TOWARD A DEFINITION OF POPULAR CULTURE

HOLT N. PARKER

ABSTRACT

The most common definitions of popular culture suffer from a presentist bias and cannot be applied to pre-industrial and pre-capitalist societies. A survey reveals serious conceptual difficulties as well. We may, however, gain insight in two ways. 1) By moving from a Marxist model (economic/class/production) to a more Weberian approach (societal/status/consumption). 2) By looking to Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” and Danto’s and Dickie’s “Institutional Theory of Art,” and defining popular culture as “unauthorized culture.”

Keywords: popular culture, cultural capital, “institutional theory of art,” Arthur Danto, George Dickie, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci

I. IN SEARCH OF THE POPULAR

Popular culture is like pornography—in, oh, so many ways: we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it.1 Indeed, scholars of popular culture and cultural studies have taken a certain perhaps perverse pride in not defining their subject. The neophyte turns hopefully to a book entitled An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture only to find: “Although this is a book about popular culture, not much time will be wasted defining it in this Introduction.”2 Or in another called Popular Culture: An Introduction: “I am using the concept of ‘popular,’ with which cultural studies is largely concerned, to talk about the everyday terrain of people without being sure who the people are, that is, without deciding ahead of time and once and for all who is being referred to by the term ‘people.’”3

As Tony Bennett wrote in an early and influential article: “The concept of popular culture is virtually useless, a melting pot of confused and contradictory meanings capable of misdirecting inquiry up any number of theoretical blind alleys.”4

I come to the topic as a historian and classicist. An approach with an eye to antiquity might prove fruitful, since Greece and Rome have played an important role in the idea of “popular culture” ever since the term was first coined by Herder.  

II. SIX DEFINITIONS

After Bennett’s warning, his article provided four different ways in which popular culture was used. John Storey’s often revised and reprinted *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* expanded Bennett’s four uses and offered what is still the most systematic discussion of attempts to pin down popular culture. Storey lists six definitions, each with its own strengths and difficulties, each bringing with it a slightly different set of objects for contemplation as “popular.” Perhaps the best way to review and analyze these definitions is to see what popular culture is being cut off from. Popular culture, if not a residual category (see 2 below), is at least always oppositional.

As historians we face a great difficulty at the outset, for nearly all theories of popular culture take it as given that popular culture is a phenomenon dating from, or indeed caused by, the Industrial Revolution. Storey notes the difficulty: “What all these definitions have in common is the insistence that whatever else popular culture might be, it is definitely a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization. . . . This of course makes Britain the first country to produce popular culture defined in this historically restricted way.” And yet, pre-industrial societies showed something that we all would like to include under any

---


8. As Strinati notes: “Any attempt to define popular culture inevitably involves its analysis and evaluation. It therefore seems difficult to define popular culture independently of the theory which is designed to explain it” (Strinati, *Introduction to Theories*, xvii). The lens determines its object.


11. Storey, *Cultural Theory*, 10. He continues, “There are other ways to define popular culture, which do not depend on this particular history or these particular circumstances, but they are definitions which fall outside the range of the cultural theorists and the cultural theory discussed in this book.” Storey does not discuss what the “other ways” might be.
useful definition of popular culture. There clearly was a popular culture in Greece and Rome, defined, described, and derided as such by various elite authors.12

We might begin by looking at Strinati’s own “working definition” of popular culture, which he takes from Dick Hebdige: “a set of generally available artefacts: films, records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc.”13 This definition has proved very popular itself,14 but the whole quote reads: “What we call ‘popular culture,’ for example a set of generally available artefacts—films, records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc.—did not emerge in its recognizably contemporary form until the post-Second World War period when new consumer products were designed and manufactured for new consumer markets.”15 Thus everything before the 1950s is ruled out of our consideration. Strinati notes the difficulty with his own working definition: “Popular culture can be found in different societies, within different groups in societies, and among societies and groups in different historical periods.”16 The Industrial Revolution tends to be the outer limit, since most scholars are relying on “a definition of culture and popular culture which depends on there being in place a capitalist market economy.”17 Some will push back the cut-off date to the early modern period but seldom further.18

12. Most famously, Juvenal’s “bread and circuses” (Satires 10.81), or Aristotole on baunasia, Nicomachean Ethics 1123a20-28.
15. Dick Hebdige, Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things (London: Routledge, 1988), 47. John Fiske, Understanding Popular Culture (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 170, confines his definition of popular culture to the bricolage 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.” This ignores, among many things, the huge economy of the niche markets.
Behind this lies a certain uncritical and frankly romantic nostalgia for “The World We Have Lost,” a Golden Age of Gemeinschaft and organic society: “Before industrialization and urbanization, Britain had two cultures: a common culture which was shared, more or less, by all classes, and a separate elite culture produced and consumed by the dominant classes in society.”19 This picture of a prelapsarian age underlies a great deal of discussion of popular culture, and owes a certain amount to Marx’s own Romantic idealization of the Middle Ages and before, which he tended to see as a time of not yet alienated craftsmen.20 It is not that the Industrial Revolution did not cause profound changes in social relations, but it is an impoverished view to restrict the use of “popular culture” to these few centuries, or century, or decades.

1. Bennett and Storey’s first definition is quantitative: “Popular culture is simply culture which is widely favoured or well liked by many people.”21 Storey notes one obvious objection: “Unless we can agree on a figure over which something becomes popular culture, and below which it is just culture, we might find that widely favoured or well liked by many people included so much as to be virtually useless as a conceptual definition.”22

The problem is exacerbated for the historian of any but the most recent period of the West: finding a figure much less agreeing on one. We have no sales figures for antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance.

The contrast here is “unpopular culture.” The problem then is not merely inclusion but exclusion. Certain minority tastes might rightly be cast out from the


21. Storey, Cultural Theory, 4; Bennett, “Popular Culture,” 20. See also John G. Nachbar and Kevin Lauzé, Popular Culture: An Introductory Text (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 10: “Let’s begin with the part of the definition which arouses little argument. ‘Popular’ simply refers to that which is (or has been) accepted or approved of by large numbers of people; in America, Madonna is popular, Saddam Hussein is not. In Iraq, the situation is reversed.” Mukerji and Schudson, Rethinking Popular Culture, 4-5: “ ‘Popular culture’ is a difficult term to define. We will sidestep a great many terminological disputes with the inclusive claim that popular culture refers to the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population. This includes folk beliefs, practices and objects rooted in local traditions, and mass beliefs, practices and objects generated in political and commercial centers. It includes elite cultural forms that have been popularized as well as popular forms that have been elevated to the museum tradition.” With this definition, it is hard to see what would not count as popular culture.
realm of the popular (for example, baroque opera), but so would others that one might like to see included (for example, pigeon-fancying). However, this definition has the advantage of being the only “non-evaluative, purely descriptive” one and interesting for being the only one in which popular culture is thought of as the higher category, the top of the pops to which other works beg for admittance.

2. Their second definition is qualitative: “the culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture.” It carries with it an inevitable aesthetic denigration of the excluded portion of culture.

There are several problems with this definition. First, we are not defining the “popular” but merely shifting the burden onto finding and demarcating what constitutes “higher” culture. Determining the “quality” (in all senses) is a problem both historical—determining what counted as “high culture” in other eras—and transhistorical, since the judgment required to determine what makes the grade is the very distinction that we are questioning. Second, the residue of popular culture is no more uniform than elite culture. Just as the elite can consist of, say, the lords spiritual, temporal, and legal, so the _populus_ may consist of peasants, farmers, artisans, burghers, and the urban poor, all with different concerns and pleasures. Third, no cultural product can be assigned to any given category of popular or high culture apart from its _use_. An opera aria can move from being a popular work for a fiercely competitive market, to showing one’s elite taste, to being used in a commercial exactly as a sign of elite taste, to being used to mock that elite taste, to background music in a movie, to parody in the Marx Brothers.

The fourth problem is the most severe: a fundamental category error, which we might express in the form of a Venn diagram. Popular culture can be a residual area only if “popular” and “high” represent two nonintersecting sets, that is, if

---

the elite and the “people” have no common pursuits. So, for example, the court masque is part of an elite, exclusive culture, but everyone attends Carnival.

This definition thus fails to distinguish among high culture, popular culture, and “common culture.” It forces us into thinking of elite culture as merely a superstructure on a base culture. We might invoke literal consumption. McDonald’s and molecular gastronomy are non-intersecting sets. But pizza is a human universal. Pizza may be good or bad, mass produced or artisanal (the categories are not homologous), but everyone likes pizza.

3. In the third definition, the essentially aesthetic distinction slides over into a “synonym for mass culture,” that commercialized, commoditized “culture industry” decried and described by Horkheimer and Adorno. Both Strinati and Freccero seem willing to equate popular culture directly with mass culture. Frith’s clear definition of mass culture as “the culture made possible by technological change, by the use of the means of mass cultural production” shows the difficulties both historical and conceptual.

The historical problem is clear enough. If we confine “popular culture” to Western modern industrial society, we force an identification of “popular culture” with “mass culture.” Olick makes the important contrast:

The term popular culture can refer broadly to common aesthetic or life practices, in both the statistical and qualitative senses. Theorists have used the term more precisely to designate a particular form of common culture that arises only in the modern period. Popular culture in this account is distinct from both folk culture and high culture: unlike the former, it is mass-produced; unlike the latter, it is mass-consumed.

28. Scribner, “Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?” 179, 182, warns of “the danger of regarding ‘popular culture’ as a residual or marginalised category.”

29. In the sense used by Williams, Culture and Society, 317-318. Richard Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” American Historical Review 99 (1994), 833 has argued that “the distinction between ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ cultures can usefully be subordinated to a more nuanced and fluid distinction between ‘common tradition’ and various specialized traditions; once this basic distinction is established, it becomes possible to see diverse ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures as forms of specialized culture related in complex and shifting ways to common culture. Much of the culture at any time was common: not universal or uniform but sufficiently diffused that it cannot be assigned to any specific subgroup and expressive more of solidarity than of either hegemony or dissent”; cf. his earlier remarks, Magic in the Middle Ages (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 56-57.

30. Except for the fries.


32. Strinati, Introduction to Theories, xvi (quoted above); see, however, his further discussion (2-43) and his analysis of the Frankfurt School (46-76). Freccero, Popular Culture, 14, seems contradictory: “I am also using it [popular culture] in the sense of ‘mass culture,’ the popular cultural forms produced through the medium of mass technology and communications, as well as those forms produced on a smaller, localized scale.”


34. Olick, Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, IV, 44. This makes for a rather interesting three-way chart: Popular [+ mass produced, + mass consumed], High [- mass produced, — mass consumed], Folk [- mass produced, + mass consumed], presumably. What would be [+ mass produced, — mass consumed]? Flops, one supposes.
It will not do, however, to label the popular culture of pre-industrial Europe as merely “folk culture.” Most of it was not mass-produced but much of it was mass-consumed and in urban settings. Indeed, it is difficult to think of anything more mass-consumed than Roman circus games or the plays in Athens’ Theater of Dionysus.

Still, there is much to recommend Hebdige and Strinati’s definition of “generally available artefacts.” If we are generous in what we call artifacts, the category will include Homer, the City Dionysia, the plays of Plautus, Corpus Christi processions, the plays of Shakespeare, maybe even the rose window at Chartres. The problem is that it will leave out a number of things that one would like to see included. Most parts of traditional cultures, those very folk songs that provided the original locus for studying popular culture, were not “generally available,” at least not outside the immediate small community that produced and reproduced them. Types of singing, dancing, carving, painting, and dressing were unique to each locality and served as distinct markers of identity. This is no less true for some types of modern culture: many bands, clubs, raves, and mixes depend on their exclusivity. In short, “generally available artefacts” is really only another way to say “mass culture,” that is, “mass-produced culture.”

The conceptual problem lies in the condemnation that is always implicit in the label “mass culture,” which began as a way of describing Nazi propaganda. Once “mass culture” becomes a set phrase, what it is being contrasted with is seldom made explicit: “not mass-produced,” presumably. However, as soon as we have set this down, a host of images come to disturb us: William Morris chairs, craft fairs, artisanal cheeses, and other things not traditionally associated with “popular” culture. “Not mass-produced” is not the same as “popular.”

4. This suspicion of “mass culture” leads to the fourth definition: “the culture which originates from ‘the people’.” This formulation is an odd amalgam, combining a sharp reaction against the preceding definition (dating from mid-century but lingering well into the twenty-first) with the oldest layer of searching for “das Volk.”

35. Bourdieu’s “field of large-scale cultural production” is merely a synonym for “mass culture”; The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 115: “the field of restricted production as a system producing cultural goods (and the instruments for appropriating these goods) objectively destined for a public of producers of cultural goods, and the field of large-scale cultural production, specifically organized with a view to the production of cultural goods destined for non-producers of cultural goods, ‘the public at large.’”

36. See Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 129 and the “Notes and Sketches,” 212-213. Bennett, “Popular Culture,” 21: “Mass-culture” carries “the pejorative connotation that popular forms are manipulative and formulaic, produced in organised centres of cultural production over which the broad masses of the people have no control.”

37. Bennett, “Popular Culture,” 22: “When used in this way, ‘popular culture’ functions as a rough equivalent of the nineteenth-century concept of folk culture. As developed in Marxist theory in this country since the Fifties, however, this usage has received a specific political inflection in being more restrictively applied to the cultures of those oppressed groups or classes held to constitute the site upon which the imaginative resistances to the socially dominant culture and ideology cluster or develop. At its crudest, popular culture is thus often equated with a highly romanticised concept of working-class culture construed as the major source of symbolic protest within contemporary capitalism.”
The first objection is obvious: “One problem with this approach is the question of who qualifies for inclusion in the category ‘the people.’” Defining “popular” as “of the populace” is not very helpful. The hidden opposition therefore is “people/not of the people.” But it is just as difficult to determine who does not count as “of the people,” or rather to determine the exact times and places when certain groups or individuals would be excluded, and from what other groups of “the people” taken as a whole. (The king on his knees is a layman still.)

The result and purpose of this definition (as applied in certain types of analysis) is to divide non-elite culture into a Good Thing and a Bad Thing. Frith noted the creation of the special category of “positive mass consumption” (which became—and remains—the pithiest academic definition of ‘popular’ culture). In short, if I as an intellectual can approve, it’s popular: if I don’t, it’s mass. This uneasy division is valorized in many texts: “Mass culture refers to popular culture which is produced by the industrial techniques of mass production and marketed for profit to a mass public of consumers.” Before, it was popular; now, it is defiled and merely mass. “A popular culture, with moments of real resistance to the dominant one, is transformed into a mass culture with its commodities, its advertisements, and its centrally created style.” Thus, popular culture is only truly popular when it resists.

This oddly enough is merely the flip side of Horkheimer and Adorno’s condemnation that “enjoyment implies consent.”

38. Storey, “Popular,” in New Keywords, 263; Cultural Theory, 7. See Freccero, Popular Culture, 17 (quoted above) for ducking the problem of who “the people might be.”
40. Frith, “The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent,” 103. Bennett notes with some wonder: “the study of popular culture has been defined as a site of positive political engagement by both socialists and feminists” (his emphasis), in Popular Culture and the Turn to Gramsci in Popular Culture and Social Relations, ed. Tony Bennett et al. (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986), xii. Reprinted in Storey, Reader, 92-99.
41. Strinati, Popular Culture, 9, taking the definition from Dwight MacDonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture,” in Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Free Press, 1957) and citing with approval MacDonald’s idyllic landscape: “Folk Art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of High Culture, to suit their own needs. . . . Folk Art was the people’s institution, their private little garden walled off from the great formal park of their masters’ High Culture. But Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination.” It is telling that MacDonald’s earlier article, “A Theory of ‘Popular Culture,’” Politics (February 1944), 20-23, was recycled as “A Theory of Mass Culture.”
42. Fiske, Reading the Popular (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986), 67; Fiske, Understanding, 44 ("Defining the popular"): “Readings that consent to its hegemonic strategy—these are not part of popular culture: they are complicit with the interests of the power-bloc against which the formations of the people are variously situated.”
43. A more disturbing but generally unacknowledged part of this approach is that “resistance” may include resistance to democratic government, civil order, or civil behavior to, for example, women or minorities. When the rock of hegemony is overturned not all that crawls out is life-affirming. Fascism was a genuinely popular movement. Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London: Methuen, 1979) was virtually unique in being willing to consider skinheads next to punk. See Timothy S. Brown, “Subcultures, Pop Music and Politics: Skinheads and ‘Nazi Rock’ in England and Germany,” Journal of Social History 38 (2004), 157-178.
This romantic conception of “the people” is, of course, far from any historical reality: folk products have never been created in isolation from the centers of urban culture nor from elite culture. That was as true for Hesiod as for Theocritus, for Vergil as for the English ballads. Furthermore, one of the most prevalent features of popular culture (both pre- and post-industrial) to which theorists point is precisely its bricolage: the reuse, refashioning, reappropriation of the acts and materials of elite culture.

Furthermore, one of the most prevalent features of popular culture (both pre- and post-industrial) to which theorists point is precisely its bricolage: the reuse, refashioning, reappropriation of the acts and materials of elite culture.

Here Gramsci’s own words make the point better and lead to the fifth definition:

A classification or division of popular songs formulated by Ermolao Rubieri: (1) songs composed by the people and for the people; (2) songs composed for the people but not by the people; (3) songs composed neither by the people nor for the people that the people have nevertheless adopted because they conform to their way of thinking and feeling.

It seems to me that all popular songs could and should be reduced to the third category, since what distinguishes popular song, within the framework of a nation and its culture, is not its artistic element or its historical origin, but its way of conceiving the world and life, in contrast with official society; here, and only here, should one look for the “collectivity” of popular song and of the people themselves.

Gramsci rejects definition 4 (“of the people”) and definition 3 (mass culture for the people), in favor of a form of bricolage.

5. Storey’s fifth definition is harder for him to formulate, as he outlines the directions that Bennett indicated by taking the “turn to Gramsci.” His definition takes popular culture as:

a site of struggle between the “resistance” of subordinate groups in society and the forces of “incorporation” operating in the interests of dominant groups in society. Popular culture in this usage is not imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it an emerging from

45. For a brilliant analysis of the intertwining of oral, manuscript, and print in even the oldest layer of English ballads, see Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 1-10. Cf. Gramsci’s remark, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, transl. William Boelhower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 195: “Thus folklore has always been tied to the culture of the dominant class and, in its own way, has drawn from it the motifs which have then become inserted into combinations with the previous traditions.”


47. *Selections from Cultural Writings*, 329; *Prison Notebooks*, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) II, 399-400. He continues: “Other criteria of folklore research follow from this: that the people themselves are not a homogeneous cultural collectivity but present numerous and variously combined cultural stratifications which, in their pure form, cannot always be identified within specific historical popular collectivities. It is true, however, that some identification of these collectivities becomes possible when one isolates them more or less historically.” Gramsci was not immune to a view of the people as romantic remnants (*Selections*, 189; *Prison Notebooks, 1*, 186): “It [folklore] ought to be studied as a ‘conception of the world’ of particular social strata which are untouched by modern currents of thought,” characterized as “a museum of fragments of all the conceptions of the world and of life that have followed one another throughout history.”

below, spontaneously oppositional culture of “the people.” Rather, it is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two; a terrain, as already stated, marked by resistance and incorporation.49

However, this reduction of hegemony to containment vs. resistance does a disservice to Gramsci.50

It is impossible to explore the rich complexity of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony here.51 For our purposes, we must be content with noting two things. First, Gramsci and others make it clear that hegemony is based on methods of mass communication—newspapers, books, and increasingly radio, movies, and television.52 Second, Gramsci (or neo-Gramscian hegemony theory) does not in fact

49. Bennett, “Turn to Gramsci,” xv; Storey, Reader, 96: “The field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavour. As such, it consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which—in different particular types of popular culture—dominant, subordinate and opposition cultural and ideological values and elements are ‘mixed’ in different permutations.”

50. Cf. such statements as Perry Anderson, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” New Left Review 100 (1976), 26: “Hegemony means the ideological subordination of the working class by the bourgeoisie, which enables it to rule by consent”; Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 256: “Hegemony is a ruling class’s (or alliance’s) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the systematic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order.” Elizabeth G. Traube, “‘The Popular’ in American Culture,” Annual Review of Anthropology 25 (1996), 136, trenchantly observes: “It is one thing, however, to look at how particular discursive constructions of the people circulated in political discourses may be reproduced, transformed, or contested in popular fictional forms. . . . It is another to define popular culture as the site where political subjects are constructed for or against a represented power-bloc. The overpoliticization of popular culture entailed in this latter view may have contributed to the drift from hegemony theory to the new revisionism, with its scaled-back, romanticized focus on local subjectivities, amplified in Fiske’s rhetoric into ‘the people.’” See also Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing,” 228 = Storey, Reader, 478. Jonathan Rose, “Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences,” Journal of the History of Ideas 53 (1992), 47-70, outlines a number of fallacies made in the application of the idea of hegemony, contrasting them with the multiple realities of reading experiences.

51. Like many key terms, Gramsci never gave a precise definition of “hegemony,” which is largely a product of eisegesis. His clearest statement is in Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, ed. and transl. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12: “The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.” For a clear (and witty) review of the many ways in which Gramsci used the protean word “hegemony,” see Peter Ghosh, “Gramscian Hegemony: An Absolutely Historicist Approach,” History of European Ideas 27 (2001), 2, 3, 6: “the core idea is not cultural, but that of revolutionary class coalition”; “there is no instance of Gramsci envisaging ‘hegemony’ as operative in ‘advanced capitalist society’”; “hegemony is something aimed at by aspirant revolutionaries, not something inflicted by powerful reactionaries.” In this, Gramsci is closest to the spirit of Marx and Engels in The German Ideology, ed. Christopher John Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 64, 66: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. . . . For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.”

52. For example, Gramsci, Selections from Cultural Writings, 389-390.
offer a definition of what constitutes popular culture. Instead the idea of hegemony offers a powerful model of how high and low interact and affect each other, one that winds up largely obliterating the difference between elite and popular into “common sense.”

However, there is a definite sense in which hegemony has always been with us. As we read statements such as this: “The original commodity (be it a television program or a pair of jeans) is, in the culture economy, a text, a discursive structure of potential meanings and pleasures that constitutes a major resource of popular culture,” we realize with a certain frisson of pleasure that we’ve seen all this before. It is Bacon’s “Idols of the Market Place”:

There are also Idols arising from the dealings or associations of men with one another, which I call idols of the Marketplace [idola fori]. For speech is the means of association among men, and in consequence, a wrong and inappropriate application of words obstructs the mind to a remarkable extent. Nor do the definitions or explanations with which learned men have sometimes been accustomed to defend and vindicate themselves in any way remedy the situation. Indeed, words plainly do violence to the understanding and throw everything into confusion, and lead men into innumerable empty controversies and fictions.

We notice the linguistic nature of the process of delusion, the grounding of the idols in shared words, that is, in ideology, in what cannot be questioned, since it seems grounded in our langue itself, in common sense.

53. Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” New Left Review 82 (November–December, 1973), 8: “Hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway.” See the entire passage for a criticism of a simplistic reduction of hegemony. Carl Boggs, Gramsci’s Marxism (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 17, 39: “By hegemony Gramsci meant the permeation throughout civil society—including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches, and the family—of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc. that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an ‘organizing principle,’ or world-view (or combination of such world-views), that is diffused by agencies of ideological control and socialization into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the broad masses, it becomes part of ‘common sense’: as all ruling elites seek to perpetuate their own philosophy, culture, morality, etc. and render them unchallengeable, part of the natural order of things.” Gramsci’s hegemony is closer to Bourdieu’s “conductorless orchestration,” in The Logic of Practice, transl. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 59, than to any consciously imposed thought control. See, too, Bourdieu on doxa, and on habitus as the embodiment of common sense in Outline of a Theory of Practice, transl. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 80, 167; Language and Symbolic Power, transl. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 239. Marc Angenot, “The Concept of Social Discourse,” English Studies in Canada 21 (1995), 1-19.

54. Gramsci (Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 161) describes hegemony as “a compromise equilibrium.” See, for example, Gramsci, Selections from Cultural Writings, 189: “Folklore should instead be studied as a ‘conception of the world and life’ implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part implicit, mechanical, and objective) to ‘official’ conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process.”

55. Fiske, Understanding, 27.

56. Francis Bacon, Novum Organum (1620: Book 1, aphorism 43), transl. and ed. Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 55.

57. These points of comparison might be pursued elsewhere, particularly with regard to modern
6. Storey’s sixth definition is also an approach, a method of analysis, rather than a demarcation of boundaries: “A sixth definition of popular culture is one informed by recent thinking around the debate on postmodernism. . . . The main point to insist on here is the claim that postmodern culture is a culture which no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture.”

We seem to have reached a Socratic aporia. Storey’s survey of six definitions ends with something of a whimper, while Bennett early came to the dispiriting conclusion, “There is no such thing as popular culture.”

III. ATTEMPTS AT A NEW DEFINITION

We can, however, still be cheerful in our search for the popular. At this point, I would like to venture a new way of looking at popular culture, which may serve less as a functional definition than as a heuristic tool. As indicated by the “Toward” in my title, I do not hope to give the “answer” to the koan of popular culture. What I would like to do is to sketch out a couple of possible approaches and some tentative definitions. My purpose is to hang up a few piñatas big enough for everyone to take a swing at. Whether they are filled with candy remains to be seen.

First, we may have more luck if we turn away from a Marxist model (with a focus on production) to a more Weberian model (with a focus on consumption) and turn from class to status.

Nearly all discussions of popular culture rightly begin with Marx, but that means that in essence our procedure has been to isolate (if only implicitly) whatever we think is “the people,” that is, a class, and then see what objects and practices are associated with it. Yet “class” is a tricky concept at the best of times. Marx notoriously failed to provide a definition, and most subsequent discussions of popular culture have run aground on these shoals.

Weber turned our attention to status. In his most succinct summation: “With some over-simplification, one might thus say that ‘classes’ are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas ‘status

linguistic theory and Gramsci’s (a Sardinian’s) views on the formation of a national language. See below.

58. Storey, Cultural Theory, 9. So already in Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, and Other Essays (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 299: “One important consequence of the new sensibility (with its abandonment of the Matthew Arnold idea of culture) has already been alluded to—namely, that the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture seems less and less meaningful.” Fredric Jameson, in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster Port (Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 112, lamented “the effacement of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” as one of the principal markers of the postmodern condition; see a revised version in The Cultural Turn (London: Verso, 1998), 1-20. See also Strinati, Popular Culture, 204-238.


60. Fiske, Reading, 27, in particular seems willing to entertain “the suggestion that production may be essentially proletarian and consumption bourgeois. . . . Consumption, however, is a more bourgeois act; it appears to support, rather than threaten bourgeois values.”

61. See Marx’s sketchy remarks at Capital, vol. 3, ch. 52. For the difficulties of “class” in the ancient world, see, for example, M. I. Finley, The Ancient Economy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 49-51, who also turns to Weber’s status but not explicitly to his formulation of the concept. See Ian Morris’s Foreword to the updated edition (xiii-xxxvi).
groups’ are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special ‘styles of life’ (Lebensstil).”


64. For example, Muchembled, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France*, 11-13, who confines his survey to the categories of “thought” (recovered from the observations of literate outsiders) and “actions” (dance, riots), but leaving aside “the material aspects of existence.”

65. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45: “the ‘object,’ that is, a thing that is no longer just a product or a commodity, but essentially a sign in a system of signs of status,” referring to Baudrillard. Cf. Baudrillard’s statement (the earliest and therefore perhaps the clearest), “The System of Objects,” in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster [1968] (Stanford: Stanford University Press., 1988), 16-17: “It is as if the differential system of consumption significantly helped to distinguish: 1) Within the consumer, categories of needs which now have but a distant relation with the person as a lived being; 2) Within society, categories or ‘status groups,’ recognizable in a specific collection of objects. The hierarchized gamuts of objects and products play exactly the same role as the set of distinguishing values played in previous times: the foundation of group morality. . . . Objects are categories of objects which quite tyrannically induce categories of persons. They undertake the policing of social meanings, and the significations they engender are controlled.” This is the “sign value” of an object: Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, transl. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 63-69. For the less opaque, anthropologists’ approach, see Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 59, on “Goods as an information system”: “Goods are primarily needed . . . for making visible and stable the categories of culture. It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators.”
tell us about the culture of the people who used them as symbolic counters.\textsuperscript{66} Just as archaeologists distinguish “The Beaker Folk,” we may look to “The Garden Gnome People.”

In modern society, the goal (or the effect) of market capitalism is to reduce us all to uniform consumers, while still encouraging us to ravenous acquisition in order to differentiate ourselves from the herd of our fellow consumers.\textsuperscript{67} An approach through objects and status may help us to notice with renewed interest the way in which our societies and others minutely codify and rigorously enforce status differences in clothes, housing, spatial positions, commensality, or inter-marriage.

Second, with our eyes on production, rather than looking at capital in the purely economic sense, we can turn to Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital.\textsuperscript{68} Like “hegemony,” “cultural” or “symbolic capital” is one of those terms that the author never quite got around to (and later studiously avoided) defining. One of his earliest statements is perhaps the most direct: “By this is meant the structure of the distribution of instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed.”\textsuperscript{69} Bourdieu subsequently divided cultural capital into three types:

\textsuperscript{66}. In an early contribution, Natalie Zemon Davis, “Introduction: The Historian and Popular Culture,” in Beauroy and Gargan, \textit{The Wolf and the Lamb}, 9-10, contrasted the pioneering researches of Jules Michelet’s \textit{Le peuple} (1846) and Charles Nisard’s \textit{Histoire des livres populaires} (1854-64). In Michelet “culture is characterized, as anthropologists might, by its relation to the lives and purposes of a specified social group. To unearth it, one starts with a community and studies it, or one starts with some institution or form of behavior known to be part of that community.” In Nisard’s approach, “one starts with a cultural artifact, tries to locate it in a network of relationships—who created it? who communicated it? who hears, reads, sings, sees or acts it?—and then tries to assess its meaning.”

\textsuperscript{67}. Fiske, \textit{Understanding}, 32: “In the consumer society of late capitalism, everyone is a consumer. Consumption is the only way of obtaining the resources for life, whether these resources be material-functional (food, clothing, transport) or semiotic-cultural (the media, education, language).” Baudrillard, “The System of Objects,” 11, 20: “A fixed class of ‘normal’ consumers has been created that coincides with the whole population. . . . The fact that a system of interpretation (lecture) and recognition is today applied by everyone, or that value signs are completely socialized and objectified does not necessarily lead to true ‘democratization.’ On the contrary it appears that the constraint of a single referent only acts to exacerbate the desire for discrimination. Within the very framework of this homogeneous system, we can observe the unfolding of an always renewed obsession with hierarchy and distinction.”

\textsuperscript{68}. An excellent and approachable overview of the origins, development, and uses of the term can be found in Michele Lamont and Annette Lareau, “Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments,” \textit{Sociological Theory} 6 (1988), 153-168.

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which . . . confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. 

Now obviously, cultural capital can differ: it can be broad or narrow, high and low. But just as a billion dollars is more fungible than cowry shells (generally speaking), so higher cultural capital is more fungible than low (generally speaking), and Bourdieu tends to view “cultural capital” as the capital necessary to succeed in an advanced consumer society. Yet, cultural capital may actually be easier to see in pre-industrial societies. Taking Homeric society for example, we find embodied capital in bard and seer, objectified in arms and gift exchange, institutionalized in kingship and priesthood.

We can now offer our first approximation of a definition of popular culture. Tentative Definition I:

- Popular culture consists of the productions of those without cultural capital, of those without access to the approved means of symbolic and cultural production.

That is, popular culture does not require the long training and apprenticeships of embodied cultural capital (The Ramones inspired The Clash because of their lack of training), nor the investment in acquiring objectified cultural capital (all you need is a guitar, or a voice); most importantly it stands explicitly outside the blessing of institutionalized capital (music conservatories, master classes). This formulation can be broadened to include both production and consumption. Tentative Definition II:

- Popular culture consists of products that require little cultural capital either to produce or else to consume.

It might be useful to work through the possible intersections of different levels of cultural capital schematically: 1) Some things require a high level of cultural capital to produce and a high level of cultural capital to consume: opera, modern art, modern poetry. 2) Very few things, however, seem to need only a low level of cultural capital to produce but a high level of cultural capital to consume. 72

70. “Forms of Capital,” 243; Education, Culture, 47. In embodied cultural capital, “external wealth [is] converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus,” which “unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility” cannot be instantly transferred. Examples include “culture, cultivation, Bildung” (“Forms of Capital,” 244, 246-247 = Education, Culture, 48, 50), that is, education, apprenticeships, and linguistic competencies as well. Objects—reified, concretized cultural capital—can be transferred but 1) they usually require economic capital (cash) to acquire them and 2) they need embodied capital to “consume” them.


72. Though much of popular cultural studies consists of subjecting the former to the latter. One might think of certain games like chess and soccer here. However, though one’s appreciation of the game can grow, what one acquires is just more “soccer capital” or “chess capital,” which is not transferable to any other game or sphere, whereas learning about Greek mythology can increase one’s enjoyment of opera, painting, literature, as well as video games. A mark, therefore, of what constitutes “high culture” may be simply that enjoyment increases as cultural capital increases.
Some things may require a high level of cultural capital to produce but only a low level of cultural capital to consume: TV, movies, and so on, all need large amounts of cultural as well as technical expertise to produce but little to consume. 4) Many things need only a low level of cultural capital to produce \textit{and} to consume (folk art, folk dances, punk, raves). So using musical events as an example, we might create a chart of the differing investments of cultural capital.

The intersection of both economic capital and cultural capital shows similar, but slightly different results, for a \textit{Schubertiad} takes little in the way of economic capital but needs a good deal of cultural capital both to produce and consume:

Popular culture thus includes those things that require only small amounts of cultural capital to produce (dances, whether folk or raves), and also the things that require only small amounts of cultural capital to consume (movies, sports). Television, on the other hand, while it takes large amounts of money and power to produce, needs virtually no cultural capital to consume. Thus we can distinguish
mass-culture within popular culture (a need for high levels of economic investment) without having to distinguish it from popular culture.\textsuperscript{7}

This observation is distinct from the aesthetic condemnation usually implicit in Bennett and Storey’s definition 2 above (“the culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture”) and explicit in the culturalism of Arnold to Adorno & Co. Just as you can spend hundreds of millions of dollars and produce a bad movie or millions of dollars and produce a bad opera, so productions involving little economic or cultural capital can be good and beautiful. Aesthetic value is independent of capital investment. Simplicity of form and clarity of function can have a positive aesthetic value of its own.

It is also distinct from Bourdieu’s somewhat naïve division between a “popular aesthetic” and a “high aesthetic,” where “working-class people” value function over form, are incapable of Kantian disinterestedness, and can make only moral judgments about art.\textsuperscript{74} Nonsense: people make complex aesthetic arguments about TV, movies, video games, and pop music all the time, and their producers pay well-founded respect to those judgments.\textsuperscript{75} Popular art can be good or bad, well or poorly done. More importantly, people argue pleasurably about which is which.

IV. ARTWORLD

This idea can be refined by looking at Arthur Danto’s concept of the “artworld” and George Dickie’s expansion of Danto’s insight into what he calls “the institutional theory of art.”

The dominant question for twentieth-century art (and twenty-first, too, it seems) has been “Is it art?” The question was asked (and to my mind definitively answered) for the first time in 1917, when Marcel Duchamp bought a urinal, turned it on its side, and signed it “R. Mutt,” the first of his readymades. From that point on, various artists have been asking the question, “Is it art?” of, say, a can of excrement (Piero Manzoni, \textit{Merda d’artista}, 1961), a pile of bricks (Carl Andre, \textit{Equivalent VIII}, 1966), plus spin paintings, spot paintings, butterfly paintings, and the occasional pickled shark (Damien Hirst: \textit{The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living}, 1991).

Faced with one of these challenging objects, Andy Warhol’s stack of Brillo boxes (1964), Danto wrote one of the most influential papers in the history of aes-

\textsuperscript{73} One result of the information revolution is that this pattern is breaking down. Records used to require a studio to produce and a label to distribute. Relatively inexpensive capital equipment, software, and the internet have allowed many groups to bypass the authorities and go straight to the consumer. With blogs, every man his own newspaper; with podcasting, every man his own TV station. With the people seizing the means of production, we see the rise of both democratic authorization (ratings on YouTube and Amazon) as well as an increased importance of the gatekeepers. With tens of thousands of self-published books, blogs, albums, to choose from, who will guide me to what I like the most?


\textsuperscript{75} Frith, “The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent.”
thetics, “The Artworld.” He asked, “Why the Brillo people cannot manufacture art and why Warhol cannot but make artworks.” His answer was: “What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is. . . . Nor would these things be artworks without the theories and the histories of the Artworld.” 76 The Artworld, then, is that which makes art Art.

Danto’s essay was somewhat impressionistic, and he never defined what he meant by the artworld. Dickie picked up Danto’s term and in Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis formed this much-debated and analyzed definition of art:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is
(1) an artifact,
(2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld). 77

The artworld in turn is an institution that provides a “framework for the presenting of particular works of art”:

The core personnel of the artworld is a loosely organized, but nevertheless related, set of persons including artists (understood to refer to painters, writers, composers), producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters for newspapers, critics for publications of all sorts, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others. These are the people who keep the machinery of the artworld working and thereby provide for its continuing existence. 78

In short (though I do not think the connection has been made clearly) the blessing of the artworld acts as a type of “performative utterance” in Austin’s sense. 79 To install a urinal on a pedestal in an art museum thereby makes it an art object.

The artworld, then, functions as a form of Bourdieu’s institutionalized cultural capital. Bourdieu was thinking primarily of education (degrees and so forth), but his remarks apply to all sorts of academies and authenticating bodies whose purpose is to put the guinea’s stamp on cultural rank of one form or other.


The objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications is one way of neutralizing some of the properties it derives from the fact that, being embodied, it has the same biological limits as its bearer. This objectification is what makes the difference between the capital of the autodidact, which may be called into question at any time . . . and the cultural capital academically sanctioned by legally guaranteed qualifications, formally independent of the person of their bearer. With the academic qualification, a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, social alchemy produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively possesses.\footnote{Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 247-48 = Education, Culture, 50-51.}

To restate, Damien Hirst’s spin paintings are \textit{art} (and your child’s are not), because his are sold by \textit{art} galleries, to \textit{art} collectors, guided by \textit{art} investment counselors, for millions of dollars (up until recently), as reported in the \textit{Art Newspaper}. Whether Dickie’s view is a complete and necessary definition of “art” we can debate later. It is certainly a profound insight.\footnote{For an overview of critiques, see R. J. Yanal, “The Institutional Theory of Art,” in Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, II, 508-512.}

\section*{V. FROM ARTWORLD TO POPULAR CULTURE}

For our purposes, I am interested in reversing this important observation. I want to introduce the term “authorize” in all its etymological force, that which turns someone into an \textit{auctor} (author, creator) with \textit{auctoritas} (author-ity). If art is what is authorized by an artworld, we may venture Tentative Definition III:

\begin{itemize}
\item “Popular art” is that which is \textit{not} authorized by the artworld.
\end{itemize}

A sign that we may be on the right track is the fact that when unauthorized art is recognized by the artworld—Martín Ramírez, Henry Darger, and other outsider artists come to mind—it immediately becomes “art,” and is sold by \textit{art} galleries, and so on, who guarantee its resale value.

We can now make this more general, not just for art but for culture in general. The distinguishing characteristic of popular culture is that it is \textit{unauthorized}. To be aphoristic (Tentative Definition IV):

\begin{itemize}
\item Popular culture is unauthorized culture.
\end{itemize}

That is, popular culture consists of the paintings of those not recognized as artists by the artworld, the poems of those not recognized by whoever is responsible for recognizing poets, the medicine of those not recognized as physicians, the religion of those not recognized as priests, to which we might add the scholarship of those not recognized as scholars by the proper institutions. This definition of popular culture as unauthorized culture may recall Bakhtin’s repeated use of “unofficial” to describe the popular culture of comic and carnivalesque forms of medieval life.\footnote{Mikhail Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World}, transl. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 6-7: “All the comic forms were transferred, some earlier and others later, to a unofficial level. There they acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered more complex, until they became the expression of folk consciousness, of folk culture.” 11: “As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and}
Sunday painter into an artist, a writer into an author, that confer authority, that make the scribbler authorized.  

For the historian, the growth of institutional capital may be the most interesting topic of all. We can see embodied capital (shamans, movie stars) and objectified capital (handaxes, computers) from the earliest human records. But the ever more powerful role of guilds, colleges, licensing bodies, of institutionalized capital (medicine is an obvious case), has not been thoroughly explored. One consequence of defining popular culture as unauthorized culture is to make us look for the authorities who separate high from popular culture. One mark of high culture is that groups of critics or other types of authorizing/licensing bodies interpose themselves between the market and the consumer. In classical antiquity we note the rise of the Alexandrian critics, the Roman grammaticus. For popular culture the authority is the market itself. A popular record is one that sells well (Bennett and Storey’s Definition 1). It does so without any blessing of an artworld: the song’s popularity in all senses comes from word of mouth, sharing, airplay. There are rock critics but it is doubtful they affect consumption in any significant fashion. Few people rush out to buy an album because it is praised in The New Yorker.

This last point brings up the phenomenon of “selling out,” which vividly demonstrates the role of authorization in creating the popular. An artist may sell out from above by prostituting his high aesthetic ideals to the demands of the crass market, and so on. Damien Hirst again leads the postmodern moment by making market manipulation part of the art form itself. More interesting, however, is the charge of selling out from below. The history of the cycles of music, for example, shows very clearly the workings of popular culture as unauthorized utterance. Punk begins as rebellion, DIY music, proles with guitars, proud of its lack of skills, rejoicing in its freedom from cultural capital. Then it gets record contracts, movie deals, academics writing articles about it. Punk has sold out. Yale has given its imprimatur to The Anthology of Rap. Popular culture ceases to be popular when it is authorized. Recognition is death.

---

83. One might compare Bourdieu’s use of “consecration,” as in Field of Cultural Production, 121 (also 112): “cultural consecration—i.e. legitimacy . . . Various instances of consecration . . . consist, on the one hand, of institutions which conserve the capital of symbolic goods, such as museums; and, on the other hand, of institutions (such as the educational system) which ensure the reproduction of agents imbued with the categories of action, expression, conception, imagination, perception, specific to the ‘cultivated disposition.’” However, for Bourdieu consecration applies almost exclusively to high culture and is primarily a monopoly held by the state as a means of concealing and maintaining economic and class differences. See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “From Ruling Class to Field of Power: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu,” Theory, Culture, and Society 10, no. 1 (August 1993), 39-40.

84. Gangsta rap was interesting in being about selling out right from the beginning. The subject matter included the details of their contracts, product placements, quarrels with their agents, all the trimmings of business.

One effect, paradoxically, of our studies may be the elimination of popular culture—or its reduction to the ephemeral, something that withers in the light. Our very gaze kills it. Like anthropologists, we contaminate what we study. Hitchcock was popular culture. Then he was taken up by Truffaut and Cahiers du cinéma. Now Žižek proclaims, “We are dying in flames because we don’t have enough Hitchcock. That is the best antidote to nationalism.”

A weighty burden for popular film, but then Hitchcock is no longer popular (in any sense), and is shown only in art houses.

VI. PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

This definition of popular culture as “unauthorized culture” raises, I fear, far more questions than it answers (which may be the mark of a useful idea), but it opens up potentially fruitful lines of investigation. I can foresee five effects.

1. We can reform the question. Thus we need no longer ask, “What attributes of form, function, aesthetics, production, or consumption, define ‘the popular’?” Rather, we can try to identify the institutions that have the authority to mark something as art, music, medicine, orthodox, edible. Then we can ask the even more intriguing question, “And how did they get that authority?” Even as Marxism asked how the ruling classes first acquired their monopoly on power and capital, we can ask, “Who died and made you a critic?”

2. The second is to create a tool to localize different types of popular culture. Since the definitions are negative there is a tendency to toss all of popular culture into one hopper. But rock and TV, Elvis memorial china and pigeon-fancying, are all popular in quite different ways and to quite different groups. This is because they are created as Other by differing authorities. Each field of cultural production has its equivalent of the artworld, and each level of cultural activity, too. Those who have the power to authorize will be our best guides to understanding and identifying a cultural area. Thus we may be able to identify different genera of popularity, depending on the types of authority they lack or refuse or subvert.

Not only genera but also species: some popular cultures are more popular than others. There are heresies, and heresies within heresies. Religion is a useful model. For a millennium the Catholic Church claimed a sole authority to determine dogma, reading, and rite. The Protestant revolution was unauthorized utterance, unleashing and creating popular culture. Yet, the Anabaptists in Zürich were drowned by their fellow Protestants for their unauthorized utterances. Punk was the Anabaptism of rock: not just a rebellion against bourgeois society (though very much that) but also a rebellion against rock itself for not being rebellious enough. Who then within popular culture or a subculture claims the authority to decide what counts?

3. The third is a result of the above. Looking at differing types of constitutive authority and hence differing types of popular culture may help us resist the temp-

---

87. Like dialects or sociolects, different forms of popular culture are autonomous with respect to one another other but heteronomous with respect to the dominant culture. See Peter Trudgill, Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society, 4th ed. (London: Penguin, 2000), 4.
tation to treat “the people” as a lump. This is a strong tendency in cultural theory, in part dating from its socialist origins. Treating “the people” as a single thing has seemed to be a desirable political goal, but it can confuse uniting the people with homogenizing the people. A number of theorists recognize the contradiction but at the same time wish to elide it:

“The people” refers neither to everyone nor to a single group within society but to a variety of social groups which, although differing from one another in other respects (their class position or the particular snuggles in which they are most immediately engaged), are distinguished from the economically, politically and culturally powerful groups within society and are hence potentially capable of being united—of being organised into “the people versus the power bloc”—if their separate struggles are connected.

We are all different but the same in being against Them. Now all we need is to figure out who “They” are so We can be against Them.

In part, however, taking the people or popular culture as a single thing risks merely reproducing the view of the elite, to whom we all look alike. Identifying different authorities may also help us resist creating a monolithic Them as well as an indivisible Us. It may help us to locate competing magisteria. And if that serves a political goal of setting the authorities against one another, more fun for all.

4. The fourth is to bring back ABBA. Within popular culture, some areas are more studied and praised than others, notably those that fit an idea of struggle and resistance. Frith was right to note the absence from many discussions of popular culture of some of the most popular things of all, the “middlebrow: the easy listener and light reader and Andrew Lloyd Webber fan.”

88. Bennett, “The Politics of the ‘Popular,’” 20. Cf. Fiske, Understanding, 24: “All these reformulations are made within a structure of power relations, all social allegiances have not only a sense of with whom, but also of against whom: indeed, I would argue that the sense of oppositionality, the sense of difference, is more determinant than that of similarity, of class identity, for it is shared antagonisms that produce the fluidity that is characteristic of the people in elaborated societies.”

89. Bourdieu, Pascalian Meditations, 76, is scathing (if a tad unfair): “The cult of ‘popular culture’ is often simply a purely verbal and inconsequential (and therefore pseudo-revolutionary) inversion of the class racism which reduces working-class practices to barbarism or vulgarity. Just as some celebrations of femininity simply reinforce male domination, so this ultimately very comfortable way of respecting ‘the people,’ which, under the guise of exalting the working class, helps to enclose it in what it is by converting privation into a choice or an elective accomplishment, provides all the profits of a show of subversive, paradoxical generosity, while leaving things as they are, with one side in possession of its truly cultivated culture (or language), which is capable of absorbing its own distinguished subversion, and the other with its culture or language devoid of any social value and subject to abrupt devaluations.”

90. Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing,” 238 = Storey, Reader, 486-487: “Class cultures tend to intersect and overlap in the same field of struggle. The term ‘popular’ indicates this somewhat displaced relationship of culture to classes. More accurately, it refers to that alliance of classes and forces which constitute the ‘popular classes.’ The culture of the oppressed, the excluded classes: this is the area to which the term ‘popular’ refers us. And the opposite side to that—the side with the cultural power to decide what belongs and what does not—is, by definition, not another ‘whole’ class, but that other alliance of classes, strata and social forces which constitute what is not ‘the people’ and not the ‘popular classes’: the culture of the power-bloc. The people versus the power-bloc: this, rather than ‘class-against-class,’ is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarized. Popular culture especially is organized around the contradiction: the people versus the power-bloc.”

91. Frith, in “The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent,” 103-104, characterizes this position as
two classes of the unauthorized: those that refuse the imprimatur, and those that ignore it. Punk is an example of the former, video games of the latter. Rock revels in its exclusion; gamers simply don’t care.

5. The fifth is to reintroduce race and gender into the discussion. Despite a growing body of theory, an economic and class basis of defining the popular is often taken for granted. The difficulties of applying a Marxist theory of “class” to women as a whole or to racial groups has always been a major problem for some forms of theory. Looking at popular culture as unauthorized culture can at least allow us to note that different authorities are responsible for declaring what is suitable (or not) for women (chicklit), blacks (hip-hop), the working class (Burberry), or youth (skateboarding). The assumption that women and other minorities have less cultural capital (or should be denied cultural capital) and that therefore their culture is automatically popular culture is one that needs to be questioned.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

A precise definition of popular culture is elusive, perhaps delusive. Even the more careful considerations exclude much that we would like to include or include things that we feel are not somehow really “popular.” Nearly all common definitions are inapplicable to any but recent times. Definitions of popular culture as 1) quantitatively superior, 2) qualitatively inferior, 3) mass culture, 4) a product of “the people,” 4) a battlefield for hegemony, or 6) a chimera to deconstructed by postmodernism, have much to offer, but none is completely satisfying.

However, by looking to patterns of consumption and Lebensstile, we may be able to create an archaeological, deductive picture of class and popular culture. Further, defining popular culture as products that require little cultural capital and as unauthorized culture may guide our thoughts into fresh woods and pastures new. It directs us to look for differing forms of authorization across differing fields of cultural production. It also helps us distinguish three levels of discourse, ancient and modern. One: the unauthorized utterance, the voice of the subaltern, of those


92. Visibly absent from my own account until now.

93. Strinati, Popular Culture, 160-201; Storey, Cultural Theory, 103-128.


95. Ray B. Browne, “Popular Culture—New Notes toward a Definition,” in The Popular Culture Reader, ed. Jack Nachbar et al., 3rd ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 13: “Popular Culture is the culture of the people, of all the people, as distinguished from a select, small elite group. It is also the dominant culture of minorities—of ethnic, social, religious, or financial minorities—simply because their way of life is, by and large, not accepted into the elite culture of the dominant group.” A detailed criticism of the contradictions in this definition by Rose, “Rereading the English Common Reader,” 57. So, too, Fiske, Understanding, 47: “So women, regardless of their class, can and do ‘participate’ in soap opera in a way that parallels what Bourdieu has identified as a mark of proletarian culture, but that can be generalized out to refer to the culture of the subordinate, or popular culture. . . . Women’s tastes and proletarian tastes are similar not because women are proletarian or because the proletariat is feminine, but because both are disempowered classes and thus can easily align themselves with the practices of popular culture, for the people are formed by social allegiances among the subordinate.”
without access to cultural capital (Pompeian graffiti, lead curse tablets). This is a world of face-to-face meetings (from re-enactors to raves) but also increasingly one of unauthorized means of communication, often small-scale but potentially unlimited: zines, chatrooms, listservs, Second Life. Two: the authorized utterance in search of as large an audience as possible (Aristophanes, Plautus). Here we find television, movies, advertising. This is the place of mass culture, commercial, commodity, consumer culture within popular culture. Three: the elite speaking to the elite (Theognis, Tacitus).  

Looking at all that exists outside the various art-worlds may help us to understand other worlds and include much more of human history in our search for the popular.

*University of Cincinnati*

96. Bourdieu’s label of “production-for-producers” (for example, *Field of Cultural Production*, 46) is too narrowly economic (and conspiratorial) in outlook, ignoring the elements of consumption, enjoyment, solidarity, as well as evangelical fervor. It may, however, remind readers of Nietzsche’s aphorism in *The Gay Science*, transl. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 157-158, no. 102, that philology exists to serve “those rare human beings (even if one does not see them) who really know how to use such valuable books—presumably those who write, or could write, books of the same type. . . . All of it is work *in usum Delphinorum*.”