduced – deprived, in their mechanically reproduced state, of what Benjamin (1968) terms their *aura*. There is no more evidence to support the first of these contentions than supports the related argument in regard to mass media

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audiences. But the second contention leads in part to a compounding of the confusion which stems from treating mass and popular culture as equivalent. This occurs with the introduction of the terms *middlebrow culture*, and *mid-cult* (MacDonald 1957) to refer to intermediate orientations in the dichotomy between high and mass culture.

The phenomenon of middlebrow emerges from the democratization and widespread affluence of modern societies. The former extends a participatory status of citizenship to increasing numbers and wider groups of people; the latter provides them with the means to improve their material lifestyles through consumption. As one reaction to these processes, traditionally dominant classes and elites, no longer able to claim ascriptive social and political authority, seek to redifferentiate themselves from the majority by claiming new, implicitly ascriptive qualities of superior insight into, awareness and experience of, and ability to express high culture. As has been noted earlier, they claim to be defending a tradition of epistemology against dilution through popularization, condensation and trivialization, and to constitute an avant-garde of fine artists, intellectuals and critics, devoted to an exclusive modernism in order to preserve the intrinsic meaningfulness of aesthetics against the tide of commercial consumerism that is mass culture. Sociologically, they are an alliance of traditional aristocracy and high bourgeois against the upwardly mobile social aspirations and reductive cultural philistinism of the new middle classes – the middlebrows.

Middlebrow culture is seen as the antithesis of high and folk culture, but it is one form of differentiating popular culture in negative terms as the culture of a majority which aspires to membership of traditionally dominant social groups. Middlebrow culture is seen, in this sense, as the legitimating culture of conformist social aspiration. Middlebrow is the culture of those who are motivated by the ambition to differentiate themselves from the culture of the majority groups from which they have separated and which they consider beneath them. It is also the culture of those who need to dismiss the culture of intellectual minorities because they see it as the culture of the politically and economically impotent (Fiedler 1957). In some cases – the avant-garde, for example – these minorities seek deliberately to generate an epistemological culture which is difficult to understand, and therefore designed to be especially inaccessible to those whom they label middlebrow. This is part of a strategy of response to their perception of the need to defend traditional culture from dilution. It is also a reaction to their sense of dismissal into the social isolation of a marginal relation with the normative, scientific and materialist culture of high and late industrial society, and of their disdain, in turn, for what some of them term the *kitsch* that it produces (Greenberg 1957). The condition of middlebrow, thus, is a fragile and unstable one. It is attacked by those who are sustained by the norms and values of popular culture which ambition has led it to deny, and despised by those committed to the high cultural tradition towards which it is drawn inevitably by its aspirations, but where

there is to be found little that is compatible with its own urge to conformity and desire for bland consensus. It is, in effect, a recurrent aberration within the increasing heterogeneity of contemporary popular culture, a manifestation of the continuing volatility of the complex social structures of late industrial societies as they change and reconstellate around the proliferating focuses of interest, association and differentiation.

Confronted with these configurations of societal flux, popular culture demonstrates a coherence and resilience which support its claim to remain the appropriate sociological formulation of the beliefs, values, artifacts and institutional practices of contemporary social majorities. First, it is sustained through a historical continuity which is rooted in communities that have survived through an active engagement with the structural and ecological changes that have characterized industrialization through all its stages. The flexibility of a social structure which has adapted in microcosm to the considerable pressures and constraints that societal and global changes have placed upon it has generated and been reinforced by a reflexive *common culture* of popular beliefs and values. It is a *common* culture because of its genesis within and its reflexive legitimation of a sense of community that is coherent enough to adapt consciously to change as a way of preserving its collective sense of identity. The central experiential value of this common culture is identified by Williams (1958) as solidarity, which he proposes as the central achievement of working-class culture. Hoggart (1957) and Thompson (1968) endorse this in discussing critically the self-consciousness and confidence with which working-class communities and movements have responded to the social changes that have confronted them to produce their reflexive, lived culture. The industrial working class has been, since the mid nineteenth century, the most dominant of the self-conceptions of the social majority that have been characteristic of modern societies. As such, it is a formulation of the *people* as a collectively conscious social majority; and its culture, in the distinctively sociological sense of a whole way of life, is a *popular* culture, whose strength stems from a core of lived values which are held in common (Clarke et al. 1979).

This experiential core to popular culture gives it a coherence which enables it to adapt creatively to the processes of change which constantly confront it in modern society. This is in marked contrast to the unavoidable conservatism of those who are concerned for high culture, for whom change – of which popular culture itself is seen as a manifestation – invariably threatens the coherence and continuity of tradition. Whereas high culture is seen as sustaining a traditional past, popular culture allows for collective orientation to and active engagement with future ways of life. Liberal exponents of the mass society outlook (Shils 1972) argue that the future of what they term mass culture is of participation in and contribution to high and minority cultures, thereby broadening their selective traditions into a lively critique of contemporary experience. This generates the complex, reflexive texts of pop art (Hughes 1991; Williams 1984) and punk

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(Hebdige 1979; 1988) which invert the high/mass dichotomy as part of a broad critique of aesthetic and epistemological cultural valuation. These are clear contemporary examples of the processes of cultural hegemony discussed above. The processes which they exemplify are features of the self-differentiation of social majorities into heterogeneous subcultures: social groups organized within and between societies around a considerable variety of focuses of identity and differentiation (Gilroy 1993b). Subcultures are constitutive features of the postmodern condition, and incorporate what Gans (1974) has termed *taste cultures*, to indicate the relatively transitory processes by which they constellate, disband and reform around interests which are quite temporary as well as more sustained. Both subcultures and taste cultures are interrelated with another of the characteristic features of postmodernity, the globalization of culture (Mennell 1990 and see chapter 'Local/Global').

HORIZONTAL STRATIFICATION OF CULTURE: CENTRE AND PERIPHERY AS A DISSOLUTION OF THE HIGH/MASS DICHOTOMY

The type of complex, large-scale contemporary societies that are characterized variously as First World, affluent, developed, late industrial and postmodern have in common, as well as the features implied by these characteristics, a central value system which is shared by the ruling authorities of each society and which is intimately connected with what each society holds sacred (Parsons 1951; Parsons et al. 1961; Shils 1972). If there is a specific location for the dominant, normative culture of these societies, it is to be found in this central value system. It both legitimates and is reinforced by a centralized complex of institutionalized organizational structures which constrain and facilitate the immense variety of patterned actions and interrelations that constitute each society's constant and recurrent processes. Because it is a *normative* system, however, specific social groups are located in differential proximity to the societal centre of the value system and the institutional complex. Indeed, since societies of this type are governed and administered by elites, the majority of their populations find themselves located structurally and culturally in relatively peripheral relations to the centre. As these societies continue to develop in scale and complexity the vertical social stratification between relatively empowered and unempowered classes has been supplanted by a differentiation between elites and majorities, the changing memberships between which have tended to be drawn from wider social bases and have become more mobile, for reasons of meritocracy and egalitarianism that have been legitimated by the central value system. Thus a new mode of stratification begins to emerge, between *centre* and *periphery*.

The designation of the type of society in which these processes are occurring as First World indicates a further distinctive feature of their structures and cultural processes. They are deeply implicated and engaged in what Wallerstein (1974; 1979; 1987) has termed a **world system**, that is, a structure of interrelations between modern societies that is in itself trans-societal. In important political and economic respects, Wallerstein argues that these interrelations, and the system in terms of which they are organized, are more important in their consequences for the societies involved in them than are many of their internal institutional structures. Because of this, he proposes that the preoccupation of much general, comparative sociology since the mid nineteenth century with the geopolitics of the nation-state has been misplaced (see chapter 'Civil/Political') – a contention which is supported to an extent by the initial emergence of modern Western societies in the context of a structure of inter-societal mercantile economic relations. It was on these, in turn, that the capital was developed and concentrated to a sufficient extent to stimulate industrialization as a developmental process. Since the fifteenth century, modern Western societies have been mutually engaged in a structure of political and economic relations which have generated and been legitimated by a set of reflexive cultural values and practices (Elias 1978; 1982). These relations, moreover, have been developed not only between Western societies but, from the outset, with those located in non-Western subcontinents also. Against such an endemic history of global orientations, a preoccupation with the politics of the nation-state seems almost an aberration (see chapter 'Nationalism/Internationalism'). It ignores, moreover, the incipience, throughout the process of Western modernization, of a trans-societal structure of institutions and identities which parallels that of the intra-societal relations between centre and periphery: that of the relations between global and local (Hannerz 1990). Just as the relations between centre and periphery have emerged to destabilize, and perhaps to supplant, the traditional hierarchies of stratification in late industrial societies, so the globalization of economic interests has become manifest in the institutional structures of multicorporate industrial capitalism and has generated parallel movements of trans-societal political federalism. These have had the further effects of generating a self-conscious sense of *local* identity among more particular economic and political interests within the geopolitical limits of traditional nation-states.

It is these movements especially which have generated the reciprocal global/local flux and diversity that is so characteristic of postmodern culture. Globalization has been formulated quite specifically as an essential process of modernity, which translates routine social practices from their local, intra-societal situation into contact with related practices in other societies, thereby transforming them potentially into a globalized environment (Giddens 1990). It is more generally understood as a diffuse process of global interdependence in several different dimensions, of which the economic is the most evident. But it refers also to a process by which particular

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institutions, and collectivities of interest and belief, develop a sense of inter-societal identity on a global scale. In both a formal and an informal sense, these institutions and collectivities are clearly cultural where, for example, they focus in common on the arts, science, education and religious beliefs and practices, or unite around a set of political goals (Inglis 1993). The cultural consequences of this are those of modernity itself and suggest, therefore, that the sociological coherence of popular culture, as it has emerged and sustained itself over the past two centuries of modernization, is able to engage reflexively with the conditions of postmodernity. The strength and durability of popular culture is in its structural capacity to constellate peripheral and local groups in flexible forms of relation around changing focuses of common interest. The very flexibility of these forms of relation has made the groups increasingly conscious of, and therefore reflexive about, their collective interests and activities. It is what has enabled them to be resilient in the face of their dismissive designation as manipulable political masses or quiescent, passive mass audiences. More importantly, the structural capacity of popular culture to survive the hierarchical constraints of the high/mass dichotomy might come to provide a basis from which the potentially global, heterogeneous social majorities of late industrial societies might construct themselves by transcending the increasingly anachronistic limits imposed by the traditional nation-states.

KEY CONCEPTS

HIGH High culture is that which operates exclusively for the few within society. It contains theatre, opera and classical music, among other forms; it has exclusive access and its appreciation requires training or socialization. To have acquired this training is to possess what Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital'.

MASS Mass culture is that which is not exclusive and accessible to all people. It is, therefore, less highly valued and less highly regarded. The distinction between high and mass culture is also a description of the symbolic hierarchy that constitutes the class system within a society.

Subculture The distinctive way of life of a significant subgroup within a complex society. This will include in particular the beliefs, values, expressive symbolic systems and artifacts, but may also extend to institutional and organizational structures of relations. Subcultures may be deviant from or oppositional towards the normative culture of dominant

groups, or they may be constellated around non-normative focuses of social identity and differentiation.

Globalization A series of related processes which are characteristic of the history of *modern* society. These include the development of universalizing concepts of humankind and of the individual, of normal or typical conditions of society (e.g. the nation-state), its political economy (e.g. capitalism, socialism) and its mode of government (e.g. electoral democracy). Globalization itself becomes distinctively recognizable through the emergence of trans-societal relations, initially, perhaps, to facilitate trade and communication, but moving towards creation of a permanent forum to regulate international relations (League of Nations, United Nations). This is complemented by comparable organizations to promote cross-cultural relations (International Olympic Committee, Nobel Prizes).

Hegemony A neo-Marxian concept, implemented initially by Antonio Gramsci, to explain the relation between culture and ideology in everyday life, and the role of that relation in sustaining economic, political and social dominance of a ruling class or other social group in the face of the oppositional interests, practices and beliefs of subordinate groups. The concept seeks to explain in particular how concessions are offered by dominant to subordinate groups in the distribution and exercise of power as a way of subsuming the oppositional beliefs of the latter into the consensual ideologies of the former.

Avant-garde A recurrent grouping of literary and visual artists committed to the modernist aesthetic principle of the intrinsic value of art. The first avant-garde at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were strongly associated with romanticism and revolutionary bourgeois politics. Such movements recurred throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, but became apolitical, seeking to sustain art in the face of commercialization, trivialization and ideological reductionism.

Teleology In the logic of sociological explanation, this term refers to the problematic practice of offering a causal explanation of a social phenomenon, structural process or event in terms of its consequences for the social system in which it is implicated. It is problematic because it produces a self-sustaining explanation, such as that mass culture is the culture of mass society, rather than one which is autonomous and can thus account for the phenomenon to which it refers as a phenomenon in its own right.

Kitsch The antithesis of fine art and traditional culture. Kitsch is seen by critics of mass and popular culture as the deleterious cultural consequence of the linked processes of industrialization, general affluence and democratization. It is

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transitory, superficial and trivial; it communicates by formula and mechanistically, consisting of false experiences, vicarious sensations and pseudo-events.

World system A mode of analysis of the human condition of modernity which questions the dominant conceptualization of societal organization, the conventional periodization of history and the characteristic differentiations of economic and political systems. Developed by Wallerstein (1974), world systems analysis seeks to argue that the relations between societies that have characterized the history of modernity are more important than the specific intra-societal structures that are typically studied comparatively by social scientists.

Physiocracy The theory of political economy according to which agrarian and mercantile craft production and their corresponding social ecology are a normal condition of human society. The theory was held by influential groups in England and France during the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, when attempts were made to operationalize it in practice through physiocratic movements. It was tied to a naturalistic theory of social and cultural ritual, a cyclical social round of birth, growth, fruition, decline and renewal, whose rhythm was set by the passing of the seasons.