

Comment: (Popular) Culture as Product – Contingencies of Cultural Change

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The supposedly commercial products of the culture industry are increasingly facing sales difficulties because growing numbers of self-assertive consumers are downloading products at will, thus no longer following the given rules of the market. Not only multinational record companies, but also representatives of 'high' culture are adamant in their criticism of the current 'culture for free' tendency. The latter can hardly be characterized as profit-oriented – nor would they describe themselves that way – but they contend that bootleg copies are a threat to their livelihood, and that the culture of piracy paves the way for hare-brained mass products.¹ The discussion encompasses copyright laws and the ways consumers are appropriating cultural products as well as the question whether or not these tendencies will fundamentally change the production of culture. Such debates are charged with cultural criticism, but in essence of economic nature. In addition, the cultural sector is faced with the accusation of waning societal relevance. In the arts and features sections of newspapers and magazines, journalists and essayists bemoan that pop culture is no longer 'the voice and mirror of political and social change, like twenty or thirty years ago'.² Although popular culture may have evolved from its original return and distribution strategies as well as its constitutive (at least for some) connection to youth and protest movements, a medially conveyed, market-driven culture that is accessible to a wide audience remains a characteristic feature of modern societies and their self-perceptions.

In social and political science research, popular (as well as mass) phenomena are experiencing a boom of sorts.³ This research is turning to precisely the interplay among production and reception modes, production conditions, and contents and consumer interests that also appears so problematic in current

¹ Wolfgang Schneider, *Kostenloskultur ist unwürdig*, 22 June 2012, URL: <<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/urheberrecht/buchtage-berlin-kostenloskultur-ist-unwuerdig-11795593.html>>.

² Acht Statements zum Zustand des Pop, 31 December 2009, URL: <<http://sz-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/32011>> (quotation: Peter Saville). Cf. also Caroline Rothauge and Martin Lüthe's report on the conference 'Theorien des Populären', 18 February 2010, URL: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=3001>>.

³ Cf. as an example Alexa Geisthövel and Bodo Mrozek's report of the conference 'PopHistory. Perspektiven einer Zeitgeschichte des Populären', 31 January 2012, URL: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=4034>>; and Bodo Mrozek, *Popgeschichte*, Version: 1.0, in: *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 6 May 2010, URL: <<http://docupedia.de/zg/Popgeschichte>>.

public debates. Along the same line, Klaus Nathaus and C. Clayton Childress emphasize ‘the fundamental insight that symbolic objects do not simply emerge from a lifeworld, “Zeitgeist” or in reflection of larger socio-political developments. Instead, they are an outcome of the shifting interplay among actors within largely self-referential “production systems”’. From this starting point, they propose an integrative perspective on the preconditions for the production and impact of culture. They rely on a general definition of culture, but in the concrete examples they provide, the primary connotation is that of the culture industry and pop culture. I will therefore also focus on these phenomena in the following.

The reading of the history of cultural production Nathaus and Childress propose fits into current debates over the significance of actors and the situations in which they act for historiographical analysis.⁴ Moreover, like much recent research, this reading focuses on the contingency of symbolic production in the modern era. The authors emphasize the ruptures in the relationship between various cultural forms, general value developments, and consumer desires.⁵ Contrary to the assumption of a linear relationship between, e.g., ideologies and cultural practice, or the commercial production of culture and its reception, they highlight the openness of these relationships. Nathaus and Childress claim that almost 90 percent of the allegedly market-oriented products of the culture industry fail economically precisely because the targeted audience does not consume them – or, one might claim with regard to the discussion on internet piracy, does not consume them in the expected way.

However, Nathaus and Childress are not only concerned with strategies of supply and demand, but also with the manifold relationships between the formation, acquisition, impact, and changes of culture. The production of culture approach they take up, which was originally developed by the American sociologist Richard A. Peterson in the 1960s, at the time challenged the assumption that culture simply reflects social realities – hence questioning early on the notion that (popular) culture is the ‘voice and mirror’ of societal developments. Instead, this concept traces the inner logic of cultural production. In their critical reading of these sociological theories, Nathaus and Childress enlarge this perspective to incorporate in equal measure the production conditions, the contents, and the reception of culture.

On the basis of these considerations, the authors propose two central issues as a possible agenda for contemporary history: first, a stronger sensitivity of historical research toward contingency in processes of cultural change; and

⁴ E.g. Patrick Joyce, What is the Social in Social History?, in: *Past & Present* 206 (2010), pp. 213-248.

⁵ See Wolfgang Knöbl, *Die Kontingenz der Moderne. Wege in Europa, Asien und Amerika*, Frankfurt a.M. 2007; Peter Wagner, *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation. A New Sociology of Modernity*, Cambridge 2008; Thorsten Bonacker/Andreas Reckwitz (eds), *Kulturen der Moderne. Soziologische Perspektiven der Gegenwart*, Frankfurt a.M. 2007.

second, an awareness of the effects of cultural production on social developments. This implies a certain criticism toward an alleged mainstream in historical research, which the authors only briefly outline, and which purportedly only describes popular culture as an expression of broader trends, events, or debates in modern societies, not as a factor in its own right. Although this is an important objection, it devalues to a certain degree the insights of existing contemporary history research. The legitimization attempt of this research program is thus shaped more strongly than necessary by the intellectual trenches of sociological debates dating back to the 1960s to 80s. The underlying sociological presumptions and the contexts of their *own* production would first have to be regarded in historical perspective. This applies notably to concepts of ‘popular culture’ (and its sister – ‘mass culture’), which are particularly striking examples of constantly changing and ‘recharged’ strategies of definition and distinction.⁶

The production of culture approach can roughly be located in a contemporary international academic context that challenged the hegemonic – either materialist or idealist – assumption of the direct relationship between culture and social structure. It expressed the experiences of certain countercultural (but at the same time commercially successful) phenomena of the time. And it was the result of a stronger reception of European intellectual positions in US academe.⁷ French theorists such as Jean-Claude Passeron and Pierre Bourdieu, whom Petersen frequently cites, focused on action, but continued to presume an existing class structure. Moreover, they explored more traditional milieus of cultural production, such as the academic field or the bourgeois education system. American thinkers, however, developed praxeological concepts that defined culture as the essential element, the ‘genetic code’ underlying all social relations, and systematically shifted the focus of attention to the popular culture industry.⁸ Whereas Bourdieu and others saw the ‘popular’ mainly as a figure of social distinction, the production perspective decidedly sought out a path that would free cultural phenomena from the corset of social assignment – in turn defining them as constitutive for social structuration themselves.

What was not (or no longer) explicitly expressed here is also quite interesting. The proponents of the production of culture approach no longer used the term ‘masses’, which had long shaped the cultural discourse. They also avoided the contemporary idealization of the ‘popular’ as a form of social ‘Eigensinn’ –

⁶ Cf. among others Thomas Hecken, *Pop. Geschichte eines Konzepts 1955–2009*, Bielefeld 2009; *Journal of Modern European History* 10 (2012) issue 2: Mass Culture as Modernity. European Perceptions, 1900–1980, ed. Stefanie Middendorf and Ulrich Herbert.

⁷ Cf. Richard A. Peterson, Revitalizing the Culture Concept, in: *Annual Review of Sociology* 5 (1979), pp. 137–166, here p. 159.

⁸ Richard A. Peterson, The Production of Culture. A Prolegomenon, in: *American Behavioral Scientist* 19 (1976), pp. 669–684, here p. 677–678.

although they also took into consideration the active consumer of culture. In his early texts, Peterson still started from the analysis of the situations of counter- or subcultural milieus,⁹ while in his later texts he increasingly drew on the findings of organizational sociology and proposed a rather technocratic approach to the 'infrastructure' of cultural ascription. Peterson and others relied on the term 'culture industry' (which in Europe continued to be influenced by Adorno's cultural pessimism), abandoned its aesthetic value judgments, and gave it an economic connotation. The genetics metaphor, moreover, drew on the contemporary popularity of biological interpretations and suggested a social order that differed from earlier theories with their dualistic social semantics of 'high' and 'low' culture – without systematically conceptualizing this order.

This very cursory exploration already suggests how older contentions over meaning, intellectual trends, and certain blind spots are inscribed in the production of culture perspective. What are the analytical consequences of working with these sociological theories and the concepts of culture they imply, hence transferring them to different production contexts?¹⁰ Researchers should keep this question in mind if they want to avoid historical de-contextualization.

This also applies to the 'self-referentiality' of cultural production systems that Nathaus and Childress as well as Peterson and others presume. The sociological concept of genre they propose makes sense in order to strike a balance between the diversity of cultural variants and the analogies of cultural institutionalization processes – and in order to avoid the reductionism the authors criticize. But how can we conceive of the societal (although perhaps not the ghost of a 'Zeitgeist') as a possibility in this context at all? To me, this is a central challenge: to trace the texture of society – within and beyond the genre-specific communication processes of consumer cultures, specialist platforms, and 'field configuring events' – and tie in with current debates in contemporary history. This would give the historiography of popular culture the significance it is due in light of the importance of the objects it explores in modern societies – a significance that is still often denied.

We would first need to transcend empirical particularism, however. Contemporary history research can profit from Nathaus and Childress's contribution by organizing a more systematic exchange between the findings on pop culture, the mass media, and the culture industry in the twentieth century. The

⁹ Cf. Richard A. Peterson, Market and Moralists Censors of a Rising Art Form: Jazz, in: *Arts in Society* 4 (1967), pp. 253-264.

¹⁰ This problem is discussed in depth in Rüdiger Graf/Kim Christian Priemel, Zeitgeschichte in der Welt der Sozialwissenschaften. Legitimität und Originalität einer Disziplin, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59 (2011), pp. 479-508, and as a response to it Bernhard Dietz/Christopher Neumaier, Vom Nutzen der Sozialwissenschaften für die Zeitgeschichte. Werte und Wertewandel als Gegenstand historischer Forschung, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 60 (2012), pp. 293-304.

strong specialization of many scholars in specific phenomena such as film, press, comics, pop music, consumption, leisure time, or new media currently hinders such a dialogue. The empirical findings from these individual fields should be combined with pertaining theories from cultural sociology as well as with insights from the history of science or intellectual history. This would lead us beyond the original intentions of the sociological production perspective and reinforce the theoretical foundations of analyzing 'contingencies' in modern societies by generalizing the findings of historical research.

Such considerations are necessary not least of all because the question of how historiography can empirically respond to the omnipresent diagnosis of the 'contingency' of cultural processes in the modern era is still unresolved.¹¹ How can a discipline that is primarily based on causal narratives avoid the abstract assumptions of macro-theoretical narratives (e.g. superstructure/sub-structure), but at the same time offer plausible explanations that are not caught up in descriptions of individual actors and situations on the micro-level? Peterson's 'six point plan', as outlined by the authors, and the cited sociological genre studies provide a certain frame of reference, but they avoid the analytical hierarchization of influencing factors and the complex question of how coincidences, opportunities, and the uncertain outcomes of actions – hence the indeterminateness of historical situations – can be represented historiographically. On the basis of the considerations laid out here, we could for the time being only assess for individual cases whether or not the structural preconditions defined by states, the industrial market situation, consumer preferences, or individual career paths determined the contents and the success of cultural products. The shared discourses and sociopolitical trends in modern societies related to these seemingly contingent elements could, however, so far be glimpsed only very vaguely. In my view, the chance of historical research to make a significant contribution to understanding cultural industries and products in their social contexts lies in pursuing this very aspect.

For example, we might take up those debates that define an experimental attitude toward social relations as characteristic of European modernity in the twentieth century.¹² Was the production of popular culture also an active element in this overall tendency toward social ordering and steering mechanisms based on expertise, which is often assumed as constitutive for the contemporary history of Europe until the mid-1970s? Or are entirely different constel-

¹¹ Generally on this, see Markus Holzinger, *Kontingenz in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft. Dimensionen eines Leitbegriffs moderner Sozialtheorie*, Bielefeld 2007; Arnd Hoffmann, *Zufall und Kontingenz in der Geschichtstheorie. Mit zwei Studien zu Theorie und Praxis der Sozialgeschichte*, Frankfurt a.M. 2005.

¹² Lutz Raphael (ed.), *Theorien und Experimente der Moderne. Europas Gesellschaften im 20. Jahrhundert*, Köln 2012; Thomas Etzemüller (ed.), *Die Ordnung der Moderne. Social Engineering im 20. Jahrhundert*, Bielefeld 2009.

lations at work here? In diachronic perspective, how did the changing discourses surrounding the ‘popular’ and the ‘masses’ as well as ‘culture industry’ theories constitute reality in this context? How did what was said turn into something culturally concrete, for example via economic regulatory policies and cultural subsidization? Did the experience of crises, visions of the future, and thinking in terms of feasibility – aspects that have in recent years been explored for other areas – also shape cultural industries and cultural policy? How can the production of cultural genres be related to the formation of modern societies at large? For example, did popular culture genres, including their social impact, contribute to the specific chronology and to the ‘structural ruptures’ of the twentieth century? Were (popular) cultural companies and markets comparable to other economic institutions of the contemporary era in their cost management, property rights, and organizational cultures? Did they contribute to bringing about a general economization of life? And can historical research confirm equally for all phases of contemporary history the agency-oriented assumptions of the production perspective and more recent mass and popular culture theories?¹³ Or, in historical perspective, must we distinguish the periods of authoritarian ‘top-down’ systems in totalitarian societies from the more ‘open’ cultural spheres of capitalist-democratic systems?

Contemporary historians should seize the opportunity to integrate their insights into such comprehensive contexts – for the benefit of their own discipline as well as for the necessary interdisciplinary exchange that Nathaus and Childress exemplify. Historical findings that do not only differentiate, but also contextualize and theorize culture as a product form of the twentieth century can help refine sociological models. Historical analysis of the production of (popular) culture could thus yield important insights into the contingent construction of society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – which, not least of all, helps to critically reassess the omnipresent sociological narratives in this field.

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¹³ Based on the internet experience, these theories highlight culture consumers’ contingent sense of possibility even more strongly than Peterson et al., e.g., Michael Makropoulos, *Theorie der Massenkultur*, München 2008; Hannelore Bublitz, *In der Zerstreuung organisiert. Paradoxien und Phantasmen der Massenkultur*, Bielefeld 2005; Eric Macé, *Sociologie de la culture de masse. Avatars du social et vertigo de la méthode*, in: *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 112 (2002), pp. 45-62.