

## Why 'Pop' Changed and How it Mattered (Part I): Sociological Perspectives on Twentieth-Century Popular Culture in the West

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Klaus Nathaus | Essay | 01.08.2018

## Why 'Pop' Changed and How it Mattered (Part I)

### Sociological Perspectives on Twentieth-Century Popular Culture in the West

Pop songs and superhero cartoons, vaudeville shows and blockbuster movies, fashion and spectator sports are among the many examples of contemporary popular culture, defined here as widely affordable, commercial experience goods and services.<sup>1</sup> This apparently trivial and seemingly inconsequential culture became an important factor of social life in the West during the course of a 'long' twentieth century, beginning in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. What distinguishes contemporary popular culture from that of previous times is not that it is commercial or aimed at a popular audience. These are features that have been observed for earlier periods as well.<sup>2</sup> The actual transformation of culture that took place in the 1880s and 1890s on both sides of the Atlantic was its growth into industries. Its new syndication gave it greater permanence, professionalised its production and dissemination and spurred its trade across national borders. Entrepreneurs like theatre proprietors and publishers changed the provision of entertainment from something that was often local and incidental into a transnational business. They rationalised the production of content and performances and integrated its various sectors by linking its creation, exhibition, marketing and commercial exploitation. In this way, they created stars, hits, fashion trends and entertainment formats with national, if not international reach. Rapid urbanisation, increased mobility and leisure time, faster communication media and rises in working-class income were important prerequisites for this development, as were changes in copyright, financing and economic regulation.

While popular culture during the 'long' turn of the century (1880-1930) was very much tied to 'live' performances in public entertainment venues, mass media – most importantly radio and sound film – gained increasing importance from about 1930 onward. As the entertainment business began to shift its focus from stages to studios, its organisation became more complex, integrated and bureaucratic. 'Live' entertainment did certainly not disappear, but large multimedia firms disseminated recorded content to an audience that was removed from the act of performance both in time and space, which increased the importance of audience data in repertoire decisions. The particular organisation of entertainment in the period from the 1930s to the mid-1950s favoured sophisticated movie spectacles and the sanitised swing sound that catered to national 'mainstream'

audiences, while at the same time pushing the often brash and improvised 'outsider' cultures and their producers to the margins, if not into oblivion. The near absence of 'black music' from Hollywood films and American network radio is a case in point.

The rise of television from the mid-1950s demarcates the next major caesura in the history of contemporary popular culture. While 'mass culture' found a new home in this domestic medium for family entertainment, public entertainment venues and – beginning in the United States – radio channels and music records opened up to previously marginalised content and became available for teenage patrons. During the 1950s, popular culture became firmly associated with youth, spelling both 'fun' and 'trouble'. Subsequently, 'pop' became increasingly self-conscious and polarised, especially from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, when the proponents of its more meaningful, politically relevant and 'authentic' forms distanced themselves from allegedly mindless 'mass culture'. In popular music, it was rock – the commercially successful music of socially aspirational, better-educated white male discontents of the consumer society – which supplied sounds and images to a 'counterculture'.

Since around 1980, a number of technological, legal and economic changes have transformed the production and consumption of popular culture once again. This latest phase is characterised above all by an abundance of content and styles, vying for audiences' attention and challenging their ability to retain orientation. 'Pop' has grown in quantity, geographical scope and aesthetic diversity, and its audience fragmented into ever smaller 'scenes'. At the same time however, its distribution and economic exploitation has become increasingly concentrated in a shrinking number of multimedia conglomerates with global reach. 'Independent' producers and 'major' content providers, once regarded as opponents in a struggle for hegemony and scarce resources, entered a new, symbiotic relationship. As a consequence, popular culture developed into the two diverging directions of 'blockbusters' on the one hand and an increasing stylistic heterogeneity on the other.

Popular culture was increasingly taken seriously in the humanities and the social sciences since the 1970s. It has been discussed as a manifestation of 'symbolic resistance', a factor of social levelling and democratisation, an expression of widely shared norms and beliefs akin to a kind of 'folklore of industrial society' (Lawrence Levine), as an industry, labour market and institutional 'field', as an arena of social interaction and conspicuous consumption. It has become a 'legitimate' subject of study in musicology, art history and literary studies, partly through entering the canon as 'pop art', and partly through the challenge of new sub-disciplines like popular music studies.

Focussing on sociology, the present article provides an overview of major trends in the study of twentieth-century popular culture for students and more advanced scholars in history and sociology. It is the first part in a two-part review of which the [second part](#) is dealing with the historiography on the subject.<sup>3</sup> Being a social science historian (which in my case translates as a certified historian and amateur sociologist), I wrote the present text first and foremost with an audience of fellow historians in mind. Apart from sharing my interdisciplinary enthusiasm, my aim was to provide my peers with an inventory of concepts that allow them to critically reflect established interpretations, take alternative approaches, identify new sources and develop new narratives. In addition to that, the present article may also have something to offer to sociologists. Three features distinguish it from many social science textbooks and readers on 'popular culture and society'. It reviews key sociological approaches to the subject in a historical perspective; it engages the rather different trajectories of relevant research in Europe and North America with each other; it opts for a critical discussion rather than a 'neutral' presentation of different viewpoints. As it is also relatively short, it may be read as a complement to standard introductions and overviews.<sup>4</sup> And it should be understood as an invitation to also take a look at [part II](#) in view to a transdisciplinary exchange about this topic.

This part of the article consists of three sections. The first one deals with research traditions in North America and covers approaches from 'Chicago School' ethnography to the production of culture perspective. These strands study popular culture as 'social worlds', 'systems of symbol production' and in view to creative labour. Section two turns to Europe and discusses Critical Theory and Cultural Studies as the two major sociological approaches in the study of popular culture until the rapid expansion of the research field from the 1980s. Whereas these two schools of thought draw very different political conclusions from their analysis – 'mass deception' vs. 'popular resistance' –, they do share assumptions that need spelling out to avoid the dead end of the 'political economy' vs. 'cultural studies' debate.<sup>5</sup> Section three presents more recent studies that share an interest in the often strategic use of (popular) culture in the establishment of social relations, including the relation to the self. This work proposes a concept of 'culture' that is very different to the one once formulated by cultural anthropologists and that still informs much present research on 'pop', not least in historiography.

To conclude this introduction, I should stress that I do not have the ambition to be comprehensive in a field that I have entered as an amateur in search for conceptual inspiration. I do think though that the following discussion of selected sociological work helps to clarify the relative merit of theoretical strands which appear to the disciplinary

outsider surprisingly content to ignore each other.

## 1. 'Social worlds', Creative Labour and 'Systems of Symbol Production': North-American Approaches to Contemporary Popular Culture

The origins of the social-scientific interest in popular entertainment can be traced back to the early twentieth century. At that time, government agencies and social reformers cast a sceptical view on the increasing commercialisation of urban working-class leisure, from social dancing in American saloons to bawdy music hall ditties in Britain and veiled prostitution in German 'Tingel-Tangels'. The leisure pursuits of this era before radio and sound film were overwhelmingly produced and consumed on site and in unscripted situations so that critics had to observe them in social spaces. Popular entertainment gained prominence in the social surveys that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As a rule, these surveys were conducted on behalf of social reformers and driven by strong moral concerns. They frame the leisure activities of working-class people as a 'problem', a symptom of moral decline and eroding community ties. More often than not, they associate commercial entertainment with deviance and contrast it with 'rational recreations' offered by leisure organisations under the leadership of responsible middle-class citizens.<sup>6</sup> While they have often been used as historical sources, they lack an analytical perspective that would have allowed observers to fade out their moral prejudices and view popular culture as a phenomenon *sui generis*.

### *The Ethnographic Study of Social Worlds*

Alongside such surveys, we see in 1920s America the formation of a new type of inquiry which marks the beginning of an important strand of sociological research into the amusements of ordinary people. Interestingly, this approach built on European precursors in metropolitan journalism, among them the series *Großstadt-Dokumente* that consists of fifty-one ethnographic studies on urban life in Berlin and Vienna, including dance halls, variety theatres and sports.<sup>7</sup> While these beginnings were left largely unexplored by academic scholars in Germany, they were taken up and developed further by urban sociologists in the United States. At the University of Chicago in particular, sociologists approached commercial entertainment with a keen eye for the practices and motives of both the providers and consumers.

A primary example of this research is Paul Cressey's work on the *Taxi-Dance Hall* (1932), a type of venue where men bought tickets for three-minute dances with professional female

dancers.<sup>8</sup> While the study was commissioned by Chicago's Juvenile Protective Association and shows traces of a reformist agenda, it deviates from the older 'social survey' genre in important respects. Taking an ethnographic approach, Cressey defines the dance hall as a largely self-contained 'social world' and uncovers the rules that govern the particular behaviour of its inhabitants. While considering the social background of the professional dancers and their patrons, his study does not reduce taxi-dancing to an emblem of wider social circumstances. Instead, it tries to understand people's involvement in this peculiar form of entertainment from within the dance hall, carefully reconstructing its specific behavioural norms in close observation of people's interactions and the situational context in which they unfold. Like many sociologists of the 'Chicago School' would do after him, Cressey first isolates his social world to identify its inhabitants and dissecting its particular codes of conduct, before he then extrapolates from his findings by describing social types and roles. He then carefully assesses wider implications of dance hall sociality by pursuing members of his population into other social realms. He (and the members of his research team) followed taxi dancers who met up with their patrons outside the halls and sometimes moved in with them, trying to maintain a relationship that had started with an exchange of money for company. In this way, the taxi-dance played a role in the establishment of new gender relations which were independent from ties of kinship and community, but threw up new questions of trust, exploitation and economic and emotional dependency.<sup>9</sup>

The 'social world' approach to the study of entertainment was developed further by later generations of US sociologists. Examples of research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s include Robert Edgerton's study *Alone Together* (1979) and Sherri Cavan's *Liquor License* (1966). Both investigations restore the 'strangeness' of people's behaviour in particular social settings. And as they uncover particular situational rules, they call into question the notion that people's leisure 'mirrors' wider social trends in any simple way. Edgerton observes the behaviour of people visiting a beach near Los Angeles and shows how they maintain a sense of enjoyment and relaxation as they consciously fade out the not so infrequent incidents of harassment and crime taking place around them. The urban beach, Edgerton argues, is anything but an oasis of peace. Nevertheless, it is experienced as one, because sunbathers manage to turn a blind eye towards pickpockets, fights and gawking strangers.<sup>10</sup> Sherri Cavan's ethnography of bar behaviour, conducted in San Francisco drinking places during the first half of the 1960s, describes the rules of patrons' conduct in an environment that gives license to behaviour strongly discouraged in other situations, such as drunkenness, confiding personal problems to strangers, ignoring status hierarchies, openly displaying affection or engaging in fights. Drinking places are, says Cavan, commonly expected to be 'unserious', and this accounts for lowered inhibitions, frequent

'role-releases' and seemingly random, inconsequential conversations.<sup>11</sup>

A younger proponent of the ethnographic study of 'social worlds' is David Grazian, whose work largely focuses on the urban entertainment ecology and social interaction in places from nightlife spaces to zoos. In *Blue Chicago*, Grazian studies live music venues in the city in view to the creation and experience of blues music at the turn of the twenty-first century. Like Cressey, he looks at both providers and consumers of culture. He observes and interviews patrons in search of authenticity as well as musicians, waitresses, bar owners and doormen who collectively supply the 'real' blues experience. Grazian's study makes clear at the outset that the alleged authenticity of blues music as an uncompromised expression of black people's otherness is a fabrication, recreated for tourists who come to expect this kind of 'edginess' in the venues they visit. But this observation is more a premise than a finding; Grazian's intention is not simply to uncover Chicago blues as 'fake'. Instead, his book describes how the participants of the blues world work the traditions and conventions of the music genre, which they face as both constraints and resources, into their lives. Patrons seek the 'real' blues experience to create what Grazian calls their 'nocturnal selves', crafted through storytelling and role-playing in the theatrical setting of urban nightlife. The 'nocturnal self' promises gratification and social capital, as blues fans search for 'action' and encounter risks, witness the 'real thing' and process all that into exciting, appealing narratives about themselves. A relatively unspectacular taxi ride may thus be mined for adventure stories about 'dangerous' transport and 'strange' encounters with 'exotic' cabbies. The musicians' experience, on the other hand, is rather more prosaic, as Grazian shows. While on the whole they benefit from the demand for live music, they feel that their artistic aspirations are compromised. Not only does the blues night formula require them to repeat a limited number of standard songs in every set (*Sweet Home Alabama!*), it also means that musical skills are trumped by skin colour, simply because blackness is conventionally expected to authenticate the 'realness' of the blues performance, irrespective of actual musical proficiency.<sup>12</sup>

### *Sociological Research on Creative Labour*

Grazian's work deals with places and social world participants as well as cultural producers, who are another major topical focus of American social-scientific research on popular culture. A pioneering study for this strand of research is Hortense Powdermaker's book *Hollywood, the Dream Factory*, published in 1951. Based on interviews with studio 'bosses' and creative workers in the film industry, this study offers insights into the convoluted process by which Hollywood movies came into being in the immediate years

after the Second World War, a few years before the studio system disintegrated. It shows that filmmaking was neither shaped by an aesthetic vision nor, and this may actually be surprising, governed by efficient planning. Countering the common perception of the film industry as an 'assembly line', Powdermaker's book reveals the extent to which the movie business was subjected to the personal whims of powerful executives and hampered by petty status concerns and widespread incompetence. In the anthropologist's view, movie making becomes apparent as a haphazard affair in which talent and money are wasted, art is certain to be compromised, decisions are based on intuition and success is believed to result from luck, as audiences' reactions are fundamentally unpredictable. Powdermaker makes no pretence about her dislike of Hollywood and its 'phoney' products, but takes her subjects seriously enough to unearth some of the social mechanisms that shape their interactions and ultimately affect the movie repertoire.<sup>13</sup>

Since the time Powdermaker's book came out, sociologists published studies which are concerned with the way creative workers coordinate their practice through unwritten rules and how they develop professional identities in an occupational field that is associated with play rather than work. Two scholars who benefited from their first-hand experience as musicians have been highly influential in this line of study. Howard Becker, who financed his studies at the University of Chicago in the 1950s by playing jazz piano in bars on the city's south side, made use of his field notes when he described how jazz musicians established an 'outsider' identity as they negotiated the contravening forces of artistic aspirations, the demands of an indiscriminating dance music audience and the general perception of what constitutes a successful professional career.<sup>14</sup> While Becker discussed the professional and private roles of 'jazzmen' in connection with 'deviance' (his book *Outsiders* also contains a chapter on Marijuana users), Robert Faulkner's 1971 study on Hollywood musicians shifts the focus from stage to studio and offers an investigation that is concerned with more mundane issues of work. Faulkner illuminates the complex arrangements of how music for feature films is composed and recorded under enormous pressure to get it right and on time. His study highlights the importance of personal networks for the organisation of the musicians' labour market. Focussing on professional identities, he also describes how 'popular' and 'classical' musicians experience the studio career very differently. Whereas the former regard session work as the pinnacle of success and proof of their superior craftsmanship, the latter are likely to experience it as failure, because they have been nurtured to aspire to become soloists and shine on stage.<sup>15</sup>

The near absence of objective, universal standards of skill and quality and its consequences on labour relations, networking and professional outlook have since been identified as key



features of work in the 'experience industries'. Following Powdermaker, Becker and Faulkner, creative careers have frequently found researchers among American sociologists.<sup>16</sup> More recently, it attracts increasing attention among social scientists on both sides of the Atlantic who are interested in precarious, 'entrepreneurial' work. Some of this research follows the ethnographic approach described above and is based on interviews and participant observation.<sup>17</sup> Other studies are more concerned with the political economy of content production, shifting the focus from workers' practices and experiences to concerns about labour relations, power, ownership, alienation and self-exploitation. A major theme in the research on creative work is the question to what extent labourers in the cultural sector realise the promise of self-actualisation. While only few authors unequivocally celebrate the freedom of creative work,<sup>18</sup> most scholars stress its precariousness and argue that creative labourers trade income and job security for what is often only a slim chance to achieve artistic autonomy that pays the bills. 'Governmentality' and the 'New Spirit of Capitalism' are prominent concepts to account for the apparent preparedness of creative workers for self-exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

A study that adds substantially to the critical discussion on creative work is Matt Stahl's *Unfree Masters*, a reflection on labour relations under capitalism that takes both the representations and the political economy of recording artists' work in contemporary America into view.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the many studies that stress the particularities of creative work, Stahl takes the labour of recording artists as a limit case of 'normal' employment in liberal societies. While he acknowledges that creative workers derive a sense of autonomy from their labour, his main focus is aimed at the means through which employers exert control over artists and appropriate the product of their work. This leads him to contract and intellectual property laws as the primary institutions separating labour from capital and defining ownership of cultural goods. In an historical account, Stahl traces how American entertainment firms in the 1980s lobbied state and federal governments to change nineteenth-century legislation which had granted artists the right to terminate their employment contracts after seven years and substitute it with a framework that practically binds them to their companies for unlimited time. So-called 'option contracts' enable companies to one-sidedly demand and reject products from 'their' artists, making it virtually impossible for them to leave the firm. Stahl explains this development in view to structural changes in the record industry in the late 1970s, when companies increasingly concentrated on a few superstars whom they saw necessary to keep on their roster. However, Stahl is not so much interested in tracing the historical context of the legal change than in the arguments of the debate and their implications. In his view, recording artists who fought legislation that resulted from the lobbying efforts of the music firms

made a fair point when comparing their contractual situation to that of indentured slavery. However, they failed to effectively counter the argument that they had entered these agreements voluntarily. The principle that people should be free to enter any consensual relationship trumped the artists' complaint that this freedom in effect often spelled servitude.

Stahl's book stresses the central importance of rights regimes for the creative industries. Taking a limit case of employment to reflect on 'ordinary' work, he also raises issues which are not immediately apparent in labour histories that are typically concerned with industrial work relations where the one-sided arrangement of domination and appropriation is usually taken for granted and long-term contracts are seen as beneficial for workers. However, as labour relations become more flexible and a growing share of the wealth is derived from ideas instead of the production and sales of physical items, the problems of a few recording artists are likely to be shared by workers in other professional fields.

### *Explaining Cultural Change: Conventions and Systems of Symbol Production*

In addition to social worlds and creative labour, American sociologists dealt with the question of cultural change, an aspect of immediate relevance to historians. One of the concepts that may contribute to shed light on this issue is the idea of 'conventions', a key term of symbolic interactionism to which Howard Becker devoted a chapter of his influential book *Art Worlds*.<sup>21</sup> Conventions are understood as the unstated rules that art world participants (including producers, intermediaries and audiences) learn through shared practices. Conventions align expectations, enable participants to coordinate their actions and create what they as well as outside observers recognise as a particular art world. Inconspicuous as the term may seem, the notion of 'conventions' is far from trivial. It establishes the idea that the coherence of an institution such as the Heavy Metal genre does not depend on what is commonly referred to as context and background, i.e. deeply rooted, congruent beliefs of fans or a common socio-economic position that presupposes an affinity for certain sounds. Instead, it is based on no more (and no less) than the continued practice of those who have a stake in it. This, in turn, leads to intriguing questions about change and continuity: If 'pop' worlds are the product of localised practices, how can we explain the relatively sudden appearance of a seemingly new set of conventions (as in the case of the breakthrough of new genres in popular music)? And how is frequent deviation from the conventional script, be it through lack of resources, incompetence, or the coming and going of participants, kept at a minimum so that art worlds are experienced as

continuous? How are participants of such fluid situations able to coordinate their actions and collectively create an art world?<sup>22</sup>

While such questions have often been answered (not least by historians) by pointing to macro-level changes of values, mentalities, demographics, politics or the economy, proponents of the production of culture perspective search for explanations at the meso-level of institutions and organisations within the realm of content production. The production of culture perspective, an influential strand in American cultural sociology that emerged as a self-conscious approach in the 1970s, 'focuses on how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved.'<sup>23</sup> Its fundamental claim is that in contemporary societies, symbolic content (like pop songs and television shows) does not directly emerge from 'grassroots' practices or needs of 'the people', but results from the interplay of specialist producers and intermediaries who act under constraints that are particular to their realm of cultural production, including the fundamental unpredictability of audiences' responses. To substantiate this claim, case studies on the production of culture deal with episodes during which new symbolic repertoires gained wide exposure.<sup>24</sup> These studies prove that changes in content can and often do happen relatively quickly, asynchronous with major political events, economic cycles or demographic shifts. Rather than reflecting a 'Zeitgeist' or corresponding to a given demand, repertoire changes are best understood, so the argument goes, as contingent outcomes of shifts in interrelated legal, technological and organisational constraints which affect the practice of and the relationship between symbol producers. A copyright reform, the availability of new media technology, new sources of funding or a novel market research tool may alter the relationship between content-producing firms and impinge on their inter-organisational hierarchies, procedures and perceptions. In turn, this may open up windows of opportunity for previously marginalised producers and their alternative ideas.

Initially, production of culture research faded out questions of meaning and treated symbolic objects much the same way as one would consider any other consumer article. Subsequently, respective scholars have expanded the scope of the perspective to include meaning-making by looking at the processes through which particular sounds, looks and statements are established as essential for specific cultural genres. An early study that represents this move is *Creating Country Music*, written by the late Richard Peterson, the main proselytiser of the production of culture perspective.<sup>25</sup> To begin with, the book offers an analysis of legislative, technological, economic and organisational changes in the American entertainment industry between the 1920s and the mid-1950s. This created

opportunities for 'old-time' and 'hillbilly' music to be featured on radio, records and in cinema films. Radio's demand for cheap musicians who were able to play as long or as short a time as needed, the opportunity for these musicians to advertise their upcoming 'live' appearances via radio, the record industry's turn to new markets in the rural South and record producer Ralph Peer's idea to make money from song publishing rather than just record sales are among the many elements of Peterson's complex account of how music which had previously been only played by buskers at tent shows became part of the commercial music industry. On the basis of this organisational analysis, Peterson turns to the question how country music came to be regarded as 'authentic', i.e. both and at the same time original and true to older models. He sees the answer in the institutionalisation of country music as a genre, a process which involved compromises between musicians, broadcasting executives and sponsors, record industry personnel, producers of Western films, folklorists and a number of other actors who had a stake in the emerging field and contributed to shaping the sound, lyrics and image of the music. On radio, for instance, commercial sponsors who paid for 'family entertainment' obliged musicians to 'clean up' their act, thus contributing to the 'wholesome', socially conservative image of country. At the same time, bars in Texas and Oklahoma oil towns made for a performance setting where musicians found that they captured the attention of their overwhelmingly male, alcohol-consuming audience most successfully with rougher sounds and candid lyrics. And as the record industry recovered from its previous collapse from the late 1930s onward, the latter approach to country was dispersed via juke boxes across the nation and into the homes of record buyers. According to Peterson, the two diverging strands of 'hard core' and 'soft shell' became part of the country music genre and remained a source of the music's frequent cyclical renewal, explaining why country was neither elevated into art (like jazz, for instance), ossified as folk nor absorbed by the mainstream to the extent that would have discouraged frequent 'hard core' country revivals.

Peterson's history of country's institutionalisation as a genre is a story of trials, errors and unintended consequences. Adding to the contingency of the story is the audience. Peterson refers to it as an active party, but stresses that its contribution remained enigmatic to music suppliers, who were forced to follow their perception of audiences because a dialogue was elusive due to technological and organisational reasons. Describing the relationship between producers and their public as a 'disjunction', Peterson confirms economic sociologists' description of 'the market as a mirror'<sup>26</sup> as well as what media scholars have written about 'institutionally effective' audiences that are constructed mainly to legitimise programming decisions.<sup>27</sup> Peterson would certainly subscribe to Richard Caves's notion of the 'nobody knows property' of content production, which postulates that '(r)esearch and

pretesting are largely ineffective (...) because a creative product's success can seldom be explained even ex post by the satisfaction of some pre-existing need.<sup>28</sup> Qualifying these statements, Peterson suggests that the gap between providers and audiences narrowed in the course of country music's institutionalisation and the consolidation of its aesthetic. In view to his own analysis, however, one may alternatively argue that the 'disjunction' is actually less pronounced in live performance settings (where musicians may bridge the divide as they resonate with a present audience) and greater in the mass media environment, where motley crews of producers with very different viewpoints and motives base their joint decisions on data of remote and diverse audiences. In other words, increasingly sophisticated audience research does not get closer to reconciling supply with demand, but increases the divide between producers and actual consumers, filling the widening gap with ever more data that makes up 'institutionally effective' audiences. This seems a hypothesis worth testing empirically.

*Creating Country Music* began to extend the production of culture perspective to integrate meaning and reception. This motivated the study of the institutionalisation of genres, defined as 'systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together an industry, performers, critics, and fans in making what they identify as a distinctive sort of music.'<sup>29</sup> This initiative has since been continued by a number of sociologists on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>30</sup> Among them is Jennifer Lena, who developed her joint work with Peterson into *Banding Together*, a study of some sixty popular musical genres mostly created in twentieth-century America.<sup>31</sup> Her aspiration to compare and systematise the musical landscape during this period is admirable. The result, however, which groups these genres into types and identifies basic trajectories of genre evolution, appears problematic to the historian. Not only does the search for typical development patterns lift the cases out of their temporal context and sequence. The study is also based on secondary accounts whose generic narratives should not be taken as objective descriptions of the development of musical styles. Instead, these accounts need to be analysed as part of the very process of institutionalisation to which genres owe their contested existence. What makes Lena's book useful for the historian though are its conceptual tools to describe musical genres and its effective discussion of classifications in culture in view to questions of legitimacy, power, status and identity. Above all, it may be read as an invitation to historians to combine the strengths of their discipline, namely the critical awareness of social temporality and narrative models, with sociologists' conceptual inventiveness to arrive at a sound understanding of popular culture's role in contemporary societies.

The disjunction between the study of production, meaning and reception that motivated

Peterson and others to turn towards the analysis of genres is also the starting point of Clayton Childress's *Under the Cover*.<sup>32</sup> This most recent contribution to an extended production perspective follows the trajectory of one novel, Cornelia Nixon's *Jarrettsville* (2009), from its inception and (collective) creation through its convoluted marketing-process and its critical reception by reviewers to its eventual arrival in book groups, whose members made their own and often very different sense of the text. Childress acknowledges that the fields of creation, production and reception have their own particular social rules, which he brings out in his ethnographic chapters on the various stages of *Jarrettsville*'s life-cycle. His further ambition is to re-connect these fields without reverting to an overarching 'system', 'cultural logic' or 'Zeitgeist'. To this end, he looks for overlaps between the realms of art, commerce and meaning and highlights the contribution of literary agents, acquisition editors, field reps, bookstore buyers and reviewers. Combining the interactionist ethnography of 'art world' studies and the organisational analysis of the 'production of culture perspective', Childress identifies 'enthusiasm' as the key element in the communication chain that links his intermediaries. More than mere gatekeepers, the editors, agents and sales staff involved in the making of *Jarrettsville* were busy feeding a collective enthusiasm for this novel, regardless of the fact that they all saw very different qualities in the book. Each of them appropriated *Jarrettsville* at each step of the way, to make a convincing case for it at the next handover. In this way, they blended the different languages spoken in the fields of creation, production and reception, and managed to keep the book moving forward on the tracks from author to reader, while adding to the richness of its meanings. *Under the Cover* makes apparent the structure of the publishing industry with its power relations, networks and struggles for positions. At the same time, it shows how enthusiasm animates this structure like the proverbial ghost in the machine. Childress's mentioning of my name in the acknowledgements in his book as well as his feedback on the present article do not prevent me from stating that I think that *Under the Cover* is fruitfully exploring an integrative approach to the study of commercial popular culture both conceptually and empirically. But it certainly means that the reader of the present review should not take my biased word for it and should read *Under the Cover* himself.

In the United States, ethnographic approaches in the 'Chicago' tradition as well as studies on content production which frame culture as a topic for occupational and organisational sociology formed influential, at times even dominant strands in social-scientific research on popular culture.<sup>33</sup> The preferred method of these investigations is observation, their ethos empiricist. Given that sociology is regarded as a nomothetic science, the level of their generalisation and abstraction is, on the whole, remarkably low. Often, their impetus is to

challenge theories which conceive culture as a 'mirror' of society by undermining their grand claims with idiographic accounts of particular cases. Instead of large-scale theory, they offer stories as well as conceptual tools for empirical investigation. A further characteristic of this research is that judgements about the aesthetic or moral quality of popular culture are muted, if not absent. Both the 'Chicago School' and the production of culture perspective steer clear from the polemics around 'high' vs. 'low' and 'elite' vs. 'mass' culture, neither condemning it as worthless nor celebrating it as a bastion of popular agency.

## 2. Popular Culture 'From Above' and 'From Below': Critical Theory and Its Discontents

### *Popular Culture as 'Mass Deception': Critical Theory*

While the social worlds of popular culture and 'pop's' professional production featured prominently in American cultural sociology from early on, they have attracted far less interest among scholars in Europe. A brief look into textbooks and readers may illustrate this: Whereas ethnographic research in the 'Chicago' tradition and the production of culture perspective receive prominent treatment in American publications, they are conspicuously absent in European overviews, if I may generalise from German and British research.<sup>34</sup> In Germany, the little work that is done on the production of culture tends to be offered the narrow 'economics' slot. This, in turn, limits its heuristic potential and keeps it quite separate from the majority of research which continues to focus on the study of reception and texts while being spared the irritation inherent in the production approach.<sup>35</sup> It is also telling that Pierre Bourdieu's work on *The Field of Cultural Production*, which shows considerable overlap with the institutional strand in American cultural sociology, is rarely related to the study of popular culture and overshadowed by his books *Distinction* and *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.<sup>36</sup>

Partly, the relative neglect of ethnographic approaches and the production perspective might be explained by the different trajectory of European research in popular culture. (Again, I am extrapolating from the German and British experience.) While this started at about the same time as in the US, it differs from it in several respects. In the Old World, studies of popular culture were firmly rooted in hermeneutics; they connected 'pop' with larger historical and societal trends and remained preoccupied with questions of aesthetic value and 'the masses'. Early texts which defined this perspective emerged at the interface between journalism, aesthetic theory and the humanities. Prominent examples are Siegfried Kracauer's essays from the 1920s, collected in the volume *The Mass Ornament*,

and Walter Benjamin's essay on the *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.<sup>37</sup> These and other reflections on popular culture from the inter-war years informed Max Horkheimer's and Theodor W. Adorno's canonical text on the 'culture industry', published as a chapter of their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>38</sup> Under the impression of the Second World War and concerned with the rise of National Socialism, Horkheimer and Adorno formulated a far more bleak assessment of mass culture than earlier Marxists had done. However, they followed them in the way they focus on the symbolic content of popular culture and base their grand argument on selective close readings. While their chapter established the term 'culture industry' in the social sciences, it is important to stress that it uses the term as a metaphor to link commercial popular culture with larger trends of modernity. It is safe to say that the actors, structures and processes of content production, i.e. the actual 'culture industry' did not interest Horkheimer and Adorno very much. As a matter of fact, the 'culture industry' chapter is not at all a study of the culture industry, but uses a very distorted image of it as an illustration for the thesis that under capitalism, reason mutates into instrumental rationality, so that enlightenment turns into positivism and, ultimately, barbarism. For Horkheimer and Adorno, true works of art defy categorisation and make people question their existence in order to fulfil their human potential. Art is incommensurable, and this very incommensurability makes it a source of existential reflection and ultimately a force of enlightenment. Starting from this premise, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that 'mass art' is calculable, designed for its effectiveness with an audience that is constantly monitored and measured for the purpose of its manipulation. Whereas true art challenges recipients in deep and unforeseeable ways, the formulaic fare of 'jazz' music and Donald Duck cartoons merely pleases a homogeneous crowd. Thus capitalism transforms culture into a commodity and substitutes existential experience with superficial thrills.

Critical Theory offers a comprehensive narrative of crisis, linking popular culture to the rise of an all-pervasive capitalism whose ultimate triumph is the control of hearts and minds through 'mass art'. This is a very different way of taking popular culture seriously if compared to the approaches developed by US sociologists. It is written from the vantage point of a radical alternative to capitalism, not from within the liberal market economy. What is more, Critical Theory established the idea that the provision and the reception of culture are opposed to each other in a relationship of domination. In other words, it distinguishes between an 'above' of production and a 'below' of consumption. This distinction, which is absent from the American research tradition reviewed above, proved to be consequential for subsequent research in sociology and historiography. In addition to that and as a result of its hermeneutic method, the 'critical' narrative allows scholars to



draw far-reaching conclusions via analogies between individual symbols and the whole of capitalist society which it allegedly mirrors. In this view, the laughter of a cinema audience represents the capitalist 'mass deception' in a nutshell. Finally, the set narrative of Critical Theory pre-empts interpretations, which makes for rather predictable case studies.<sup>39</sup> This predictability, however, does not seem to have troubled Critical Theorists, who have been more concerned with pulling the veil of deception from people's eyes than with the actual intricacies of people's practices on the ground, be they producers or consumers of culture.

### *Popular Culture as 'Symbolic Resistance': Cultural Studies*

Critical Theory, which enjoyed its heyday in the 1970s, was challenged so thoroughly that it has become almost an anathema in sociological and historiographical research on popular culture.<sup>40</sup> The main thrust of the critique addressed at Critical Theory concerns its characterisation of audiences as 'dupes' manipulated by an all-powerful 'culture industry'. This revisionist line was influentially formulated in British Cultural Studies. Initially though, this new approach did not develop in direct opposition to Critical Theory. In fact, it shared much of the Frankfurt School's scepticism towards commercial popular culture. British literary scholar Richard Hoggart, who in 1964 founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, had in his 1957 book *The Uses of Literacy* infamously condemned the 'juke-box boys' he observed in milk bars as 'directionless and tamed helots of a machine-minding class', as 'hedonistic but passive barbarian(s)'.<sup>41</sup> Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Hoggart thought that ordinary people deserved better culture, and so he despaired at the sight of their apparent inability to cast their minds beyond the 'candy-floss world' of 'mass art'. Less than twenty years later, however, scholars working at CCCS ennobled juke-box 'barbarians' to be the active, not at all tame heroes of a tragic story of popular resistance. Hoggart's successor Stuart Hall edited in 1975 with Tony Jefferson *Resistance through Rituals*, a key collection of working papers that outlined the theory of working-class youth subcultures and staked out the field for future research on groups such as Teddy Boys, Mods and Skinheads.<sup>42</sup>

The theoretical move made by Hall, Jefferson and their collaborators to change the perception of popular culture from a means of control to a form of symbolic resistance was to adopt a concept of culture that defined culture as a 'way of life', a symbolic practice that gives shape to the feelings and experiences shared by a distinct group of people. In this understanding, culture encompasses 'the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life.'<sup>43</sup> This theory of culture is borrowed from literary scholar

Raymond Williams and shows great similarities with the definition Clifford Geertz proposed at about the same time in cultural anthropology and that became highly influential in historiography.<sup>44</sup>

Cultural Studies vested agency in the consumers of 'mass culture' and empowered them to be relatively independent creators of meaning from the culture that was being offered to them. This allowed Cultural Studies to discover the potential of popular culture as a means for resistance or emancipation rather than distraction or manipulation, a point which has since been widely shared. Though lesser known, a rich body of empirical studies on the fabrication and consumption of culture came out of Cultural Studies, produced by scholars like Simon Frith, Angela McRobbie, Keith Negus and Sean Nixon. To sometimes great extent, these scholars engage with concepts from US cultural sociology outlined above, and in some instances bring their personal experience from working in the creative industries to their research.<sup>45</sup> While this offshoot of Cultural Studies focussed on practices, the more prominent branch of the 'Birmingham School' applied a semiotic perspective and became increasingly affirmative in their view on 'pop', up to the point of unreserved populism. While Stuart Hall had insisted on a distinction between emancipatory popular culture and sedative 'mass' culture,<sup>46</sup> authors like John Fiske and Dick Hebdige read resistance into phenomena which would appear to be hardly more than forms of self-indulgence.<sup>47</sup> It is this latter strand of Cultural Studies that has had the biggest influence on German 'pop theorists', whose disciplinary affiliation is more often than not with literary studies and the arts.<sup>48</sup>

Especially in its view on consumers' agency and the political value of 'pop', Cultural Studies came to define a revisionist stance in opposition to Critical Theory. However, this should not obscure that the two approaches share important assumptions and traits. Like Critical Theory, Cultural Studies in search of 'subcultures' projected a set narrative onto their objects of study, which determined the result of investigations, leading to case studies that were as certain to be variations of the 'resistance' narrative as the empirical studies in the 'Frankfurt' tradition confirmed the grand story of 'mass deception'. In addition to that, the semiotic strand of Cultural Studies left the realm of cultural production in the dark where Critical Theory had placed it. Substituting 'culture industry' with Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'power bloc', Cultural Studies maintained the view that consumers are pitted against producers in a struggle for 'cultural hegemony', only reversing the arrow of influence from 'top down' to 'bottom up'. What Cultural Studies did *not* do was to question this opposition, irrespective of the fact that the aforementioned American research offered evidence that the relationship between culture provision and reception may be better understood as a

disjunction between self-referential content production and remote consumption embedded in situational contexts and with very contingent outcomes. There were good reasons to leave the opposition untouched: Questioning the 'top down'/'bottom up' distinction would have undermined the interpretation that read the 'active' consumption of popular culture as an act of resistance against a coherent, controlling 'power bloc'. This would in effect have robbed Cultural Studies of their punchline.

### **3. (Sub)cultural Capital, 'Tool Kit' and Technology of the Self: Studies on the Strategic Use of 'Pop' in Social Relations**

The anthropological culture concept shared by Cultural Studies – and other humanities scholars, including historians – tied symbolic content and ritualistic practices to deeply rooted values, norms and beliefs. The ideas of 'coherence' and 'depth' imply that people were immersed in a culture that shaped their behaviour consistently and across different situational contexts.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to this view, a number of sociologists have stressed that at least in contemporary societies, culture is fragmented rather than holistic, a resource for strategic behaviour rather than a force working behind actors' backs. In the realm of popular culture, the so-called 'post-subcultural' studies have stressed that young people choose deliberately among pop repertoires, as they frequently change their allegiance to particular styles and social scenes. According to this research, selective behaviour in the realm of popular culture has been pioneered in the post-war years by the 'Teddy Boys', whom the British Cultural Studies had identified as the first representatives of working-class youth subcultures. While post-subcultural studies at times rather overstate the ability of youths to choose freely from current 'pop' trends and work them into personalised lifestyles,<sup>50</sup> they make the important point that people are not entirely immersed in culture, but switch codes as they change between situational contexts. In other words, actors are able to relate to culture in instrumental, strategic ways. It should be stressed though that neither the situations nor the codes are freely chosen. People make their own culture, but not as they please; they make it under given circumstances and with given resources, some of them more likely to be picked than others.

#### *'Subcultural Capital': Distinctions in the Consumption of Popular Culture*

An influential book that explores these ideas is Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures*, a study on ideals and attitudes of young people in Britain around 1990 for whom dance clubs and raves played an important part of their lives.<sup>51</sup> The interview- and observation-based part of the study is grounded in a historical account of the rise of 'disc culture', which

transformed the relationship between 'live' and recorded music since the 1950s. This chapter deserves a mentioning because it manages on relatively few pages to describe how records, which in the realm of social dancing had been seen as a poor substitute for music performed by 'real' musicians, accrued their own social value and aura as a result of changes in the production and consumption of popular music. Dance musicians were sidelined as discotheques were established, disc jockeys advanced from operators of record players to turntable artists, and authenticity shifted from the stage to the communal atmosphere of the dance floor. Building on this historical account, Thornton describes how recent dance music enthusiasts forged exclusive taste communities as they committed themselves to club cultures. Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu, she coins the term 'subcultural capital' to capture how clubbers claimed reputation and status as members of a group that defined itself against an imaginary 'mainstream' of indistinct, vacuous pop music. Challenging the idea of the popular being a 'curiously flat folk culture', Thornton points out that cultural snobbery and social exclusion happen in popular music as much and in much the same way as in established high culture, regardless of the dance scene's self-understanding as open, democratic and tolerant. The difference between club cultures and high art is that subcultural capital is valued only in the scene and not as easily convertible as connoisseurship in 'legitimate' art. What is similar though is that class and gender are among the primary distinctions affecting the distribution of subcultural capital. The unrestrained, hedonistic ravers saw their spaces and events as distinct and apart from the floors where suburban, working-class 'Sharon and Tracey dance around their handbags', as insiders phrased it. 'Sharon' and 'Tracey' were not shunned because they were *working-class*, but because they were 'classed', i.e. apparently unable to leave behind the 'baggage' of their emotional constraints, conventional mores and limited ambitions of their socio-economic position, symbolised nicely by the handbag. Just like Bourdieu's field of cultural production, Thornton's dance subculture is a vision of 'the economic world reversed'.<sup>52</sup> Club cultures demarcated alternative social realms where hierarchies of money and power were suspended. Both Bourdieu and Thornton note, however, that the autonomy of their respective cultural realms was incomplete. Distinctions like class and gender seeped into the field and turned out to be as powerful as in the outside world, only working in more subtle ways.

### *Popular Culture as a 'Tool Kit' for Impression Management*

The notion of 'subcultural capital' suggests that symbolic objects and practices may not only be studied as representations of values or vehicles for the symbolic resistance of 'the people' but also as media of social distinction. A similar relational view of culture informs

Ann Swidler's definition of culture as a 'tool kit', a concept that allows for actors making strategic use of culture and thereby accounts for the apparent inconsistencies between people's behaviour and their maxims. Using discourses around love as empirical data, Swidler's book *Talk of Love* studies how people negotiate the challenges of romance by drawing on a wide and sometimes contradictory repertoire of behavioural strategies and explanations.<sup>53</sup> Swidler proposes that the culture of love is not so much a set programme in people's minds than an arsenal of strategies, or 'tool kit', to be employed in order to handle situational challenges, such as talking about love to a sociological interviewer. While Swidler argues that actors are not immersed in culture, she also stresses that they are not entirely free to choose either. What binds them is the principle of mutual expectation that governs social interaction: everybody acts under the expectation that relevant others expect them to behave socially adequate. This means that culture resides not inside people (as 'values' or 'mentalities'), but between them (as 'conventions'). It also means that culture does not have to be 'deep' to shape people's behaviour, but may be shallow and merely conventional to be consequential. Swidler illustrates this with the example of gift-giving at Christmas. Even the many people who are sceptical about the idea of expressing personal affection through 'buying stuff' take part in this practice, simply because they expect that gift-giving is considered socially adequate by their peers. When deciding whether or not to buy presents, they need to take into account that not giving anything would violate a generalised expectation and probably be interpreted as a sign that they do not care about the person they should have expected to expect a present. Any attempt to rationally explain why they have opted out of gift-giving will only increase the disappointment.

The 'tool kit' understanding of culture not only acknowledges the inconsistency of people's behaviour and common mismatches between words and actions. It also shifts the question of why culture changes from the larger trends and the mysterious 'Zeitgeist' to more concrete cultural scripts, the institutions that support them and the situational contexts in which they are implemented. Again, this suggests an analysis at micro- and meso-levels which takes into account the production of 'codes' and their creative deployment in social practice.

One may assume that popular culture matters in a similar way to the 'love talk' or the practice of gift-giving described by Swidler. In this view, 'pop' as a widely distributed repertoire of meanings and styles establishes conventions that people do not need to believe to be true or particularly meaningful. The very fact that the 'right' music, fashion and vernacular are most probably known to relevant others may already be enough to enforce an engagement with it, provided that the respective person wants to belong to a

particular group or strives for a particular status or identity. Being 'with it' is the prerequisite of being 'with them'. From this perspective, popular culture does not appear so much as a spontaneous expression of inner states and beliefs nor a medium of symbolic resistance, but an *imposition* that forces people to monitor and manage their behaviour in the face of relevant others. To be sure, the mere dissemination of 'pop' images, scripts and models does not determine such social consequences. But it is clear that opting out of popular culture, assuming this is the culture that is relevant for relevant others, causes friction, misunderstandings and social costs – unless it leads to the establishment of new sets of conventions.

### *Popular Culture as a 'Technology of the Self'*

Much engagement with popular culture happens in public and is more or less conspicuously displayed in front of relevant others. It happens in spaces and situations where people cultivate their 'pop self' vis-a-vis their peers, such as dance halls and discotheques, theatres and fairgrounds, rock festivals and shopping malls. The concepts of '(sub)cultural capital' and culture as 'tool kit' appear well-designed to analyse this public side of 'pop' reception. However, in the course of the twentieth century, people have to an increasing extent consumed popular sounds, images and texts in more intimate ways, in private, in the closed environs of the home and under the headphones of the portable stereo. A strand in sociology and popular music studies has begun to research this consumption in case studies and developed conceptual tools to open up this form of reception.<sup>54</sup> A foundational book in this discussion is Tia DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life*, which frames music as an 'aesthetic technology' to understand its day-to-day use by listeners.<sup>55</sup> The study makes the point that music is not simply a means to express feelings, but a device that 'affords' the listeners to give shape to initially undefined moods, to flesh them out, connect them to memories, amplify and manipulate them. According to DeNora, this makes music 'a resource for the identification work of "knowing how one feels"'. To be applied as a technology of the self, music works like a drug, as it seals oneself from the environment and transports body and mind to a different state. In this way, music alleviates 'introjection', a process whereby the self presents itself with an image of a self in order to experience who one knows one is. In part, DeNora's book reads like an 'introvert' complement to Swidler's 'extrovert' account of face-saving behaviour. Whereas Swidler stresses culture's power to force people to assess and manage themselves in view of relevant others, DeNora looks at how people process this challenge internally, in front of themselves, with the use of music. This suggests that music (and probably also other content like films or televised images) is both a trigger of self-monitoring in public and a

privately applied remedy to gain a sense of self. Apparently, the public and the private sides of popular culture are mutually related.

Though DeNora's focus is mainly on the role of music in mood management and getting a sense of one's self, she is aware of the importance of the experts who design sounds and spaces for musical introspection. For example, she looks at how music is employed in retail environments to guide, entice or exclude customers.<sup>56</sup> Like a sonic 'welcome' mat, music conveys a shop's identity and invites its target clientele in, while telling others to stay out. Whereas older women tend to complain about music in shops, younger customers are made to feel so much at ease that they literally shop to the rhythm of the beat. Older people respond to in-store music as something which commands their attention, while younger shoppers readily engage with it, get into the appropriate mood and are generally more preoccupied with self-monitoring. For DeNora, the generational difference shows that this kind of behaviour in a musical atmosphere has got a history. She ponders over the question whether people in late modernity have become more 'outer-directed' and responsive to emotional stimuli. But we may cast the view back and ask for earlier examples for popular culture as a technology of the self. This could lead us as far back as to the practice of reading sentimental novels in the eighteenth century, an activity that was similarly conducted in private yet in view to a public. Concerning the twentieth century, it would certainly have to cover film music as a facilitator of an emotional experience, the establishment and proliferation of 'muzak',<sup>57</sup> the deployment of domestic 'mood machines' like pianos and stereos, the use of portable radios and the walkman as well as the car as a place of auditory privacy.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

This cursory overview of sociological concepts of popular culture was meant to reflect on the mutual relationship between 'pop' and society, formulated in the twin questions why the popular repertoire changed and how it mattered in social relations. Summing up most of the sociological positions presented above, we can see that popular culture need not be seen as a manifestation of deeply internalised values, norms and beliefs (Clifford Geertz) or a site in the struggle for hegemony (Antonio Gramsci), but may be regarded as a 'social' or 'art world' (Howard Becker), an outcome of the collective activities of specialist content producers (Richard Peterson), an organisational field and marker of distinction (Pierre Bourdieu), a 'technology of the self' (Tia DeNora), as well as a behavioural constraint and resource, strategically deployed in particular situations in often inconsistent ways (Ann Swidler).

All in all, it seems that sociological research on popular culture in the United States is more closely connected to cultural sociology in general. Both the 'Chicago' tradition and the production of culture perspective evolved through engaging with the basic question of the role of culture in changing social relations, with the result that it was spared the semiotic takeover that was often the consequence of the so-called 'cultural turn'. The works presented in this review suggest that 'the social' is far from being dissolved in values, norms and beliefs and shows how it may maintain its central position in cultural sociology. From this perspective, it is not deep-seated, largely coherent, self-generating perceptions that form the basis of society, but double contingency, from which social systems emerge. The 'expectation of expectations' is at play when stakeholders from across the field interact, be it socialising 'pop' fans, jamming musicians, listeners traversing the city with their headphones on, or artist and repertoire managers who translate what they like into what their company may believe could sell. The awareness of the malleability and mutuality of culture in social constellations urges studies to account for the complexity of culture's situational, performative deployment as well as the intrinsic dynamic of content production. Questioning notions of representativity, coherence and depth transforms popular culture from an epiphenomenon of politics, economy or mentalities into a phenomenon *sui generis*. In turn, that requires the researcher to understand the changes and continuities of popular culture and its specific societal effects 'from the inside out'. On the one hand, direct connections between 'pop' and larger political events, general economic trends and basic mental currents, between culture and its alleged 'contexts' and 'backgrounds' become less obvious than often assumed. On the other hand, a host of aspects shifts into view that may be regarded as central to the understanding of contemporary popular culture and thus deserve further study: the particularities of social worlds, including their physical spaces, conventions and encounters; the dynamic of content production; the uncertainty of demand and the disconnect between content producers and their audiences; the constructed nature of 'authenticity' and pop-cultural identities; the political economy of the cultural industries and issues of fairness around creative labour; the strategic use of 'pop' repertoires in public as well as the accumulation and deployment of 'subcultural capital'; the intimate ways in which people embrace and are affected by popular culture as a technology of mood regulation.

Against this wide portfolio of topics, the primary interest in 'pop' as a medium of 'symbolic resistance' among European researchers appears somewhat narrow and begs explanation. An important reason for this may be seen in the particular career of popular culture as a topic in European social-scientific and humanist thinking. In the Old World, where 'pop' still stands in the shadow of 'high' culture, it was more likely to be taken 'seriously' when it



became 'art' or when it was regarded as a manifestation of politics. Certainly in historiography, and probably as well in sociology, the politicisation of 'pop' helped the topic onto the scientific agenda. But it also meant that popular culture was – and to a considerable extent still is – studied as an indicator for something else. Thus it is conceptualised as a form of protest, a reflection of widely shared beliefs, a radical utopia. Such concerns favour the textual approach of literary scholars, who, at least in Germany, seem to dominate the academic 'pop' discourse. To explore the many other facets of popular culture mentioned above, we need other perspectives. We need historians to historicise the 'pop' era that began with Elvis and ended in the present 'Retromania' (Simon Reynolds) and which delimits the short temporal horizon of most 'pop' scholarship. And we need sociologists approaching popular culture from a genuinely sociological perspective – study it in social relations, while steering clear of dated polemics around 'high' vs. 'low' and 'elite' vs. 'mass' culture, neither condemning it as worthless nor celebrating it as a bastion of popular agency.

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## Endnoten

1. Neither qualitative nor populist, this definition of popular culture avoids the 'high' vs. 'low' and 'elite' vs. 'mass' oppositions which inform other concepts. In my view this is an advantage, because these distinctions have been blurred and partially reversed in the course of the twentieth century. Classical concerts and art exhibitions can be 'pop' events if they have been made accessible for people with restricted economic and cultural capital, and commercial culture that failed at the box office may still be considered 'popular'. The term 'commercial' does not dispute the existence of do-it-yourself culture, but stresses that the latter came to be inspired by, engaged with and dependent on 'pop' produced for the market. 'Commercial' is meant here to distinguish popular culture from culture funded by governments or philanthropists.
2. One may go back as far as the early modern period. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, New York 1978.
3. Klaus Nathaus, [Why 'Pop' Changed and How It Mattered \(Part II\): Historiographical Interpretations of Twentieth-Century Popular Culture in the West](#), in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 1.8.2018.
4. See, for instance, David Grazian, *Mix It Up: Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., New York 2017.
5. Nicholas Garnham, *Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?*, in: *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (1995), 1, 62–71; Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies vs. Political Economy: Is Anybody else Bored with this Debate?*, in: *ibid.*, 72–81. Attempts to rekindle the debate are Janice Peck, *Why We Shouldn't be Bored with the Political Economy versus Cultural Studies Debate*, in: *Cultural Critique* 64 (2006), 92–126, and most recently Jianhua Yao, *Beyond the Political Economy versus Cultural Studies Debate? Toward a new Integration*, in: *Fudan. Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 10 (2017), 3, 281–295.
6. See, for instance, Louise de Koven Bowen, *The Public Dance Halls in Chicago*, Chicago, IL 1917; Karl Brunner, *Der Kinematograph von heute – eine Volksgefahr*, Berlin 1913.
7. Dietmar Jazbinsek / Bernward Joerges / Ralf Thies, *The Berlin 'Großstadt-Dokumente': A Forgotten Precursor of the Chicago School of Sociology*, 2001.

8. Paul G. Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialised Recreation and City Life*, Chicago, IL 1932.
9. For a more recent study in a similar vein, see James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*, Chicago, IL 2002. For an older, but still informative overview of ethnographic work in American sociology, see David Grazian, *Opportunities for Ethnography in the Sociology of Music*, in: *Poetics* 32 (2004), 197–210.
10. Robert B. Edgerton, *Alone Together: Social Order on an Urban Beach*, Berkeley, CA 1979.
11. Sherri Cavan, *Liquor License: An Ethnography of Bar Behavior*, Chicago, IL 1966.
12. David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*, Chicago, IL 2003. See also Idem, *On the Make: The Hustle of Urban Nightlife*, Chicago, IL 2008, especially the chapter on 'Where the Action Is' which develops further the concept of 'storytelling'.
13. Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers*, London 1951.
14. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Glencoe, IL 1963.
15. Robert R. Faulkner, *Hollywood Studio Musicians: Their Work and Careers in the Recording Industry*, Chicago, IL 1971.
16. For alternative approaches, see Richard A. Peterson / Howard G. White, *The Simplex Located in Art Worlds*, in: *Urban Life* 7 (1979), 411–439 (organisational sociology); H. Stith Bennett, *On Becoming a Rock Musician*, Amherst, MA 1980 (symbolic interactionism); Susan Christopherson, *Beyond the Self-Expressive Creative Worker: An Industry Perspective on Entertainment Media*, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (2008), 7–8, 73–95 (political economy).
17. An early example is Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making*, Oxford 1991; more recently David Hesmondhalgh / Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*, London 2011; Kate Oakley, ['Art Works' – Cultural Labour Markets: A Literature Review](#), London 2009; Jo Haynes / Lee Marshall, *Reluctant Entrepreneurs: Musicians and Entrepreneurship in the 'New' Music*

Industry, in: *British Journal of Sociology* 69 (2017), 2, 459–482.

18. Most prominently Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, New York 2002.
19. Ulrich Bröckling, *Das unternehmerische Selbst: Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform*, Frankfurt am Main 2007; Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität: Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung*, Frankfurt am Main 2012; Luc Boltanski / Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London 2005. It should be stressed that these studies are interested in the rise of a neo-liberal mentality rather than the creative practice that is at the heart of the aforementioned work in the 'Chicago School' tradition.
20. Matt Stahl, *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work*, Durham, NC 2013.
21. Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley, CA 1982.
22. The coordination problem of collective action and its solution, the 'gradual fitting together of individual lines of action into a coherent collective act' (190) is also the major sociological concern addressed in Faulkner's and Becker's joint book on performing jazz: Robert R. Faulkner / Howard S. Becker, *'Do you know...?': The Jazz Repertoire in Action*, Chicago, IL 2009.
23. Richard A. Peterson / N. Anand, *The Production of Culture Perspective*, in: *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004), 311–334. See also Marco Santoro, *Production Perspectives*, in: John Shepherd / Kyle Devine (eds.), *The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music*, New York 2015, 127–139; Klaus Nathaus / C. Clayton Childress, [The Production of Culture Perspective in Historical Research: Integrating the Production, Meaning and Reception of Symbolic Objects](#), in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 10 (2013), 1, 89–100.
24. Richard A. Peterson, *Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music*, in: *Popular Music* 9 (1990), 1, 97–116. For further case studies, see N. Anand / Richard A. Peterson, *When Market Information Constitutes Fields: Sensemaking of Markets in the Commercial Music Industry*, in: *Organization Science* 11 (2000), 3, 270–284, and the references in Peterson/Anand, *Production of Culture Perspective*. More recently, the approach has

been taken up by historians. See Jonathan Morris, *Why Espresso? Explaining Changes in European Coffee Preferences from a Production of Culture Perspective*, in: *European Review of History* 20 (2013), 881–901; Klaus Nathaus, *How the Hits Got into the Flicks: The Production of 'Schlagerfilms' in West Germany, 1955–1963*, in: Hans J. Wulff / Michael Fischer (eds.), *Musik gehört dazu: Der deutsch-österreichische Schlagerfilm im Kontext seiner Zeit*, Münster (in press).

25. Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, Chicago, IL 1997.
26. The metaphor of 'the market as a mirror', in which producers only see themselves and their competitors, but not the actual consumers, goes back to Harrison White, *Where do Markets Come From?*, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 87 (1981), 517–547. For an overview of the field, see Neil J. Smelser / Richard Swedberg (eds.), *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Princeton, NJ 2005.
27. Philip M. Napoli, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences*, New York 2010.
28. Richard Caves, *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce*, Cambridge, MA 2002, 3.
29. Jennifer Lena / Richard A. Peterson, *Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres*, in: *American Sociological Review* 73 (2008), 698. Note the closeness to Howard Becker's 'art world' definition.
30. The journal *Poetics. Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts* publishes much of this research on classifications, institutions and evaluations in culture. David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, Oakland, CA 2016, does not engage with this recent sociological genre research and reads therefore like an older book.
31. Jennifer C. Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music*, Princeton, NJ 2012.
32. Clayton Childress, *Under the Cover: The Creation, Production, and Reception of a Novel*, Princeton, NJ 2017.

33. Marco Santoro, Producing Cultural Sociology: An Interview with Richard A. Peterson, in: Cultural Sociology 2 (2008), 33–55.
34. Compare, for instance, the readers by John Storey (ed.), Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., Abingdon 2009, and Thomas Hecken, Theorien der Populärkultur: Dreißig Positionen von Schiller bis zu den Cultural Studies, Bielefeld 2007, with the textbook of Wendy Griswold, Cultures and Societies in a Changing World, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., Los Angeles 2013, and the collection by John Shepherd / Kyle Devine (eds.), The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music, New York 2015.
35. See, for example, Thomas Hecken / Marcus S. Kleiner (eds.), Handbuch Popkultur, Stuttgart 2017.
36. Pierre Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production: Cambridge 1993; idem, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Jugdement of Taste, Cambridge, MA 1987; idem, Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge 1977. For a discussion on the applicability of Bourdieu's concepts for the study of popular culture see David Hesmondhalgh, Bourdieu, the Media and Cultural Production, in: Media, Culture and Society 28 (2006), 2, 211–231; for overlaps with American cultural sociology see Santoro, Producing Cultural Sociology.
37. Siegfried Kracauer, Das Ornament der Masse: Essays, Frankfurt am Main 1963; Walter Benjamin, Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit, in: idem, Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften, Frankfurt am Main 1961, 148–184.
38. Max Horkheimer / Theodor W. Adorno, Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente, Amsterdam 1947.
39. For examples, see Horst F. Neißer / Werner Mezger / Günter Verdin, Jugend in Trance? Diskotheken in Deutschland. 2., durchgesehene Auflage, Heidelberg 1981; Werner Mezger, Schlager: Versuch einer Gesamtdarstellung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Musikmarktes der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Tübingen 1975.
40. The Frankfurt School's fall into near oblivion in history and cultural sociology is the precondition for calls for its reappraisal. See Tia DeNora, After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology, Cambridge 2004; James W. Cook, The Return of the Culture Industry, in: idem / Lawrence B. Glickman / Michael O'Malley (eds.), The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present and Future, Chicago, IL 2008, 291–318; Andreas Gebesmair, Die

Fabrikation globaler Vielfalt: Struktur und Logik der transnationalen Popmusikindustrie, Bielefeld 2008.

41. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments*, London 1990<sup>1957</sup>, 250.
42. Stuart Hall / Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, London 1991 [1975].
43. John Clark / Stuart Hall / Tony Jefferson / Brian Roberts, *Subcultures, Cultures and Class*, in: Hall / Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals*, 9–73, 10.
44. William H. Sewell jr., *The Concept(s) of Culture*, in: Victoria E. Bonnell / Lynn Hunt (eds.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Culture and Society*, Berkeley, CA 1999, 35–61.
45. Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock*, London 1978; Angela McRobbie, *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?*, Abingdon 1998; Keith Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, London 1992; Sean Nixon, *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951–69*, Manchester 2013. Negus had had a career as a musician, while Frith had worked as a music journalist before becoming a sociologist and popular music scholar.
46. Stuart Hall, *Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'*, in: Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London 1981, 227–239.
47. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London 1991; Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London 1979. See also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA 1984<sup>1980</sup>.
48. Hecken, *Theorien der Populärkultur*. Irrespective of his Adorno references also Diedrich Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik*, Köln 2014. I discuss Diederichsen's book further in Nathaus, [Why 'Pop' Changed \(Part II\)](#).
49. An instructive discussion of this is offered by Sewell, *Concept(s) of Culture*.
50. See, for instance, Andy Bennett, *Subcultures or Neotribes? Rethinking the Relationship*

between Youth, Style and Musical Taste, in: *Sociology* 33 (1999), 599–617.

51. Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Cambridge 1995.
52. Pierre Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed, in: *Poetics* 12 (1983), 311–356.
53. Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*, Chicago, IL 2001. Swidler's explications of 'how culture matters' are similar to Erving Goffman's concept of 'impression management' (Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York 1959), but adds to this a pointed engagement with competing cultural theories. Her reflections on codes, contexts and institutions are particularly instructive.
54. Paul Théberge / Kyle Devine / Tom Everett (eds.), *Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound*, London 2015; Karin Bijsterveld / Eefje Cleophas / Stefan Krebs et al., *Safe and Sound: A History of Listening Behind the Wheel*, New York 2014; Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*, New York 2000; idem, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*, London 2007.
55. Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, Cambridge 2000.
56. For this – and also as an excellent 'taster' of empirical research in this area –, see Jonathan Sterne, *Sounds Like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space*, in: *Ethnomusicology* 41 (1997), 1, 22–50.
57. Such research could build on Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak®, Easy Listening, and Other Moodsong®*, revised and expanded edition, Ann Arbor, MI 2004.
58. For a rare historical sketch, see Tobias Pontara / Ulrik Volgsten, [Domestic Space, Music Technology and the Emergence of Solitary Listening: Tracing the Roots of Solipsistic Sound Culture in the Digital Age](#), in: *Svensk Tidsskrift for Musikforskning* 99 (2017), 1, 105–123.

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