Comprehensive area definition
Reading popular music: cultural politics and social movements
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Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, and perhaps as early as the eighteenth, "culture" has been, in its Western context in any case, one of the most contested fields of both social and political association and practice. Culture is a term and a concept heavily laden with contradiction, paradox, and tension in the ways in which it has been perceived and mobilised historically. It stands at the centre of the early formation of the modern nation-state and national self-consciousness and operates as the basis for both individual and group formation and identification. It is often said to form the core of Western processes political and economic expansionism throughout the last two centuries, but is also describable as a set of aesthetic objects. It is at once said to be a form of the consolidation of repressive social and political power, and one of the more fertile sites for social and political resistance, opposition and reform. Its past is clearly chequered, though on the streets and in the lecture halls, one often hears the term rolling easily and unproblematically off many a wagging tongue. Young (1995), Readings (1996) and Eagleton (2000), in quite different contexts, point towards many of the ways in which the concept has been constituted, applied, shifted, articulated with institutional power and brought to bear upon the location and definition of social groups, and the organisation and control of such groups. Its etymological origins stem from, on the one hand, agricultural practice, lending it a sense of the organic as associated with particular physical, historical and social geographies (the "blood and soil" variety of culture invoked at the moment of the consolidation of Western nation-states and the growth of "national-cultures"). On the other hand, it finds origins in descriptions of social relationships and associations built around bodies of knowledge and practice and usually having strong institutional (and initially religious, as in *cultus*) connotations which bear within them relatively rigid in-group/out-group distinctions, thus linking cultural association with the ordering of social subjects and identity formation in relation to gender, class, ethnicity, history, knowledge and practice. Furthermore, and this in a more fully blown modern context, "culture" has also come to represent the embodiment of social and particularly aesthetic practices as they are made available within a given society. This is the rather familiar formulation of "culture-as-object" that allows both internal social distinctions to be made ("there really is no culture in Fredericton") and comes to define individuals with respect of the. agglomeration of objects and aesthetic tags with which they surround themselves ("my, isn't he/she cultured" or "Where did you put my Marilyn Manson t-shirt?").

It is in the context of this triple-meaning (identification, formative practice, objective environment) that culture can be interpreted formally (if differentially vis-à-vis its content) as one of the primary sites of political contestation between what is seen as the "natural" product of human association and what constitutes social relationships in the context of specifically mediated power differentials within a given society. In plain English, the layers of meaning inherent in "culture" lend it to an array of different interpretations and mobilisations in processes of identity formation, the reproduction of power relationships, the organisation of social practices, and the ordering of the members of a given society both with respect of each other and of that society's various "others". "Culture" can be imagined, in this context, as a field of practice and organisation through which associations and practices taken to be "organic" operate within sets of more or less institutionalised power relations that span a society and are reproduced in the everyday practices that define that society as a closed unit. Culture can thus also be imagined as a set of border relations between the reproduction of social power and power differentials on the one hand, and struggles for social reform or resistance to those relations on the other. In this latter formulation, culture is not imagined as a static, definitive set of objects and practices, but as a dynamic space where groups and individuals negotiate their varying positions and work towards social change (or social reproduction). It is from such a definition of culture that a sense of "cultural politics" has emerged in scholarly criticism since the 1950s (beginning perhaps earlier with the rather isolationist cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School), though it must be understood that such cultural politics should not be read entirely as "left resistance" to the hegemonic ordering practices of modern institutions (science, culture industries, capitalism, industrialism, the state). Indeed, in many ways, the cultural criticism bearing dominance in scholarly traditions today largely stems from a historical moment, the so-called "counter-culture" which came to its most visible apex

in 1968, which in many ways is no longer tenable *as* a "counter-culture", as Epstein (1991) points out. If we still live in a world marked by institutionalised, regularised, normalised power relations across gender, race and class, it would appear that this has, at least in part, to do with a certain reification or institutionalisation of left cultural politics as such, and the ability of modern institutions to operate (in Giddens phrase) as "learning institutions". But the location of "culture" as a site of political resistance does not, as so often appears to be the case in certain versions of cultural analysis, guarantee that now we can simply breathe a sigh of relief and leave the political up to the political scientists. Thus, what has come to be known as "cultural politics" in a certain vein (largely stemming from the Marxian criticism of the Frankfurt School), depends on adopting a perspective that situates theory a priori of practice, and this in exactly the same way as the homogenising and hegemonic traditions of cultural theory that the "cultural politicians" (to coin a phrase) attack. Thus culture either becomes a morass of alienating, atomising things and practices, creating a docile populace and eroding the solid foundations of "serious culture", or a great festival of liberation and active political resistance. While this is, admittedly, an oversimplification, and while both appraisals of culture and cultural politics remain important, there is much room to move beyond these borders.

The problem arising from this is not simply one of defining a course for positive social change, or being able to locate it in particular cultural practices, but of defining what might constitute a social movement in the first place, and, once one defines such an entity, how to go about understanding it as a political movement. For if left cultural politics, as a politics of resistance that is largely hegemonic in the West (and perhaps only relevant within the West), remains viable, it is only because it has come formally to operate on the very same basis as the hegemonic "culture" it emerged in opposition to in the first place. The polarities of domination and resistance being firmly set both in the sky and on the ground, so to speak, how can one evaluate cultural practice in other terms than those offered by a pat liberal conception of culture on the one hand, or institutionalised theoretical Marxism on the other? And furthermore, how does "culture" continue to operate on the border between domination and resistance, and (in a parallel formulation) theory and practice? Put simply, how is one to read cultural movements in mediation between available social theory and a vast array of social and cultural practices? One answer to this question is provided by Clifford Geertz (1997), in his proposal that culture, as an active array of enacted relations between groups and individuals, be read in the practices of specific groups, and that these pactices come to give analysis its theoretical content. What this implies for understanding cultural movements is that, in the words of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, we recognise that those we are studying are themselves the specialists (what they call "engineer-sociologists in the context of the social study of technological development), and that we (the academics) must learn from them. A growing body of literature around the subject of culture – from anthropology, from writing around social movements, from post-colonial studies and from feminism – attempts to do just this. The growth of a number of what Homi Bhabha refers to as "third terms", or "third spaces" now provides a set of alternative viewpoints from which to both critique Western conservative and neo-Marxist cultural politics and analyse tripartite "culture" in its complexities.

This examination will consider literature around culture as outlined above, taking into account literature definitive of culture in the modern Western sense outlined above, literature around "cultural politics" in the Marxian vein, and literature that attempts to come up with alternative means for analysing culture. These theoretical readings will be complimented, extended and brought into focus by a set of applied studies focussing on music as a cultural and political practice. Music will serve here as the empirical basis upon which some understanding of "culture", "cultural politics" and notions of power and resistance can be seen to be active within cultural objects and practices. Focussing on music will also provide a point whereupon to extend and examine the notion of culture as a border relation between subjects involved in relations of power. The examination readings will be divided as follows:

1. **theories of culture and cultural politics:** this subsection comprises a necessarily limited set of readings that form a historical survey of theories of culture in the abstract, both from a Western constitutive perspective (nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts of culture – Hegel, Arnold, Humboldt, Tylor), a left critical perspective (largely resulting in a scholarly conception of

"cultural politics" – Marx, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Williams, the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies), and finally literature dealing with culture and interpretation or problems of scholarship around theories of culture (Geertz, Berman, Bourdieu, Eagleton). The purpose of this subsection is both to familiarise myself with what is constitutive all around as substantive Western debates on culture as a practice, as a site of social identification and as a set of objects.

2. **general theory of social movements:** This subsection deals with various critical interventions, still at the level of theory, that come out of traditions other than modern Western scholarship or its critique from the cultural left (also predominantly Western). Central here is scholarship coming out of post-colonial studies (Bhabha, Said, Friere, Fanon) and feminism (Epstein, Probyn, Oakley, etc.). Accompanying these are some texts around the general theorisation of movements for social change (Angus, Brecher, Wallerstein, etc.). The purpose of this subsection is to gain some familiarity with alternative theoretical approaches to the study of culture, to begin to understand how both dominant Western schools of thought have been enhanced or critiqued, and to begin to build a general idea of the potential scope of what constitutes "cultural politics" in the theoretical sense.

3. **cases from the cultural politics of popular music:** This subsection deals with representative samples from the vast literature on music and society, some of it stemming from what I have termed "modern Western" perspectives, others growing out of left cultural critique, and still others forming from the other critical traditions outlined in the first two subsections of the examination. The purpose of this section is two-fold – on the one hand to gain some understanding of the range of mediation between theories of culture and its concrete cultural practice in a limited empirical field, and on the other hand to come to some understanding of the complications involved in the translation of theory into practice and practice into theory. Historical scholarship on music and culture will be enhanced by samples of literature coming out of the left critical tradition as well as out of feminist and post-colonial critiques.

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