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Cosmic Ambivalence: Academia's Relationship to the Popular

Ambivalencia cósmica: la relación de academia con lo popular
Ambivalência cósmica: a relação da academia com o popular

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In keeping with academia's place as one of society's principal sources of authority, it has a hard time acknowledging the value of popular culture. This negative attitude goes back a very long way: writing in the 1st century AD, Plutarch recounts the great lawmaker Solon telling a play's author, Thespis: "if we allow ourselves to praise and honour make-believe like this, the next thing will be to find it creeping into our serious business."

This is the first instance I know of popular culture producing such intense disquiet amongst those in power. It is not alone. The emergence of private, silent reading in the 9th century, which ended religion's monopoly on textuality, was criticized as an invitation to idleness. And in the 12th century, John of Salisbury warned of the negative impact of juggling, mime, and acting on "unoccupied minds [...] pampered by the solace of some pleasure [...] to their greater harm." As printed books began to proliferate in the early 18th century, critics feared a return to the "barbarism" of the post-Roman Empire; erudition would be overwhelmed by popular texts, just as it had been by war. When Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Man Werther* was published in 1774, its hero was deemed to have caused numerous mimetic suicides among readers, and the book was banned in many cities.

The extension through societies of the capacity to read had as its corollary the possibility of a public that transcended people physically gathered together. The obvious implication was that mass literacy could inform industrial and political turmoil. When unionists in the Cuban cigar industry organized readings of news and current affairs to workers on the line, management and the state responded brutally. In the United States,

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slave-owners terrorized African-Americans who taught themselves and their colleagues to read; many attributed Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion to his literacy.

The advent of reading outdoors and the arrival of the train as a new site of popular culture generated anxieties about open knowledge and debate. The telegraph's capacity to spread information from the eastern states to 19th-century Californians before they had finished breakfast was accused of exhausting emotional energies at the wrong time of day, while its presence in saloons expanded working-class betting on sporting events. Neurological experts attributed their increased business to telegraphy, alongside the expansion of steam, periodical literature, science, and educated women. Nineteenth-century US society saw spirited scholarly debates over whether new popular media and genres, such as newspapers, crime stories, and novels, would breed anarchic readers lacking respect for the traditionally literate classes. They posed a threat to established élites, because they enabled working people to become independently minded and informed, distracting them from servitude. Anxiety about cultural imperialism also appeared, via Spain's *conquista de América*, Portugal's *missão civilizadora*, France and Britain's *mission civilisatrice*, and Islamic debates over Western domination.

By the early 20th century, academic experts had decreed audiences of popular culture to be passive consumers, thanks to the missions of literary criticism (distinguishing the cultivated from others) and the psy-function (distinguishing the competent from others). The origins of social psychology can be traced to anxieties about "the crowd" in suddenly urbanized and educated countries that raised the prospect of a long-feared ochlocracy of a worthless mob able to share popular texts. Elite theorists emerged from both right and left, arguing that newly literate publics were vulnerable to manipulation by demagogues.

These critics were frightened of socialism, democracy, and popular reason. With civil society growing restive, the wealth of radical civic associations was explained away in social-psychological terms rather than political-economic ones, thanks to "new" scholarship. The psy-function warmed itself by campus fires in departments of psychology, sociology,

education, and communication. Scholars at Harvard took charge of the theory; faculty at Chicago took over the task of meeting and greeting the great unwashed; and those at Columbia and the mid-west were responsible for statistical manipulation.

Such tendencies moved into high gear with the Payne Fund studies of the 1930s, which birthed the media-effects research we know today. They juxtaposed the impact of films on young college professors, male graduate students, their wives, and children in juvenile-correction centers. Pioneering scholars set out to see whether “the onset of puberty is or is not affected by motion pictures.” The researchers asked their subjects whether “all, most, many, some, few, or no Chinese are cunning and underhand” and investigated cinematic “demonstrations of satisfying love techniques” to establish whether “[s]exual passions are aroused and amateur prostitution [...] aggravated.” Laboratory techniques used psychogalvanometers and wired beds with hypnographs and polygraphs.

The example of the Payne Fund studies, the development of communication studies, and the massive growth of the psy-function have led to seven more decades of attempts to correlate youthful consumption of popular culture with anti-social conduct. Worries over popular culture’s indexical and incarnate power underpin a wealth of research that questions, tests, and measures people and their texts. Not all this work assumes a strong relationship between social conduct and audience conduct, but that premise underpins it nevertheless.

Marxism has often viewed popular culture as a route to false consciousness that diverts the working class from recognizing its economic oppression; feminist approaches have moved between condemning the popular as a similar distraction from gendered consciousness and celebrating it as a distinctive part of women’s culture; and cultural studies have regarded it as a key location for the symbolic resistance of class, race, and gender oppression alike.

But there has been a positive reception, as well. For some analysts, popular culture represents the apex of modernity. Rather than encouraging alienation, it stands for the expansion of civil society, the moment in

history when the state becomes receptive to, and part of, the general community. The population is now part of the social, rather than excluded from the means and politics of political calculation, along with a lessening of authority, the promulgation of individual rights and respect, and a newly intense, interpersonal, large-scale human interaction that are necessitated by industrialization and aided by systems of mass communication. The spread of advertising is taken as a model for the breakdown of social barriers, exemplified in the triumph of the popular.

Today—a moment when the Global North uses culture as a selling point for deindustrialized societies, and the Global South does so for never-industrialized ones—we need a nimble, hybrid scholarly approach that is governed not by the old anxieties, but by a critical agenda that inquires *cui bono*—who benefits and loses from governmental and corporate maneuvers around the popular, who complains about the fact, and how can we learn from them?