

of their unofficial, "backstage" behavior toward each other.

Children can use television not only to subvert or mock adult discipline, but also to evade it, to construct a fantasy world for themselves where they are free of the constant adult control to which they are subjected in the school and home. Children watch TV for many purposes and in many different ways, but the one that most offends adults and that adults (erroneously) think of as typical is the mode of total attention, when the children lie close to the screen and apparently "lose" themselves in it, or become helpless victims of it. This seems to threaten adults because it is an instance of children creating their own popular culture outside adult control. Adults' common admonition to children to move back from the screen is an attempt to create a social as well as physical space between television and the child into which the parent can insert adult influence and values. There is no firm evidence that watching TV in this way is physically harmful (either to the eyesight or to the pattern of electronic impulses in the brain—two of the most common "panics" called up by adults as they discipline the way their children watch television), and Palmer has shown how this "absorbed" viewing is untypical, and that children will create their own distance from the screen sooner or later, when they wish to change their mode of viewing, to change the relationship of television with the rest of their everyday lives. If children occasionally watch TV with self-loss and absorption it is because they choose to, for reasons relating to their social situation, not because TV has cast a spell over them like some wicked witch.

To be popular, the commodities of the cultural industries must not only be polysemic—that is, capable of producing multiple meanings and pleasures—they must be distributed by media whose modes of consumption are equally open and flexible. Television, books, newspapers, records, and films are popular partly because their nature as media enable them to be used in ways in which the people wish to use them. As they cannot impose their meanings on people, neither can they impose the way they are received into everyday life. Popular discrimination extends beyond the choice of the texts and the points of pertinence within them, to cover the choice of medium that delivers the text and the mode of consumption that best fits the "consumer's" sociocultural position and requirements.

## CHAPTER 7

# Politics

### POPULISM AND THE LEFT

I have tried in this book to point to the political potential of popular culture, for I believe that such culture is always, at its heart, political. It is produced and enjoyed under conditions of social subordination and is centrally implicated in the play of power in society. But in investigating its politics we must not confine our definition of politics to direct social action, for that is only the tip of the iceberg, resting upon a less visible, but very real, politicized consciousness—the consciousness of, and in, popular culture.

Under certain historical and social conditions this submerged consciousness can break through the surface into visible political action, and this is the focus of this final chapter. I am interested in ways in which the progressive political potential of popular culture can disrupt the social surface, and central to my interest are the relationships between macro- and micro-politics, and between radical and progressive thought and action.

Laclau's (1977) analysis of populism is a good starting point, although his concern is primarily with the radical and the macropolitical, whereas I believe popular culture to be most effective in the progressive and the micropolitical. Laclau suggests that populism takes three main forms in capitalist societies, all of which are defined by their relation to the state.

First, Laclau identifies a "democratic populism" in which the differences between the state and the various formations of the people are organized and understood as complementarities,

not antagonisms. This is essentially a liberal-pluralist view of social difference, in which the principle of difference is integrated into the system so that class, or other, conflicts and resistances are neutralized. While such a populism is produced by a system of domination, it is absorbed by that system, which therefore takes into its sphere of control all the experiences, pleasures, and behaviors of the subordinate. The relationship of the disempowered to the system that disempowers them is finally one of complicity and consent, however unconscious or unwilling. Such a view cannot account for the vitality and offensiveness of popular formations; it cannot account for the precariousness and brevity of hegemony's victories, or for why the dominant ideology has to work so hard and so insistently to maintain its position. There would be no need for capitalism (or patriarchy) to promote its values so assiduously if there were not ample popular experience of its inadequacies and inequalities. Such a liberal-pluralist theory of populism is not one I find convincing.

Then Laclau theorizes what he calls "popular" and "populist" oppositions. Both differ crucially from his "democratic populism" in that they conceptualize relationships between the people and the state as essentially antagonistic: the difference between them is that popular opposition is structured into a system organized to cope with the challenges it offers, whereas a populist opposition arises at a point of social crisis, when historical conditions make the state vulnerable to transformation, or even revolution. "Popular" oppositionality is like "democratic populism" without its consent or complicity, so that domination is experienced as oppression. It recognizes that the various formations of the people have interests that necessarily conflict with those of the state, and that they never allow the forces of domination to relax or feel secure in their control. While they might not actively work to overthrow the power-bloc, they do keep it constantly under pressure and keep their own oppositionalities vigorously and intransigently alive. Such "popular" opposition can, at certain historical moments of heightened social antagonism, be transformed into a radical "populist" movement that directly challenges the power of the state.

The popular culture of capitalist societies works primarily in

the realm of popular rather than populist opposition, and its politics are therefore progressive rather than radical. I would also stress, in a way that Laclau does not, that such popular progressive politics are a necessary precondition, if not a necessary cause of populist radical movements. Popular culture not only maintains social differences, it maintains their oppositionality, and people's awareness of it. It can thus empower them to the extent that, under the appropriate social conditions, they are able to act, particularly at the micropolitical level, and by such action to increase their sociocultural space, to effect a (micro)redistribution of power in their favor.

Popular culture is progressive, not revolutionary. Radical art forms that oppose or ignore the structures of domination can never be popular because they cannot offer points of pertinence to the everyday life of the people, for everyday life is a series of tactical maneuvers against the strategy of the colonizing forces. It cannot produce the conditions of its existence, but must make do with those it has, often turning them against the system that produces them. Radical art tries to create its own terms of existence, to free itself from the status quo. It has an important place in a system of culture, and some of its radicalness may filter through to, and increase the progressiveness of, popular art, but it can never, in itself, be popular. Indeed, Bourdieu (1984) argues that radical art is bourgeois and lies outside the bounds of popular taste, while Barthes (1973) suggests that avant-garde art can only cause a conflict between fractions of the bourgeoisie, but can never be part of a class struggle. The political effectivity of radical art is limited by inability to be relevant to the everyday life of the people, and, by the same token, any radicalness of popular art is equally limited by the same requirement of relevance.

The politics of popular culture has often been misunderstood and its progressiveness unrecognized by theories that fail to take account of the differences and the relationships between the radical and the progressive, and between the micropolitics of everyday life and the macropolitics of organized action. The absence of the radical, and of direct effects at the macro level, does not mean that the popular is reactionary, or quiescent, or complicit, or incorporated, but it does point to a major problem facing left-wing academic and political theorists whose focus

upon the macro and the radical has led them to neglect, or worse still to dismiss, the micro and the progressive. The left needs to pay greater attention to the relationships between progressivism and radicalism, between the micro and macro—left-wing theorists need to explore the conditions under which the submerged 90 percent of the political iceberg can be made to rear up and disrupt the social surface.

The forging of productive links between the resistant tactics of the everyday and action at the strategic level is one of the most important and neglected tasks of the left as we move toward the 1990s. The left has generally failed to win the support (or the votes) of the people whose interests they support, and with whom they wish to be aligned. Indeed, some Marxists deny the validity of "the people" as a category within a theory of social relations. With few exceptions, left-wing theorists have failed to take account of central areas of everyday life. Most glaringly, they have failed to produce a positive theory of popular pleasure. The result of this is that their theories can all too easily appear puritanical; the society they envision is not one in which fun plays much part, if it exists at all—they have allowed the right to promise the party. One of the central arguments of this book is the importance of understanding popular pleasures and their politics.

Another problem with some left-wing theory is its tendency to demean the people for whom it speaks. It casts them as the victims of the system (which, up to a point, they are) and then, quite logically, concentrates its efforts upon exposing and criticizing the agencies of domination. But the negative side of this concern is its failure to recognize the intransigence of the people in the face of this system, their innumerable factual evasions and resistances, their stubborn clinging to their sense of difference, their refusal of the position of the compliant subject in bourgeois ideology that is so insistently thrust upon them. It is inadequate to conceptualize subordinate groups simply in terms of their victimization at the structural level and to downplay their power in coping with their subordination at the level of everyday practices. Consequently, the tricks they use against the system, the pleasures they find in evading or resisting it, and their gains in enlarging their cultural space within it are all devalued and explained away by the theory of

incorporation. Instead of being valued for these everyday resistances, the people are demeaned as cultural dupes for finding pleasure or satisfaction in them. Because these practices are not strategic battles, opposing the system head on with the aim of defeating it and overthrowing it lock, stock, and barrel, their tactical raids are devalued. It is hardly surprising that the people, in their variety of social allegiances, are reluctant to align themselves with political and cultural theories that demean them, that fail to recognize their pleasures or their power, and whose emphasis on structures and strategy can seem disconnected from the practices they have evolved by which to live their everyday lives within and against the system.

Of course, the left's distrust of populism is well grounded. In the West, at least, the most successful populist movements have been right-wing ones—both Hitler and Mussolini rose to power on a populist vote, and both Thatcher and Reagan are mistresses of populist rhetoric. The strong blue-collar (and female) vote for right-wing populist leaders can be argued to be instrumental in maintaining their formal political power. Bennett (1983b) and Hall (1980b, 1982, 1983) both argue the need for the left to understand and develop a form of socialist populism that will reconnect left-wing theory and left-wing political platforms with the everyday lives of the people who stand to gain the most by them.

Throughout this book runs the theme that popular culture is organized around the various forms of the oppositional relationship between the people and the power-bloc. This opposition always has the potential to be progressive, and in practice it generally is. Insofar as the popular forces are attempting to evade or resist the disciplinary, controlling forces of the power-bloc, they are working to open up spaces within which progressiveness can work.

But we must recognize that opposition need not necessarily be progressive. There are alliances among the people for whom the power-bloc has advanced too far, has been too progressive, and whose political and cultural impetus is reactionary in at least some aspects. There is a right-wing populism, there are some formations of the people that act as a reactionary, not progressive, force.

In the United States there is a populist religious right, and a



more popular evangelical movement, often in black communities, that is opposed to what it sees as the dangerous liberalism of the power-bloc. There is a similar "redneck" populism whose allegiances form around the opposing notions of the traditional country against the liberal city, which has regionalized variants such as the South against the North, or the Midwest against the coasts. What these oppositionalities, whether progressive or reactionary, have in common is the desire of subordinated people for some control over certain aspects of their lives, in particular over their culture. The struggle against the power-bloc is a struggle against social and cultural control and thus, where the left is influential in the power-bloc or where elements of progressivism exist within it, popular oppositionalities may, in some cases, be reactionary.

This poses a real problem for the left, and exposes a paradox that the right has been quick to capitalize on. The left's concern for the interests and well-being of the powerless and the weak, and its belief that such powerlessness and weakness are the results of the social system, and not of the inadequacies of the people within it, leads it to propose a political program of social action. The right has been eager to equate any such program with an increase in the power of the power-bloc and thus a reduction of people's ability to exercise control over their own lives. The right has been able to turn this popular desire for control to its own interests by articulating it with its own ideology of individualism. It has therefore been able to construct and have circulated a right-wing set of meanings of the opposition between the people and the power-bloc, a set of meanings that are relevant to popular culture because they align the people with individualism and freedom and the power-bloc with state control. By its use of a populist rhetoric the right has, in the domain of party politics at least, been able to define the left as antipopular and itself as concerned with the interests of the people, and at the same time has been able to disguise the paradoxical nature of the definition.

In this rhetoric, politicians and legislators are constructed as the visible embodiments of power, and thus the (healthy) popular skepticism with which such roles are viewed has been turned into the "common sense" that the state can never be concerned with the interests of the people in their construction

as free individuals. Ultimately framing all of this, of course, is the overarching alignment of the state with communism and the individual with Americanism.

Against the right-wing rhetoric of individual freedom, the left tends to use one of social conscience and justice, a rhetoric that has little appeal to popular consciousness or pleasure. It needs to find ways of articulating its concerns with health, welfare, and education with the popular desires for freedom and control. As Williamson (1986) argues, by criticizing the materialism and individualism through which the system apparently satisfies (however illusorily) the needs of the people, the left has tended to invalidate the needs themselves instead of looking for more progressive ways of meeting them. Such a search, if it is ever undertaken, can be based only upon an understanding of the ways that the people have developed for meeting their needs and desires within the system that seeks ultimately to channel and control rather than satisfy them.

The left also needs to disarticulate social action from the workings of the power-bloc and to rearticulate it with popular control. It needs to show that the power-bloc does not consist merely of the manifest operations of the state, but that its antipopular forces are spread throughout the social order, especially in the economic sphere.

But this book is not about political action and rhetoric; it is about popular culture, where popular skepticism, resistance, and evasion may be a lot more apparent than in the political sphere. This is not to say that there are no links between popular culture and politics, but that we must not expect such links to be direct or immediate—rather, we must expect them to be diffuse, deferred, and not necessarily entailed at all. Sometimes the political potential of popular culture may never be activated, even within the realm of micropolitics; at other times it may be, but when it is not we should not allow this to deny the existence of the potential. We must admit, too, that on some occasions the politics of popular cultural practices are contradictory, as when racial or class progressiveness is accompanied by gender conservatism.

The politics of a cultural form lie in its social mobilizations rather than in its formal qualities. These are difficult to trace, and we are only now beginning to develop appropriate

methodologies and ways of theorizing the contradictions and complexities of cultural practices.

Country music is a case in point. On the face of it, country music is both popular and reactionary, yet its mobilization to express the felt collectivity of rural people against the forces of metropolitan control may be liberating at least, and may contain a progressive potential, not so much in its formal content as in its maintenance of social difference, in its legitimation of a "country" consciousness against a metropolitan hegemony. Under certain historical conditions such a consciousness may be radical or progressive; under others, it may be reactionary. What is important is that it is there.

Australia provides an interesting example of the problems of understanding the politics of popular culture. Traditionally, the most popular non-Aboriginal music among tribal Aborigines has been country and western, and, in Western Australia, the most influential (progressive rather than radical) Aboriginal politician is a country and western singer with a number of albums to his credit. More recently, some younger, urban Aborigines have turned to rock, and more explicitly politicized ones to reggae. Rock and reggae are widely considered to carry voices of social opposition, country and western far less so. But as Aborigines were able to make Third World meanings of *Rambo*, so the antiurbanism of country and western may allow them to produce antiwhite meanings that serve an Aboriginal consciousness.

So, too, on a visit to a Cherokee reservation the most common music I heard was country and western. Certainly it was performed for mainly white tourists, but it was significant that this was the musical form chosen to be part of the tourist experience of visiting an Indian reservation. Even the most economic explanation of this needs to allow for some Indian appropriation. All the other tourist traps were economically successful because they had strong markers of Indianness—they were westernizations of Indian culture into a sort of bastard form. With the music, the process appeared to be in the opposite direction, an Indianization of western culture, but there was an Indianizing process at work. This was supported by my own observations; I felt, but could not prove, that the performance was not just a masquerade for the tourists, but that

the Cherokee musicians had, in some ironically contradictory way, made this anti-Indian music into a cultural form that could carry elements of Indianness. I felt, too, that the young Indians clog dancing to it were not only performing for the whites (and encouraging them to join in) but were also, as a subtext, dancing for and with each other. The looks, smiles, and expressions they exchanged as they danced conveyed, it seemed to me, Indian meanings and pleasures that exceeded and were not required by the tourist performance. There is something in country and western music that enables it to be mobilized in different white subcultures, in some Aboriginal and some Indian cultures, and its various mobilizations cannot be explained only in terms of its apparently reactionary form.

There is no guarantee that the politics of any cultural form or practice will be mobilized in any particular reading, any oppositionality may remain as a "sleeping" potential, and, if mobilized, there is equally no guarantee as to whether its direction will be progressive or conservative. So Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" can be claimed by both the right and the left to articulate their very different meanings of Americanness, and Midnight Oil's "The Beds Are Burning" is popular among Australian outback mine workers despite the pro-Aboriginal land rights message contained in its lyrics, which directly contradicts their racial prejudice, at the personal level, and the politics of their industry, whose economic interests are challenged by the Aboriginal land rights movement. They hear only the hard rocking music, not the left-progressive lyrics. The politics of a popular form lie more in the conditions of its reading than in its textual qualities, or, rather, they are to be found in the interface between the two.

The progressive and empowering potential of *Cagney & Lacey*, for example, is activated by those fans whose social situation contains elements of gender antagonism, who are living in their version of a social crisis, however muted its everyday form. Those whose social situation accommodates them more easily in patriarchy are less likely to make progressive meanings from it. So *Dallas* may offer contradictory political meanings to its variously socially situated readers—and such readings may be reactionary or progressive, or even both, as when progressive gender politics may be allied with a

class politics that is purely reactionary. The point is that politics is social, not textual, and if a text is made political, its politicization is effected at its point of entry into the social.

This does not mean that all texts are equally political (even potentially), or that all politicized meanings are equally available in any one of them. Politics is always a process of struggle between opposing forces, always a matter of forging alliances and of defining and redefining the opposition. If the political potential of a text is to be mobilized, the text must reproduce among the discourses that comprise it a struggle equivalent to that experienced socially by its readers. And just as power is not distributed equally in society, so potential meanings are not distributed equally in texts. It would appear to require more of a struggle, for instance, to produce profeminine meanings from *Dallas* than from *Cagney & Lacey*. We must recognize, too, that any progressive meanings that are made are never experienced freely, but always in conflicting relationships with the forces of the power-bloc that oppose them. The empowering feminine meanings of Christine Cagney, for example, can be experienced as resistant only if the reader simultaneously produces the masculine meanings of the structure of the police force and the power of the law in society. Resistance is not an essence, but a relationship, and both sides of the relationship must be contained within its practice.

### **THE POPULAR, PLURALISM, AND THE FOLK**

The reading relations of popular culture are not those of liberal pluralism, for they are always relationships of domination and subordination, always ones of top-down power and of bottom-up power resisting or evading it. When the political potential of popular readings is realized, typically at the micropolitical level, their effectivity is to redistribute power socially toward the disempowered. It is never to work toward that liberal pluralist consensus within which social differences are held in a negotiated and comparatively stable harmony, and where all are relatively happy with, or at least resigned to, their

positions within it. It is liberal pluralist accounts of popular culture that describe it as a form of ritual that smooths over social differences and melds them into a cultural consensus. It is liberal pluralism that explains popular culture as a sort of cultural forum where all have equal opportunity to speak and be heard regardless of social condition. Such accounts profoundly misrepresent the politics and the processes of the popular.

Popular culture in elaborated societies is the culture of the subordinate who resent their subordination, who refuse to consent to their positions or to contribute to a consensus that maintains it. This does not mean that they live their lives in a constant state of antagonism, for those are the conditions of crisis either social or personal, but that the oppositionality is sporadic, sometimes sleeping, sometimes aroused into guerrilla raids, but never finally anesthetized. Some resistances may be active and offensive, others more inclined to dogged refusals of the dominant, and others more evasive, carnivalesque, and liberating. The forms of opposition are as numerous as the formations of subordination, but running through them all, sometimes acute, sometimes muted, is this central thread of antagonism.

Popular culture, therefore, is not the culture of the subdued. People subordinated by white patriarchal capitalism are not helplessly manacled by it. Their economic and social deprivation has not deprived them of their difference, or of their ability to resist or evade the forces that subordinate them; on the contrary, it motivates them to devise the constantly adaptive tactics of everyday resistances that never allow the power-bloc to relax and feel that the victory is won.

If popular culture cannot be explained by liberal pluralism, we must be equally wary of turning uncritically to explanatory models derived from folk culture. The people in industrial societies are not the folk, and popular culture is not folk culture, though the two do share some characteristics. Folk culture, unlike popular culture, is the product of a comparatively stable, traditional social order, in which social differences are not conflictual, and that is therefore characterized by social consensus rather than social conflict. Those who attempt to study the popular culture of capitalist societies by anthropological



methods developed to study traditional tribal cultures often apply, wrongly, models of tribal ritual to industrial popular culture. Conceiving popular culture as a form of folk culture denies its conflictual elements. It denies, also, its constantly changing surface as the allegiances that constitute the people are constantly formed and reformed across the social grid. The idea of the people as an industrial equivalent of the folk is all too easily assimilated into a depoliticized liberal pluralism.

Popular culture, unlike folk culture, is evanescent and ephemeral. Its constant, anxious search for the novel evidences the constantly changing formations of the people and the consequent need for an ever-changing resource bank from which popular cultures may be produced and reproduced.

Popular culture, unlike folk culture, is produced by elaborated, industrialized societies that are experienced in complex and often contradictory ways. Our experience of our social relations moves along a continuum from the macro to the micro. We know ourselves, for instance, as members of Western capitalist democracies, of particular national or regional groups within them, and as members of immediate, local communities. These relationships are transected by others, such as those of gender, race, or class. So, to be popular, *Dallas*, for example, must offer complex and contradictory meanings about Americanness, about class, gender, and family, to name only a few. Without this polysemic potential it could not be incorporated directly and variously into the everyday lives of its viewers. Folk cultures are much more homogeneous and do not have to encompass the variety of social allegiances formed by members of elaborated societies. A folk culture, for instance, does not have to cope with the problem of a bigoted white nationalist watching blacks win gold medals for his country in the Olympics.

Popular cultures, unlike folk culture, is made out of cultural resources that are not produced by the social formation that is using them. Popular culture is made out of industrially produced and distributed commodities that must, in order to be economically viable and thus to exist at all, offer a variety of cultural potentialities to a variety of social formations. The resources from which popular culture is made are circulated across a range of social differences. So popular culture always

entails a set of negotiations between the center and the circumference, between the relatively unified allegiances of the power-bloc and the diversified formations of the people, between singular texts and multiple readings. The allied interests of the power-bloc are both economic and ideological; they are strategic interests constantly at work, but constantly opposed and evaded by the heterogeneous and conflictual interests of the people. Popular culture is a culture of conflict in a way that folk culture is not.

To be sure, there are, or have been, folk cultures of oppositional industrial groups, such as those of some logging or mining communities, which express their opposition to their exploitation. The songs that they produce are folk culture, specific to the community that produces and reproduces them in each singing. Such songs may, of course, be sung (and enjoyed) in other social formations—in, for instance, downtown folk bars—but in these contexts their pleasures are always ones of the other, of the alien. When folk culture is transported beyond the social formation that produced it, it always retains the alienness of its origins, so “peasant” baskets or “native” pottery in suburban homes always carries a sense of the exotic. Folk culture outside the social conditions of its production is always *theirs*; popular culture is *ours*, despite its alienated origins as industrial commodity.

There are also cultural forms produced and circulated within specific communities within our society that do not extend beyond them. There are formations of the gay community, for instance, who produce and circulate their own cultural forms. Such a culture is not popular, in the sense that I use the term. Far from turning the resources produced by the dominant system to its own interests, it recognizes that its opposition to the social order is so radical that any cultural resources produced by it are so contaminated by its values as to be unusable. It therefore produces its own subculture, a form of radicalized folk culture.

But there are similarities between the culture of the people in industrial societies and the culture of the folk in nonindustrial ones. There is a sense of the people that can cross social distances, even ones of the magnitude of those between industrial and nonindustrial societies.

Seal (1986) lists four key characteristics of a folk culture that are worth pursuing in a little more detail. His work is concerned with tracing the ways in which a folk culture can and does exist within modern industrial societies, particularly in its oral forms. So he is already looking for those points of contact and divergence between folk culture and more official and industrialized cultures.

First, Seal says that folklore defines and identifies the membership of a group for its members, often in opposition to other groups. This highlights one of the key problems of popular culture—whether its resistances are individualized and thus rendered harmless to the social order or whether it promotes any sense of solidarity, any sense of class consciousness that may be translated into some form of social action. I have argued in this book that popular culture is normally politicized at the micropolitical level only. It is at this level that we can trace continuities between the interior, semiotic resistances of meaning or fantasy and the practices of everyday life and its immediate, lived social relationships. The teenage girl fan of Madonna who fantasizes her own empowerment can translate this fantasy into behavior, and can act in a more empowered way socially, thus winning more social territory for herself. When she meets others who share her fantasies and freedom there is the beginning of a sense of solidarity, of a shared resistance, that can support and encourage progressive action on the microsocal level. Similarly, women who find profeminine and antimasculine meanings in soap opera may, through their gossip networks, begin to establish a form of solidarity with others. Such resistances at the microlevel are necessary to produce the social conditions for political action at the macro level to be successful, though they are not necessarily in themselves a sufficient cause of that macropolitical activity.

But the relationships among the interior, the micropolitical, and the macropolitical remain a largely unexplored problem for the cultural theorist. It may well be that one of the most productive roles for the cultural critic is to facilitate and encourage transitions among these sociocultural levels of consciousness and action. Theory can help to cultivate a social dimension within interior or fantasized resistances, to link them to social experiences shared with others and thus discourage

them from becoming merely individualistic; theory can situate the specificities of everyday life within a conceptual framework that can enhance the awareness of their political dimension. It can thus facilitate their transformation into a more collective consciousness, which may, in turn, be transformed into more collective social practice.

Such problems and possibilities become even more acute for cultural theorists as technology enables and encourages the domestication and privatization of culture. More and more cultural practice occurs within the home, as more sophisticated equipment enhances home-based culture, particularly in music, though the visual equivalent of hi-fi and stereo is technically available and only waiting for the right commercial conditions. This more sophisticated equipment interacts with cheaper equipment, so, in relatively affluent middle-class homes at least, the engagement with popular texts is not confined to the family room, but can also be further privatized into the individual rooms of family members. The "personal stereo" (such as Sony's Walkman) is, I suppose, the most privatized of all cultural technology, even more than the book, for headphones can isolate the user from the social experience of walking in the street in a way that no book can.

Folk culture, on the other hand, is a social culture; it is produced in societies where social experience is more important than private experience, and is typically produced and reproduced communally. Its social conditions lead it to encourage and enhance a sense of solidarity, in a way that the contemporary social conditions that produce our popular culture do not. It is important, then, for the cultural theorist to devise ways of contradicting the privatization of popular culture, not by denying its validity, but by enhancing the social potential it already possesses, by facilitating its transformation from the private to the public.

The second characteristic of folk culture mentioned by Seal is that it is transmitted informally, either orally or by example, and consequently does not distinguish clearly between transmitters and receivers. In practice, this is almost indistinguishable from the third characteristic of folk culture, which is that it operates outside established social institutions such as the church, the educational system, or the media, although it can interact with them and traverse them.



Popular culture circulates in a number of ways. There is the circulation of its resources or texts, often international, usually national, but always encompassing a wide variety of social formations. Popular culture is made when these cultural resources meet the everyday lives of the people. It may consist only of this dialogic relationship between the reader and the industrial text, it may exist only in the interior fantasy, but it will not remain at this level in all cases: the interior fantasy will typically demand some form of social circulation. One obvious form is that of talk—the media and other cultural resources such as sport or shopping malls form one of the most common subjects of conversation in homes, the workplaces, social organizations, bars, or anywhere else people meet face to face. The telephone and mail service extend this form of interaction beyond the limits of immediate social interaction. Such talk is selective and productive, and is read back into the media, so that the meanings and pleasures of a TV show, a football game, or a shopping trip are in part produced by conversation, both before and after the event, with others in one's social formation. Indeed, some meanings and pleasures are deferred, put on ice as it were, until they can be activated in later conversation with friends. Many people have told me, for example, that they often say to themselves as they watch a TV show, "I can't wait to hear what so-and-so has to say about this." The productivity of popular culture has been one of the central arguments of this book and does not need elaborating here.

But there is a less direct social circulation of meaning that does need some further comment. This often takes a commercial form, and thus its popular dimension can be underestimated. When fans buy secondary texts or spin-off products they are not just being further commodified consumers, but are actively contributing to the social circulation of their meanings of the primary text. The choice of which Madonna T-shirt to buy is a choice about which meanings of Madonna to circulate. The choice of which fan magazine to buy, or which article to read, is equally a way of circulating some meanings rather than others. Writing letters to these secondary texts can make this productivity more direct and more influential, for these secondary texts and spin-off products exist not only to make money but also to participate in the popular circulation of the

meanings and pleasures of the primary texts. The ones that are commercially successful are the ones that fans can use to make social or public their own meanings. Some of these secondary texts are almost as important a cultural resource as the primary. The information that they contain about stars' private lives, about studio intrigue and business dealings, is an important part of the cultural competence brought to bear upon the primary text. They help to stock the cultural pantry at home, with which the goods selected from the supermarket of the primary text are combined to cook up a meal or a reading.

These secondary texts are a source of popular empowerment; they help prevent the reader from feeling victimized by the original. So studies of soap opera fans, for example, reveal the pleasure fans experience in knowing that a particular actor's or actress's contract is not going to be renewed. This pleasure is additional to the pleasures offered by the primary text as the character is written out of the narrative, and is an empowering one in that it demystifies the commercial imperative concealed behind it and thus gives the reader a sense of semiotic control at least. Knowledge is power.

These secondary texts that circulate gossip and insider knowledge about the industry are popular, in part at least, because they offer a form of symbolic participation in the production processes, a knowledge that makes the fan seem less alienated and that the fan can use to fuel her or his productivity in reading. This popularity can be traced on a broader scale, too. Disempowered people in our society can often feel excluded from the explanation of "what is really going on." The skepticism that Bourdieu finds so typical in the culture of the subordinate means that official explanations or insights are never taken at their face value. There is always a sense that those with more power in society know more than those with less. These magazines fuel this skepticism by offering scandalous, offensive, undisciplined insights into that which the power-bloc would like to conceal.

Of course, these secondary texts are as shot through with contradictory forces as are the primary. Such revealing gossip is as open to incorporation by the power-bloc as any other popular practice, and so stars, sports people, politicians, and other personalities are sometimes complicit in the revelation of

their "true secrets," but sometimes even brought down by it. We should expect these secondary texts to exhibit as conflicting relations between the people and the power-bloc as any other resources of popular culture. These texts are made popular by people who *resent* their normal exclusion from the insider information of what is really going on in society, and some of this resentment can result in an antagonism in reading relations that reproduces that in social relations.

Even the most commercialized secondary texts, such as the toys that spin off from children's TV shows, are not necessarily limited to their economic function. The toy version of ALF, for example, may well enable children to take to bed with them not only a soft cuddly commodity, but also a set of meanings—meanings of the childlike ALF whose otherness from the adult world can be expressed only by his origination in another planet, whose childlike non-sense may at times be superior to the adult sense that constantly attempts to control and discipline him. The fact that the parent may have paid \$17 for the toy does not prevent the child from cuddling up to some very antiadult and prochild meanings as he or she falls asleep. The toy aids the imbrication of the pleasures of the program into the everyday life of the child.

The fourth of the characteristics by which Seal defines folk culture is that there is no standard version of a folklore text; folklore exists only as part of a process. This again accords well with the processes of popular culture—the industrially produced and circulated cultural commodity may exist in a way that no standard folk text does, but it becomes textualized only in its moments of reading, only when its meaning-potential is actualized. It thus performs a limiting or determining function that has no equivalent in folklore, and so the popular reader producing culture by struggling against resources produced by the other is not the precise equivalent of the participant in folk culture. But still, like folklore, popular culture exists only in its processes of production and reproduction, only in the practices of everyday life, not in stable, self-sufficient texts.

Though popular culture is not folk culture, the two do bear some similarities. Both are, in their different social contexts, the culture of the people. What popular culture is not, however, is mass culture. *Mass culture* is a term used by those who believe

that the cultural commodities produced and distributed by the industries can be imposed upon the people in a way that irons out social differences and produces a unified culture for a passive, alienated mass audience. Such a process, if it existed, and it does not, would be anticultural and antipopular; it would be the antithesis of culture understood as the production and circulation of meanings and pleasures, and of the popular as an intransigent, oppositional, scandalous set of forces. There is no mass culture, there are only alarmist and pessimistic theories of mass culture that, at their best, can shed light only on the industrial and ideological imperatives of the power-bloc, but none at all on the cultural processes by which the people cope with them and either reject them or turn them into popular culture.

### PROGRESSIVE SKEPTICISM

In this book and its companion volume my emphasis has been the opposite of that of the mass cultural theorists: I have focused on those moments where hegemony fails, where ideology is weaker than resistance, where social control is met by indiscipline. The pleasures and the politics of such moments are, I argue, the theoretically crucial ones in popular culture, for they are the articulation of the interests of the people. Popular culture always has a progressive potential, so it is theoretically and politically important to identify the ways in which that potential may be realized, and the historical and social conditions under which such realizations are most likely to occur. In focusing on this progressive potential I have tried not to neglect the fact that the politics of popular culture are full of contradictions, and that some of them, under some historical and social conditions, may be reactionary. But they are rarely purely reactionary—often reactionary gender politics, for instance, may serve to strengthen class or racial solidarity.

Equally, the pleasures of popular culture are met by the pleasures offered as ideology's free lunch, or as the bait on the hegemonic hook. But these are pleasures organized around the

interests of the power-bloc; they are antipopular, they are the safe, controlled pleasures that power tries to substitute for the dangerous, unpredictable ones of the people. The domain of pleasure is as full of conflict as that of meanings.

In this book I have tried to sketch out some of the possible relationships between the meanings and pleasures of popular culture and political action, particularly at the micro level, but also, potentially, at the macro level. As an academic, albeit a politically aware one, I have concentrated on trying to shed some light upon the processes of popular culture, rather than on developing a program of action whereby this understanding can be used instrumentally to mobilize these processes politically. My reluctance stems from two main sources—partly the belief that the programs of political action can be developed only in specific sociohistorical conditions, but largely from my fandom, which warns me of the people's skepticism about "preachiness," whether from the left or the right, the realization that insensitive or historically inappropriate attempts to organize the people can destroy the pleasures that motivate popular resistance.

I listen to these warning voices inside me, for besides being an academic theorist, I am also a fan of popular culture; I have strong vulgar tastes and my academic training has failed to squash my enjoyment and participation in popular pleasures—I watch TV game shows, for instance, mainly because of the enormous fun they give me, and secondarily because they arouse my theoretical interest and curiosity. I experience them both as a fan from the inside and as an academic from a critical distance. I am 50 years old, and I have spent large amounts of my leisure time participating in popular culture. I enjoy watching television, I love the sensational tabloid press, I read trashy popular novels and enjoy popular block buster movies. I have spent many happy hours in Disneyworld, shopping malls, Graceland, and on the Universal Studios tour—and despite all this, I do not think I am the dupe of the capitalist system because I can find great pleasure within it; in fact, my pleasures typically have an edge of difference to them, an awareness that they are *my* pleasures that I produce for myself out of *their* resources, and that in some way I am, from their point of view, misusing their resources for my pleasure. My

laughter occurs at moments they might not have chosen as risible; it contains a cynical bite they might not welcome. And in this I believe I am typical of the people in general, that my experience of popular pleasure is not special or privileged because I am also an academic with a variety of theoretical perspectives that are not part of everyday life. My academic theorist side pushes me to lay out a program whereby an understanding of popular culture may be harnessed to promote a more democratic social order; the fan inside me warns that popular culture is produced by the people and does not take kindly to anything it perceives as outside interference. So I tread warily.

One of the many debts we owe to Foucault is his insistence that power relations cannot be adequately explained by class relations, that power is discursive and is to be understood in the specific contexts of its exercise, not in generalized social structures. Social power does not equate with class or any other objectively defined social category: a woman can participate in patriarchal power ("Just you wait till your father gets home") in one social allegiance (that of "the parent"), just as she can resist or scandalize it in her mocking gossip with fellow soap opera fans in a typical shift of social allegiance. So too, a privileged man may have many experiences of powerlessness within the system (as well as ones of power within it). Power is a social force that crosses social categories, though obviously it bears some relation to them. Men may participate in (or evade or resist) patriarchal power, as may women, but they will do so differently. As a white, middle-class male I may be able to share some experience of powerlessness with members of far more disadvantaged categories, but our class differences must make some difference. Social power cannot be adequately explained by social categories, but, equally, it cannot be understood or experienced independently of them.

Similarly, the social allegiances so crucial to popular culture are formed within the social structure, but are not limited to, or produced by, its categories. The social person is not as passively overdetermined as the more extreme inflections of subjectivity theory would have us believe. Our consciousness is not simply produced for us by our social relations and the ideology at work in them: the discursive and cultural resources available to us



from which to make our sense of our social relations and experience are not monoglot, they are not limited to telling one story only, to making only one set of (ideologically determined) meanings. They are resources that we use, just as much as they use us: we are social agents rather than social subjects.

Of course, our experiences are produced and bounded by the social order, but the sense we make of them, and of ourselves within them, is not necessarily the one that the dominant forces in that order would wish. Nor is it one that is tightly determined by the linguistic and other semiotic systems into which we are born, and into which the dominant ideology is inscribed more or less insistently. Language systems are complex and contradictory—their cultural work cannot be confined to the reproduction of the dominant ideological framework, for our society has not been produced by an uncomplicated triumphal march of capitalism, or patriarchy, or any other social force: its history is one of constant conflicts in which all victories are partial, all defeats less than total. Popular histories make this clear: Darnton (1985), for example, shows us how specific formations of the people (e.g., printing apprentices) in eighteenth-century France expressed their (resistant) sense of their subordination in their oral and everyday culture, and how pleasurable (and offensive) these practices could be. Our social structure, our oral culture, our cultural resources are indelibly inscribed with the contradictory traces of these oppressed, but not eliminated, social formations: these contradictory forces, kept alive and in circulation in the local practices of everyday life, are equally available to, and necessary for, the productive agents of popular culture, as are the resources provided by the cultural industries. Popular culture is made out of, and contains, these quite contradictory social impulses.

The classic theories of subjectivity (whether social or psychoanalytic) stress the resolution of contradictory forces in favor of the dominant: they explain the construction of social subjectivity in terms of the victory of the dominant forces. Their outcome is, inevitably, a relatively unified, singular social subject, or subject in ideology. More recent theories, however, stress the disunited, contradictory subject, in which the social struggle is still ongoing, in which contradictory subject positions sit sometimes uncomfortably, sometimes relatively comfortably,

together. Other models are those of the nomadic subjectivity, which envision the social agent as moving among various subject positions, where the arrival at a new one can never obliterate the traces of those left behind, but instead builds on or over them. I can watch Madonna simultaneously as a patriarchal subject (I find voyeuristic pleasure in her erotic body), and as a post patriarchal (or antipatriarchal) one (I find pleasure in her challenge to my voyeurism and the "rights" it claims to give me).

There are active contradictions within subjectivities as there are within social experiences, there are active contradictions within texts, there are active contradictions in the discursive resources used in the making of sense. The necessity of negotiating one's way among these contradictory forces means that the members of elaborated societies are social agents rather than social subjects: the contradictions that characterize such societies and their cultures require active agency rather than subjectivity. Reading, like other cultural and social practices, is the activity of a social agent negotiating contradictions and constructing relevances and allegiances from among them, it is not the subjected reception of already-made meanings. The activity of such agency is not that of voluntarism or free will, but is social in that it is produced and determined by the contradictoriness that is the core experience of the subordinate in elaborated, capitalist societies. Any lines of social force working to close down or limit the space within which the agency of the subordinate can operate are contradicted by intersecting or opposing lines that work to enlarge it. Pleasure is the reward of grasping the opportunities offered by these unstable forces of empowering and enhancing one's social agency. Subjects cannot be skeptics, and hedonistic skepticism is so characteristic of the people because it is produced at those moments when the forces of ideological and social control meet the intransigent conditions of everyday life.

I find great, but contradictory, pleasures in the report that a World War II bomber has been photographed on the moon (*Weekly World News*, 5 April 1988). As an educated person, rewarded with the advantages of believing in a scientific, empirical order of things, I take pleasure and power in distinguishing myself from (inferior) systems of belief (i.e.,

"superstitions") that contradict my scientific "truth" that it is impossible for it to have got there. But at the same time, I have a skepticism about "science" (particularly, but not exclusively, in medical and environmental matters) that finds pleasurable points of pertinence in apparent facts that lie beyond its explanatory ability and therefore discursive power. I can experience these pleasures both simultaneously and alternately (or, at least, with one in alternate dominance over the other). My skepticism may be directed either toward "science" or toward "superstition," and in the contradiction between the two I am freed from subjection to either. My skepticism is both produced by and exploits the contradiction, and is pleasurable insofar as it allows me to negotiate my way between these conflicting knowledges, it allows me to be a social agent rather than a social subject, a cultural producer rather than a cultural dupe. It creates a space within which I can experience myself as a producer of meanings, some of which are pleasurable relevant to my experiences of social powerlessness: I enjoy being able to establish, momentarily, my difference from "the system" by being able to say, "They can't explain everything, they don't know everything, they want to repress that which they can't explain, because what they can't explain is what escapes their power."

My pleasure is resistive in that it recognizes that the discursive power of science is aligned with the discursive and economic power of capitalism, and that, albeit at the most tenuous level, the inability of science to explain a bomber on the moon is at one with the inability of capitalism to encompass and control the experience of the subordinate. A baffled scientist facing the limits of his power can become, by discursive transference or displacement, a baffled bourgeois facing the limits of his power; the moonstruck bomber becomes a metaphor for the social experiences of the subordinate that lie outside the meanings (and power) offered by the dominant discourses. The pleasure lies not in the bomber on the moon, but in the refusal of official truth. It is offensive, and thus science (or power) will seek not to explain it (for that would be to admit its validity) but to repress or deny it. The story allows me the pleasure of understanding science in my (popular) terms—that is, as a system of power—not in its own, dominant, terms, as a

system of nonsocial, nonpolitical truths grounded in nature and thus objective, universal, and unchallengeable. The story demystifies, challenges, offends, scandalizes, sensationalizes, articulates with "our" popular experience of "them," and is thus easily made into popular culture and its momentary pleasures. It invites productivity, it provokes gossip, argument, the play of belief and disbelief, of common sense and skepticism, of official and unofficial knowledges, of top-down and bottom-up power. It is destabilizing, sensational, and excessive, and its pleasures are those of the productive cultural agent, not of the dupe or of the subjected.

### PRODUCING RELEVANCE

Popular culture must not preach. The problem with some forms of social(ist) realism is that they attempt to provide an answer for, or a "true" insight into, the problems of industrial society. However politically correct this might be, it denies the productivity of popular culture: it minimizes the producerly elements in the text, or, at least, attempts to close them down. It attempts to do the work of the cultural agent by identifying its relevance to the social experience of the reader. This sort of "preachy" social realism is unlikely to be made into popular culture. That is not to say that no forms of social realism can be popular, but it does raise the question. *Dallas*, for instance, is watched by a huge variety of social groups throughout the Western world. In some cases, at least, it is made into surprisingly different popular cultures: it is read resistingly and/or incorporated within the daily lives of people whose social experience is far removed from that of the Ewings. The relevance of *Dallas* does not lie in the material conditions of the world it represents. Indeed, for many of the popular readers, the pleasure of these material conditions lies in their difference: they embody the dominant ideology that popular experience differs from, but relates to.

There are British television shows, such as *Coronation Street* or *EastEnders*, that represent more directly the social condi-

tions of subordinate classes (and, in *EastEnders*, races); these representations are a form of social realism insofar as they encourage viewers to form social allegiances with the subordinate. But they are popular to the extent that they avoid closed or preachy social realism; they do not propose a "party line" of socially correct meanings, but offer contradictory and controversial representations, and thus allow for producerly readings. Indeed, Buckingham (1987), in his study of *EastEnders* and its younger fans, found that although the show did, at times, appear somewhat didactic or preachy about issues such as race, the school-age viewers that he studied were adept at avoiding such moralizing. They did not, however, avoid the issues; on the contrary, they dealt with them thoroughly, but through active discussion of "the characters' moral dilemmas, through the rehearsing of past incidents and the prediction of future developments" (Buckingham 1987: 163).

In other words, their readings were far more producerly than a preachy text would allow. Such producerly popular texts work to provoke the reproduction and recirculation of meanings in gossip or conversation; their open but relevant contradictions stimulate viewers to connect them to their daily lives, and enable viewers in different social allegiances to make different meanings out of the different points of pertinence that they find. Morley (1986) has shown how pleasurable the recognition of relevance at the level of social representation can be, but this is clearly a different sort of relevance from that perceived by, for instance, Russian Jews in *Dallas*. There are different pleasures at work here. Some activate negative features on the level of representation to produce pleasures of difference, while others activate more positively represented elements to produce pleasures of similarity: represented relevance may operate along axes of similarity or difference. Thus the Moroccan Jews who read *Dallas* as a demonstration that the Ewings' money did not bring them happiness found this meaning pleasurable insofar as it was relevant to their sense of difference from Western materialism. There were pleasures of recognition that Morley's (1986) lower-class London viewers found with the representation of "local" characters and events in *Only Fools and Horses*. In this, they were similar to the *Cagney & Lacey* fans studies by D'Acci (1988).

Both sorts of representational relevance can allow popular, resistant readings. But it may be that the relevances of difference can reach a wider variety of formations of the popular than those of similarity. So *Dallas* can be popular across a wider range of national and social formations than either *Only Fools and Horses* or *Cagney & Lacey*. But its wider, rather than greater, popularity may also be the result of the greater encouragement it offers viewers to align themselves in a nonpopular way with the forces of domination: *Dallas* may also attract more hegemonically complicit readings than *Only Fools and Horses* or *Cagney & Lacey*. Our current knowledge cannot resolve the debate. The effectivity, or otherwise, of *Dallas*'s hegemonic thrust depends upon the social allegiances of its viewers and on whether they construct either relevances of similarity (between its represented world and their values) or ones of difference (between its represented world and their experienced one). The most significant relevances may not be those of similarity. The popularity of science fiction or historical romance cannot lie simply in represented social relevances at the level of the material details and conditions of everyday life. Perhaps, for some Third World viewers, *Dallas* is read as politically conscious science fiction, a futuristic dystopia that warns against development as the West defines it for them. We can, at this stage of our understanding of popular culture, do little more than speculate.

There are other sorts of relevance that exist at the level of discourse rather than of representation. The headline "CONTRAVERSY" in no way represents popular social experience, nor does the story of the moonstruck bomber. These are popular discourse, not because of the representation of the world that they offer, but because they combine contradictory discursive orientations to that world. Their relevancies lie in the relationships between the reading practices that make sense and pleasure out of them and the social practices that are used to make sense and pleasure out of everyday life. The pleasure in hearing the feminine voice speak "No way, Jose" when the masculine has already pronounced "Yes, master" is not confined to its representation of bedroom conflicts; two discursive attitudes are contradictorily and unresolvedly present in the same couple, and these contradictions are relevant



to a wide variety of contexts within which specific couples live and contest a patriarchal power: it reproduces the gender-political terrain upon which patriarchal strategy and feminist tactics engage rather than represents the "reality" of any specific engagement. This is a relevance to the discursive strategies and tactics employed in the making of meanings rather than to the recognition of elements of that social experience of which the meanings are being made.

Relevance is a complex criterion of popular discrimination: at the level of representation it operates along axes of similarity and difference. But it is not confined to the level of representation; indeed, it appears that discursive relevance is more productive of popular culture than representational relevance because it is more likely to be a foregrounded element in producerly texts: representational relevance can be made to fit more easily with readerly, nonproductive, texts, and these are unlikely to be as widely chosen as the raw resources of popular culture. Representational relevance in a nonproducerly text is unlikely to produce popular culture.

Progressives and radicals often wish to intervene in the production of mass culture to increase the variety of representations of the world that it offers, to increase the number of voices and visions that it carries, and to make it contest and contradict itself more explicitly. Such enlargement, enrichment, and variation of the resources out of which popular culture can be made are potentially a positive force for social change, but this potential can be realized only if it takes proper account of the productivity and discrimination involved in making popular culture. The mass media do not deliver ready-made popular culture as the mailman delivers mail. Seeing the mass media as the purveyors of cultural commodities and the people as mere consumers of those commodities leads to the fallacious belief that changing the commodities will change popular culture, which will, in turn, change the social order. Neither culture nor politics is that simple.

For those of us wishing to change our media or to encourage alternative media, it is all too tempting to concentrate upon the level of representation and to ignore the roles of popular discrimination, relevance, and popular productivity. Progressives will not help their cause if they produce new cultural

commodities that extend the range of representations of the world but that the various formations of the people discriminate against because they fail to offer what popular culture demands. Where relevance is taken into account, it is often confined to the representational axis of similarity, and ignores, in particular, discursive relevance and its greater potential for producerly pleasures. Progressive or radical cultural theorists can all too easily underestimate the importance of fun, of the carnivalesque, and produce sober, puritanical texts. Their desire to promote specific meanings of social experience (however resistant or progressive) can all too easily lead to the production of closed, nonproducerly texts. Producerly texts are risky texts, because their meanings are out of control, but cultural production is, necessarily, a risky business. The producers of texts cannot control either popular discrimination or popular productivity. Popular culture does not take easily to central control, however benevolent. There is a risk involved in allowing excess, for that allows meanings to get out of control: the power of the left is as open to carnivalesque inversions and evasions as is that of the right, but this is a risk that must at times be taken if the progressive is to be the popular.

### **POPULAR CULTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

Radical theorists have consistently underestimated and demeaned popular forces. I would like to start to redress this by suggesting first that we can learn at least as much, if not more, about resistances to the dominant ideology from studying popular everyday tactics as from theorizing and analyzing the strategic mechanisms of power. Second, I suggest that the popular motives for social change are quite different from theoretical and radical ones and that failure to recognize this difference has resulted in radical theorists and politicians being unable to mobilize popular energies and forces to work as effectively as possible to hasten social change. It has also led to the underestimation of the amount of social change or progress that popular forces have achieved within and against the system that dominates their social experience.

Two quite different, and possibly mutually exclusive, models of social change are being put forward here. We might call them the radical and the popular. Radical social change, which results in a major redistribution of power in society, is often described as revolution (armed or otherwise), and occurs at relatively infrequent crisis points in history. Popular change, however, is an ongoing process, aimed at maintaining or increasing the bottom-up power of the people within the system. It results in the softening of the harsh extremities of power, it produces small gains for the weak, it maintains their esteem and identity. It is progressive, but not radical.

We are wrong to expect popular culture to be radical (and thus to criticize it for not being so). Radical political movements neither originate nor operate at the level of representation or of symbolic systems. This does not mean, however, that when historical conditions produce a radical crisis the media and popular culture cannot play an active role in the radical change that may occur: what it means is that symbolic or cultural systems alone cannot produce those historical conditions. Despite the severe problems facing many Western societies today (economic, environmental, social), there are few signs that these problems constitute a historical crisis that will result in the overthrow of patriarchal capitalism. Under these conditions, popular culture cannot be radical. The most we can hope for is that it will be progressive.

Of Laclau's types of oppositional populism, the popular equates with progressive popular culture and the populist with radicalism, though as yet there is little evidence of a popular left in the political realm. The voices of Thatcher and Reagan speak with a right-wing popular rhetoric (appropriate to our difficult, but noncrisis conditions—the populist rhetoric of a Hitler or Mussolini would seem ludicrously inappropriate to all but the most extreme right-wingers). What the left lacks is a popular rhetoric: it has many historical examples of populist radical rhetorics that may have been appropriate to their historical moments, but are not appropriate for contemporary Western societies.

For theorists of popular culture, then, the problems are of two kinds. The first is to develop ways of investigating whether or not the forms of popular culture can be usefully evaluated in

terms of their degree of progressiveness, and, if so, how this differential progressiveness can be identified in specific texts and their readings. Then comes the need to think through the nature of resistance, the relationships between interior resistance (whether evasive or productive) and organized resistance at the sociopolitical level, which in itself encompasses the micro- and macropolitical levels, with their still largely unexplored interrelationships.

Evaluating the potential progressiveness of popular culture is beyond us at the present state of our understanding, and may well remain so. In this book I have tried to sketch in some of the characteristics of texts that make them available for use in some of the cultures of the people. The presence of these characteristics does not guarantee that a text will be used, but their absence makes its use less likely and less flexible. Textual analysis may be able to identify a text's popular potential, but it can only speculate about if or how this potential will be actualized. The speculations can be conducted with some theoretical rigor, for they must be situated within both appropriate textual theory and appropriate social theory, but they can never pass beyond the illustrative, they can never be exhaustive, for they will always be taken by surprise by some of the practical, contextual uses to which the text will be put. Similarly, it is impossible to predict which of these uses will be more or less progressive than any other. While the analyst will be able to situate his or her speculative potential readings of a text in relationship to the meanings that serve the dominant ideology, and thus to arrive at a rough measure of their ideological difference, this does not constitute a measure of a text's progressive potential, though it must bear upon it.

Ethnographic analysis of specific instances of a text's use can help us toward understanding under what conditions and in what ways the progressive potential may be actualized. But they are always analyses of a cultural process that has already occurred; their predictive value is limited, though not non-existent.

For instance, D'Acci (1988) has shown how the sense of empowerment that some of the fans of *Cagney & Lacey* derive from the show enables them to change their social lives; similarly, Radway (1984) has found that some romance fans

discover that their reading enhances their self-esteem to the point where they are able to stand up better to their husbands' demands and to negotiate a more empowered space for themselves within the patriarchal structure of the family. Seiter et al. (1989) have found that the representation of a married woman's affair on a TV soap opera can be used within a specific marriage as a warning to the husband to change the way he treats his wife. Such specific instances of the micropolitical use of popular texts might then lead us to predict that some Madonna fans will be empowered by their fandom to demand better treatment by their boyfriends, but we cannot predict either which fans will behave in this way or what forms those demands will take. Analysis of Madonna's texts and ethnographic studies of her fans can combine, within a sociotextual theory, with studies of specific uses of other popular texts with a similar gender-political potential (e.g., romances, soap operas, and *Cagney & Lacey*) to enable us to predict that, at the level of micropolitics, some fans of Madonna will make some socially progressive uses of her texts.

The relationships between micropolitics and macropolitics are diverse and dispersed. The most micro of micropolitics is the interior world of fantasy (see *Reading the Popular*, Chapter 5b). The preservation of fantasy as an interior place beyond the reach of ideological colonization, and the ability to imagine oneself acting differently in different circumstances, may not in itself result in social action, whether at the micro or macro level, but it does constitute the ground upon which any such action must occur. It is difficult to conceive of a movement for social change that does not depend on people's ability to think of themselves and their social relations in ways that differ from those preferred by the dominant ideology.

Such interior, privatized resistance may have its progressive potential increased if it is given a social dimension—if, through formal or informal relationships the social agent can connect with others, and can articulate his or her interior resistances with those of others. One function of the critic-theorist may be to assist in this socialization of the interior, either through the provision of a vocabulary and a theoretical framework that will help the personal to be generalized outward, or through the provision of enabling social organizations along the lines of the consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement.

The potential of such change at the micropolitical level should not be underestimated. The fan empowered by her use of Madonna to change her relationships with boys may extend this empowerment into her relationships within the family, within the school, or within the workplace. It may be part of the new way in which she walks down the street or the shopping mall, demanding that people take notice of her; it may be part of the process of claiming places within the street for women, of breaking the gendered meanings of indoors and outdoors; it might be part of changing and reducing the male's voyeuristic rights and pleasures.

Such social change, while not attacking the system radically at the level of macropolitics, may nonetheless be the sort of progressiveness that has most to offer subordinates as they live their everyday lives. We should not expect the gender progressiveness of Madonna to result in the formation of radical feminist action groups, but, equally, we should not allow her absence of radicalism to lead us to dismiss her as a gender reactionary. Radical feminists who are offended by Madonna's use of patriarchal iconography, values, and pleasures can be led to underestimate, or even deny, the progressive uses to which she can be put. In any sphere of politics radical theories can often be at odds with progressive practices.

Indeed, I would go further. There is little historical evidence to suggest that any form of radical art has produced a discernible political or social effectivity. In saying this, I have no wish to marginalize radical or avant-garde art any more than it has already marginalized itself, but I do wish to question the claims that radical art is politically more effective than the progressive uses of popular art. Barthes (1973) points to the political limitations of the avant-garde when he argues that it challenges the bourgeoisie only in the spheres of aesthetics and ethics, but in no way disturbs its economic or political power. Any effectivity it may have is confined to marginal shifts within the bourgeoisie itself. In fact, there is more evidence of the progressive effectivity of popular art on the micro level than there is of radical art on the macro level.

So while I am cautious of attributing any direct political effect to any system of representation, I do wish to recognize that all representations must have a politics, and that this politics may



be both macro and micro. On the macropolitical level, most theorists of popular culture suggest that its effectivity is reactionary, that its diffuse, long-term politics promotes the interests of the dominant classes and social groups. Such theories are persuasive only if we understand them to be describing a hegemonic thrust rather than an ideological effect.

But on the micro level the situation is different. A number of researchers have found that the sense of empowerment that may, on occasion, result from the practices of popular culture can enable or encourage progressive social action on the micropolitical level (e.g., see D'Acci 1988; Radway 1984; Seiter et al. 1989). The politics of popular culture at the macro level may be contradicted by those at the micro. If this is so, then the recent investigations into the politics and culture of everyday life would suggest that any reactionary effectivity at the macro level is powerless to prevent its subversion at the micro.

The extent to which such progressiveness is licensed and contained by the social system is debatable, and the debate centers on the problem of incorporation. On the one hand, it can be argued that progressive practices are panaceas allowed by the system to keep the subordinate content within it. By allowing the system to be flexible and to contain points of opposition within it, such progressive practices actually strengthen that to which they are opposed, and thus delay the radical change that is the only one that can bring about a genuine improvement in social conditions. Such an argument has been the orthodoxy among many radical theories of the recent past. It has still not been disproved: it still needs to be taken seriously. Its problem is that it can so easily lead to a pessimistic reductionism that sees all signs of popular progress or pleasure as instances of incorporation, and therefore conceives of power as totalitarian and resistable only by direct radical or revolutionary action. It also, ironically for such a Marxist argument, fails to account for historical conditions and thus essentializes the process. Under some conditions incorporation may be comparatively effective, but under others it is much less so. Again, the theoretical focus needs to shift from the structural process to the socially located practice.

The emphasis on incorporation may well be theoretically tenable, but it is politically sterile because, in the current and

immediately foreseeable conditions of capitalist societies, it offers no hope of being able to mobilize the popular support necessary for such radical social change. Indeed, as I argued earlier, it runs the risk of alienating the various formations of the people instead of mobilizing them.

Against this is the argument that what is called "incorporation" is better understood as a defensive strategy forced upon the powerful by the guerrilla raids of the weak. Incorporation always involves giving up some ground, the concession of space; such a continued erosive process may well provide changes in the system that allow significant improvements in the condition of the subordinate. The redistribution of power and resources within the system may not be radical, but it may alter the way that power is exercised and the nature of power itself. The economic, social, and industrial conditions of blue-collar workers have improved over this century, however patchily. Other subordinated groups have increased their power in society at both the macro and micro levels.

There is, of course, a long way still to go, but it may be counterproductive to denigrate or even discourage the everyday struggles within and against the system in favor of a radical attack on the system itself. The more modest and immediate aims of progressiveness may be more practical as well as more popular than the larger and more distant objectives of radicalism. The two models of social change should not be at odds, for radical theories that cannot enlist popular engagement are doomed to political failure, and popular progressiveness that lacks the potential to make connections with radical movements at times of historical crisis or acute political antagonism is equally ineffective. The micropolitics that maintains resistances in the minutiae of everyday life maintains a fertile soil for the seeds of macropolitics without which they will inevitably fail to flourish.

I have tried in this book and its companion volume of readings to argue a view of popular culture that is both positive and optimistic. As such, it runs counter to some academic and political orthodoxies, but if it helps toward a reconceptualization of popular forces as an untapped social resource that can fuel (and in its own way already is fueling) the motor of social change, then any disagreement I may provoke will be justified.

New knowledge is not an evolutionary improvement on what precedes it; rather, new knowledges enter adversarial relationships with older, more established ones, challenging their position in the power play of understandings, and in such confrontations new insights can be provoked. And I do wish to contest the variety of views that, in their different ways, judge the popular to be a negative social influence, for, in the final analysis, I believe the popular forces to be a positive influence in our society and that failing to take proper account of their progressive elements is academically and politically disabling. I hope I have managed to take some of my readers some of the way with me.

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