Inventing Popular Culture
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For Jenny and Katie
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Preface

_Inventing Popular Culture_ is written from the critical perspective of cultural studies. Cultural studies works with an inclusive definition of culture. That is, it is a “democratic” project in the sense that rather than studying only what Matthew Arnold called “the best which has been thought and said” (1960: 6), cultural studies is committed, in principle, to examining all that has been thought and said.

In very broad terms, culture is how we live nature (including our own biology). To say that culture is how we live nature will sound to many people like a hopelessly inclusive way to conceptualize culture. But the world is full of seemingly hopelessly inclusive concepts. Think of the concept of history defined as the study of the past. Hopelessly inclusive? What historians do in practice is recognize the concept at its level of generality, but then limit their investigation to the level of the particular. Similarly, to have a degree in English literature, for example, does not mean that someone has studied all of the ever-changing object of study which counts as English literature. But English literature still continues to exist as an object of study. In the same way, then, to study culture (defined as how we live nature) is not to embark on an examination of all the changing ways we live (and have lived) nature but to focus on particular ways. In this it is no different from most forms of analysis which work from the general to the particular (and then sometimes back to the general).

Culture is an active process. It does not lie dormant in things (that is, any commodity, object, or event that can be made to
signify), waiting patiently to be woken by an appropriate consumer. It is the practice of making and communicating meanings. Culture is not in the object but in the experience of the object: how we make it meaningful, what we do with it, how we value it, etc. “Culture is ordinary” (Williams 1958a): it is how we make sense of ourselves and the world around us; it is the practice through which we share and contest meanings of ourselves, of each other, and of the world. Watching a soap opera and talking about what the characters are doing; arguing about who should have won a football match; remembering together the songs of a shared youth; debating the claims of politicians and big business; protesting at the injustices and economic inequalities of globalization. In these, and in many other ways, we make and share meanings. To modify and paraphrase Karl Marx (1977), we make meanings and we are made by meanings. To share a culture is to interpret the world – to make it meaningful – in recognizably similar ways.

To see culture, however, as the practices and processes of making shared meanings does not mean that cultural studies believes that cultures are harmonious, organic wholes. On the contrary, cultures are both shared and conflicting networks of meanings. Cultures are arenas in which different ways of articulating the world come into conflict and alliance. The fact that meaning is not something fixed and guaranteed in nature, but is always the result of particular ways of representing nature in culture, suggests that the meaning of something can never be fixed, final, or true; its meaning will only ever be contextual and contingent and, moreover, always open to the changing relations of power.

Therefore, although the world certainly exists in all its enabling and constraining materiality outside representation, it is only in practices of representation that the world can be made to mean. Representation constructs the reality it appears only to describe. It is never a simple question of what is true or false but of what counts as “truth.” Ideologies are discourses which attempt to impose closure on meaning in the interests of power; to make what is cultural (i.e. made) appear as nature. Furthermore, dominant ways of making the
world meaningful, produced by those with the power to make their ways of articulating meaning circulate discursively in the world, generate the “hegemonic truths” which seek to assume an authority over the ways in which we think and act; that is, they invite us to take up “subject positions” from which meanings can be made and actions carried out. It is this conflict – the relations between culture and power – which is the core interest of cultural studies.

The version of cultural studies I advocate here is Gramscian (see especially chapter 4 and Storey 1999). From this perspective, the cultural field is marked by a struggle to articulate, disarticulate, and rearticulate particular meanings, particular ideologies, particular politics. Meaning is always a social production, a human practice; and because different meanings can be ascribed to the same thing, meaning is always the site and the result of struggle. The problem with “economic reductionism” (meaning is determined by its mode of production) and “textual essentialism” (meaning is an inherent property of things) is that they drain the world of the activity and the agency which go into the making of meaning, and in so doing they simplify “the politics of culture.” However, although the distinction between, say, high and popular culture (a key concern of this book) has no basis in textual properties or modes of production, this should not lead us to ignore the institutional embeddedness of this distinction. What should be examined, therefore, is not the distinction at the level of textuality or mode of production, but how the distinction is maintained and deployed in strategies of power.

_Inventing Popular Culture_ is about the idea of popular culture, the different ways in which popular culture has been defined for analysis. Like French historian Roger Chartier (1993), I will argue that popular culture is a category invented by intellectuals. Popular culture may be found in earlier historical periods, but the concept only emerges in the late eighteenth century in intellectual accounts of “folk” culture. My argument about popular culture is the same as that made by Raymond Williams in relation to social class. As Williams (1993) points out, “It is obvious, of course, that this spectacular history of the new use of class does not indicate the beginning...
of social divisions in England. But it indicates, quite clearly, a change in the character of these divisions, and it records, equally clearly, a change in attitudes towards them” (xv). What Williams says about class can also be said about popular culture.

**Inventing Popular Culture**, therefore, will not present an analysis of particular texts which can be defined as popular culture; instead it will explore the changing intellectual ways of constructing texts as popular culture and how these intellectual discourses articulate questions of culture and power. As we shall see, debates about popular culture are rarely if ever focused only on forms of entertainment: the idea of popular culture is always entangled with questions of social power, especially in terms of claims and counter-claims about, for example, class, gender, ethnicity, “race,” generation, and sexuality. Each chapter will examine a different way of thinking about popular culture. In particular, the book will explore the ways in which the idea of popular culture is often a way of categorizing and dismissing the cultural practices of “ordinary” people. Although the term popular culture can be articulated to carry a range of different meanings, what all these have in common is the idea of *popularis* – belonging to the people. Therefore, each of the different ways in which popular culture is formulated always carries with it a definition of “the people.”

In *Culture and Society* (first published in 1958), Williams observed, “we live in an expanding culture, yet we spend much of our energy regretting the fact, rather than seeking to understand its nature and conditions” (1993: iv). The most common term for this expanding culture is popular culture. The final aim of *Inventing Popular Culture* is to explore the energy that has been spent on regretting the development of our expanding culture.
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Popular Culture as Folk Culture

In the late eighteenth, throughout the nineteenth, and into the early part of the twentieth century, different groups of intellectuals, working under the different banners of nationalism, Romanticism, folklore, and finally, folk song, “invented” the first concept of popular culture. In fact, these debates eventually produced two definitions of popular culture. The first was popular culture as a quasi-mythical rural “folk culture,” and the other – and it was very much the “other” – was popular culture as the degraded “mass culture” of the new urban-industrial working class.  

The culture of the “common people” has always been an object of concern for men and women with social and political power. However, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as “traditional” popular culture, and the “traditional” cultural relations between dominant and subordinate classes, began to collapse under the sweeping impact of industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of an urban-industrial working class, many European and American intellectuals started to take a special interest in the culture of the “folk” (Burke 1996). Middle-class men and women began to demand stories and songs from the people from whom they had previously demanded only labor and respect. In this way, then, folk culture was very much a category of the learned, constructed by
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intellectuals, especially collectors, editors, and publishers, and not a concept generated by the people defined as the folk.

The collecting of, and the theorizing about, the culture of the folk occurs in two historical periods. The first period (when the objects of collection and study were “ballad” and “folk tales”) began with the publication of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765 and ended with Francis James Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (the first volume of the first edition was published in 1857, the third edition in 1898). The second period (when the object of collection and study was the “folk song”) began with the publication of Carl Engel’s *An Introduction to the Study of National Music* (1866) and ended with the publication in 1907 of Cecil James Sharp’s *Folksong: Some Conclusions.*

Nature and Nationalism

The “discovery” of folk culture was an integral part of emerging European nationalisms. The role of the actual folk – rural workers – was mainly symbolic. As we shall see, they were the mere carriers of something they did not really understand; the embodiment of a way of life that they themselves were increasingly powerless to sustain. From the very influential work of Johann Gottfried Herder in the 1770s to the last major contribution to the debate on folk song, that of Sharp in 1907, we find the same idea repeated over and over again: folk culture is the very embodiment of the nature and character of a nation. For this reason, if for no other, it should be collected and treasured.

In Herder’s work on folk culture the natural and the national blur. The value of *Volkslied* (folk or people’s song), in its spontaneity and simplicity, is that it is almost an outgrowth of nature: it is the nature in which the culture of the nation can be grown. Herder argued that folk song still possessed what all poetry had once possessed – a moral or civilizing function. Folk song thus represented a fundamental challenge to artificial and inauthentic modes of
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living. As such it suggested the possibility of a return to a more “grounded” or “rooted” culture; a return to culture before the Fall into the corrupting conditions of industrialization and urbanization, which for Herder was producing artificiality at the “top” and degradation at the “bottom” of society. But because the music of the folk belonged to a time before the Fall, it carried within it the possibility of purification; the soul of the nation could be made to rise above the contamination and corruption of a mechanical and material civilization. He therefore urged intellectuals to follow his example (of 1774 and 1778) and make collections of the poetry of the folk.

Like Herder, the folk-tale collectors Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm believed that folk culture provided access to the origins of, and the possibility of a return to, an authentic German cultural identity. Although industrialization and urbanization threatened to sweep away what little remained of folk culture, there was still time to collect and preserve this vital and valuable heritage before it disappeared forever. In the preface to the first edition of Household and Children’s Tales (1812), the Grimms presented their collection in the language of a romantic allegory:

when the heavens have unleashed a storm, or when some other natural disaster has battered down a whole harvest, we may well find that in some sheltered corner by the roadside, under hedges and shrubs, a few ears of corn have survived. When the sun begins to shine again, they will grow, hidden and unnoticed. No early scythe will cut them for the cornhouses. Only late in summer when the ears are ripe and heavy with grain, some poor humble hand will glean them, and bind them carefully, one by one. The little bundles will be carried home, more cherished than big sheaves, and will provide food for the winter, and perhaps the only seed for the future. (quoted in Michaelis-Jena 1970: 52–3)

The harvest that had been battered down by urbanization and industrialization had left behind the remains of a simpler time of