Part I
Theory and Method

1

Starting to Write a History of the Present Day: Culture and Sociology

David Chaney

The 'problem' of culture

In the second half of the twentieth century, a major innovation in the syllabus of academic sociology was the study of **culture**. The new theme was not exclusive to sociology, so it was also explored and caused major revisions in a number of fields within the human studies, such as philosophy, art history and English literature, among others. The topic also spawned its own distinctive field of cultural studies (Chaney 1994).[1] The idea that all this was an innovation might seem paradoxical, as culture had been central to the human sciences and particularly anthropology for at least a century. Thus we need to consider how and why the sociological syllabus was reshaped by a turn to culture. I suggest that in turning to culture sociologists revised and developed the fundamental sociological project of the characterization of modernity. It can now be seen that these revisions amounted to the beginning of writing a history of the present day.

An initial suggestion could be that a particular distinctiveness of the new perspectives lay in their concern with the culture of contemporary post-industrial societies. This is in itself insufficient, however. More broadly, we need to consider how culture was changing in later modernity, the social relationships between those who made and/or commentated upon culture and those who consumed it, and whether traditional distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture were being changed.

In this chapter, I explore how and why culture was 'discovered' in Britain as a topic after a century of sociological work. I will use this particular episode in cultural history to begin a more general discussion of universal sociological questions that must be posed in the study of culture. These are:

- *What* is the culture being seen as problematic?
- And by *whom* and *how* is it being discovered?

Cultural Sociology: An Introduction, First Edition. Les Back et al. Published 2012 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Answers to these questions will help us to understand the reasons why and the ways in which cultural sociology has become so central to the sociological syllabus at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In effect, this means looking at how sociological work has adapted to the cultural changes of late modernity. These are clearly major issues, and ones that this collection is intended to address. In this chapter, I say something about how culture came to be seen as distinctively problematic in the 1950s and 1960s in Britain – not just as academic study but in the broader politics of cultural and social change, as well as in terms of relationships between the heterogeneous **discourses** of cultural studies and the broader discourses of academic sociology.

As an introductory point, it is important to recognize that in certain respects the culture of the 'masses' had been seen as a problem by certain members of the intelligentsia and opinion-leaders since a new urban popular culture came into existence. To go back only to the first half of the twentieth century, culture was often considered as an element in wider concerns with ideological knowledge and the ways in which rationality could be defended and sustained in an era of mass demagoguery, particularly Nazism.

A central element in these fears over mass ideologies was the idea that new forms of mass entertainment and information (principally films and radio at the time) could easily subvert traditional forms of moral and political order. In the United States, for example, such a concern was focused by research known as the Payne Fund Studies on the effects of mass cinema attendance, particularly on the young. In Britain, an influential version of this concern was a book written on the dangers of popular literature by a Cambridge intellectual, Q.D. Leavis (1932; see also Eliot 1948).

These examples illustrate some of the ways in which sets of fears around 'culture' were being expressed at this time. In the immediate aftermath of the cataclysmic World War I, it was widely felt that a new society was emerging or would have to be made. In the process, there were concerns that much of what was romanticized as a shared culture between the ruling class and the lower orders was being undermined. It could be said, then, that culture was being seen as a problem because it was being threatened by mass audiences and mass tastes. These fears over the implications of cultural change persisted in the latter half of the twentieth century, although much of the work of cultural studies was to celebrate popular experience and cultural forms. To assume that fear was glibly replaced by celebration would be to miss much about the way the 'problem' of culture has more organically adapted in both academic discourses and the discourses of the wider society.

In part, this is because even those most dismayed by modernity have had to recognize that the culture of traditional pre-industrial society had been disappearing for a long time. As an often nationalist response, there had been a movement in several countries to collect and record the folk songs and traditions of a disappearing world (Storey 2003). This sense of a distinctive national culture under threat was further exacerbated by the early forms of a global mass culture such as the Hollywood film industry in the first half of the century. A concern to 'civilize' the new urban masses of industrial class society had been a recurrent theme in public discourse at least since the first popular national festival – the Great Exhibition of 1851. However, it was given new forms and a distinctive emphasis by the strength and vitality of a popular culture largely focused around forms of mass entertainment – radio, cinema and popular literature, and so on – that developed from 1900 onwards. In the British context, the perceived need to improve the culture of the masses was seen as the central role of the institution of public service broadcasting.

This was an institutional arrangement in which the possibility of commercial gain was sacrificed for ideological ends (Briggs 1970; Scannell 1991).

The complex of political forces that sustained the founding and hegemony of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) throughout this period is too complex to be summarized adequately here. It was, however, a central aspect of the meaning of public service that an 'improving' culture had to be made available to – and was indeed insisted upon for – the national audience. The stratification of radio into audience segments and the early introduction of commercial television based on regional producers modified but did not seriously challenge the authority of cultural elites to shape a hierarchy of taste (McDonnell 1991). And to the institutional power of the BBC should be added the influence of the Arts Council, founded immediately after the war to spread culture outside elite bastions. In this setting, the role of intellectuals – not just those working directly for the BBC but also in universities and working for broadsheet newspapers and magazines – was of central importance: first, as shapers of how the national culture understood itself; and second, as articulators of how that culture was, more or less effectively, to be made accessible to mass audiences. It follows that, as an initial step, our understanding of the 'discovery' of a problem of culture must begin with the power and character of the intelligentsia. That is, a grasp of changes in the meaning and forms of culture in the contemporary era must be grounded in changes in the status, authority, recruitment and institutional hegemony of this intellectual class.

A number of relevant factors can briefly be mentioned. Some indication of the characteristic outlook of elites is provided by the training of those who constituted the influential intelligentsia of British culture. Looking back from today's vantage point, we might be surprised by the significance of departments of English literature. Even now a training in reading English literature has been the foundation for the careers of many cultural commentators, critics, producers and directors. This has been particularly relevant to a discussion of the policies around both the provision of culture and the sorts of culture that were appropriate because of the influence of the teaching of F.R. Leavis and his school (Leavis 1977). Leavis was understood to be concerned by a betrayal of cultural standards in public life, and emphasized the centrality of quality and the ways in which good literature is able to reflect imaginative experience truthfully. Although a Leavisite emphasis upon the significance and power of the greatest literature came to be rather excoriated in the more populist and wide-ranging emphases of cultural studies, it is significant that two books published in the late 1950s, and subsequently seen to have had an important role in redirecting concerns around the provision of culture (Hoggart 1957; Williams 1958), were both written firmly within Leavisite perspectives. It is also significant that both authors wrote from a self-consciously working-class background, and saw themselves as marginal to the institutionalized centres of cultural power in Britain.

In this opening section of the chapter, a two-part theme is introduced that resonates throughout the whole: (i) the idea that the 'discovery' of culture stemmed from fears about the implications of changes to a mass culture; and (ii) the importance of the relationship of cultural elites to mass audiences. Leavisite influences remained significant on cultural policies and the terms of culture debate, particularly in relation to a continuing commitment to the defence of 'quality' (Thompson 1964). There was in the 1960s, however, a realization that the values of 'high culture' were felt to be indefensible and

inappropriate in an increasingly commercialized and consumer-driven culture. There is an interesting contrast, for example, in how fine artists in the late 1950s and 1960s increasingly turned away from the rather drab conventions of English fine art and began to explore for the first time the iconography of advertising and popular culture more generally in the movement known as Pop Art.

It could not escape the attention of even the most serious literary scholar that an explosive burst in creative energy occurred in fields such as advertising, fashion and mass media. From the late 1950s onwards, there was what George Melly (1970) later characterized as a 'revolt into style' – particularly among the young – which above all involved the pioneering of new sounds and movements associated with a mass, youth-oriented popular music (Frith 1992). It changed the cultural landscape. This shift in cultural hierarchies and agendas was also matched by an extraordinary pouring of creative energy into the making of popular television for both the BBC and commercial companies. For the first time in the era of modern life, it became fashionable for 'the brightest and the best' of cultural elites to work in the mass media. This meant that in the second half of the twentieth century, mass television was the most innovative and rewarding field of cultural production for both creative intellectuals and popular audiences (Corner 1991).

Confronting cultural divisions

For many, it was within this context of rapid cultural change that it became necessary to re-examine intellectual presuppositions about the role and nature of culture in the lives of ordinary people. Before discussing some of the ways in which that re-examination was undertaken in Britain, it is necessary to look briefly at the dominant hierarchy of cultural value during the first half of the twentieth century. Despite many intellectuals' commitment to an idea of a common culture in pre-industrial society, it is in fact clear that one effect of the massive changes of industrialization and urbanization was the development of distinct and separate class cultures. Considerable effort was put into segregating the spaces inhabited by different classes, such as the parts of a seaside resort visited (and the transport used to reach it), or the parts of a theatre if they were sharing a common entertainment. In the first half of the twentieth century, new forms of mass entertainment such as the cinema transcended these class divisions to some extent, although there were attempts – particularly in the early years of cinema – to segregate the social levels of the audience. In general, however, it is important to note that patterns of cultural activity were clearly differentiated by class and locality.

Sport had been promoted by Victorian and later reformers as a way of transcending aspects of these segregated and generally mutually antagonistic cultures, but where members of different classes might play on the same team they were given different titles – for example, gentlemen and players in cricket, who used separate entrances to the playing field. In general, though, sports did not overlap class boundaries so that the sport you played was a clear indication of your class affiliation (identifications which to some extent survive to the present day), although it is important to recognize regional differences in this. Association football remained a thoroughly working-class game in terms of both who played it and who watched it, and it was really only in the 1960s,

facilitated by television and the popularity of the World Cup in 1966, that it started to become glamorized and to attract middle-class audiences (Mason 1989). Within this context, it becomes more comprehensible that where culture did figure in the sociological discourse it was generally as a way of describing community life, so that culture was being used to refer to a whole way of life rather than a set of cultural activities or tastes (Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter 1969; see also Williams 1958).

It is relevant in this context to note that one of the indices of cultural change in the 1960s was an attempt to represent the reality of working-class life in several cultural forms (for example, film, literature and television). Previously, members of the working class had been portrayed through comic or menacing stereotypes, so that they were effectively bowdlerized through patronizing portrayals as in the stock characters played by George Formby or Gracie Fields. Although these figures were often very popular and were important stars, they sentimentalized the realities of working-class life and were in stark contrast to the films, books, television and plays of the 1960s that garnered a generic label of social realist or kitchen sink dramas (see Hill 1986; Elsom 1976; Stead 1989).

The discovery of culture that is our theme thus has at least two distinct but related strands. The first is a gradual appreciation by cultural elites that popular culture was not coarsely vulgar and lacking in merit; the second is that the semi-autonomous and largely hidden domains of popular experience had to be experienced on their own terms. It is significant that this feeling of discovery was being undertaken at a time when the fundamental structures of working-class communities – the industries of coal, steel, shipbuilding, rail and dock work – were beginning their rapid contraction or even destruction. If we also consider massive programmes of rehousing and new town development, as well as suburban migration, then the frameworks of cultural communities were changing at the same time as new forms of youth culture and consumerism, and forms of mass entertainment, were emerging (Hebdige 1979).

For the intelligentsia, it must have seemed that everything that was solid was melting into air. Although recruitment to cultural elites was still predominantly from the ranks of the middle and upper classes, this was changing in response to a step-change expansion in the numbers of people attending universities and associated changes in degree structures and themes. At least partly as a consequence of these developments, the nature of politics was also changing – driven by new forms of radicalism. New single-issue political movements emerged to mobilize new political constituencies, most strikingly in relation to opposition to nuclear weapons and subsequently the US neo-colonial war in Vietnam. These campaigns also pioneered distinctive forms of protest, such as marches, mass demonstrations and non-violent civil disobedience (Gitlin 1993; Roszak 1971).

A new political culture was therefore developing in opposition to institutionalized authority, and this to some extent complemented new predominantly working-class youth cultures. There was then a more middle-class counter-culture in which there was an aspiration to emulate the avant-garde European art movements from earlier in the century, combined with a romantic Bohemianism from the United States fuelled by new forms of drug use (more accurately, drugs became common among middle-class youth rather than being confined to metropolitan ghettoes). Although inspired in part by innovations in modern art, this counter-culture engaged very strongly with contemporary popular culture, not least in the blues groups that came to symbolize an alternative lifestyle later in the 1960s (Sandbrook 2006).

The political culture was in these ways going through a process of rapid and fundamental change. This process was very significant for the discovery of culture. This is because, rather than culture being understood purely as a set of aesthetic concerns with interpretations and meanings, sociological issues were understood to be central to the broader 'cultural project'. These sociological issues can be summarized as:

1. how the nature of social order is to be understood;
2. how the ramifications of the relations of 'power, property and privilege' (to use Williams's phrase) were to be sought in every aspect of British society, particularly cultural forms (and not just the institutionalized politics of parties and the economy).

In this context, the reworking of socialist theory and historiography by a number of authors, and often focused in the British context by the newly founded journal *New Left Review*, was an important element. British political culture typically has prided itself on a pragmatic empiricism in approach, but at this time there was a significant turn towards Europe for theoretical inspiration.

More wide-ranging were new modes of struggles for emancipation that were initially particularly focused on situations in the United States. I am thinking here of movements for Black Power and Gay Pride, but such struggles quickly came to be seen as having a major relevance to understanding forms of oppression in contemporary Britain. Particularly important for social politics and cultural studies was the emergent Women's Movement (Thornham 2000; McRobbie 2009; Rowbotham 2001). In part growing out of new forms of political radicalism, this was a movement for liberation and analysis of oppression that was to become central to new forms of cultural theorizing.

The next section will discuss the significance of the various forms of the new politics for the theorizing of culture for sociological thought. Concluding this section, it is appropriate to note that the contemporary interdependence of culture and politics was dramatized particularly powerfully in '*les évènements*' of Paris in May 1968 (Willener 1970). In this 'moment', which seemed to offer the possibility of a cultural revolution, many elements of a changing political culture were clearly manifest. New ideas spawned in this intellectual and political ferment underlay many significant developments in the theorizing of cultural forms.

Culture and sociology

The purpose of this chapter so far has been to indicate the social and political context of changing cultural values. This section considers institutional innovations in the study of culture, and looks at how these new ideas were taken up in sociological practice. Thus the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was founded at the University of Birmingham at the beginning of the academic year in 1964. It is unsurprising and appropriate that the Centre was an adjunct of the Department of English (initially inspired by the leadership of Richard Hoggart). While there were some close personal connections to the Department of Sociology, the dominant character of early work at the Centre was firmly within a framework of critical theorizing, and was based on methodologies of literary criticism adapted to ideology critique. (The intellectual history

of the Centre and of cultural studies more generally has been discussed in a number of publications, such as Hartley 2003; Strinati 1995; Tudor 1999.)

It could well be argued that not only did the initial turn to culture take place outside the syllabus of sociology, but to a considerable extent in opposition to sociological discourse – although it is important to note that a number of quasi-ethnographic projects by graduate students and research associates attached to the Centre have proved important resources for social theory (see, inter alia, Willis 1978; McRobbie 1991; Hall and Jefferson 1976). The main point to emphasize is that the cultural forms and formations of contemporary society that were being 'discovered' by those drawn to the new focus were principally seen as topics for critiques of ideology (particularly under the leadership of Stuart Hall). It was felt by many drawn to cultural studies that sociology had largely failed to emancipate itself from the ideological hegemony of a repressive social order. This meant that the relations between sociology as it was being developed and the emergent themes of cultural studies covered a range from excited enthusiasm to mutual suspicion. Aspects of either end of this range will be considered in turn.

We begin by looking at the more positive responses to the cultural initiative. The rather clumsy formulation 'sociology as it was being developed' has been used because British sociology more generally was going through a process of rapid change at this time. First, many more young people were participating in tertiary education, so colleges were expanding with new departments being founded. Second, the young people being recruited to the discipline were far from immune to changes in the contemporary political culture. Many were actively involved in new forms of radicalism, and these interests and commitments were expressed in new ways of teaching, as well as in new emphases and additions to the established syllabus. These trends combined to create a fundamental radicalism in conceptions of social order. For example, the study of crime and criminal behaviour shifted from an emphasis upon control to a more celebratory concern with deviance and other forms of transgressive social action. This shift in stance had strong links to a more cultural approach, not least with representations of 'dis-order' (Cohen 1985). There were other similar innovations in perspective in fields such as education, the family, political sociology and social theorizing. Above all, the subsequent development of gender as a key analytic resource for the study of social order, as well as the development of women's studies as foci for research and theorizing in their own right, had major implications for the sociological syllabus (Shiach 1999; O'Sullivan 1982).

There were, then, many opportunities for an emphasis on culture to be consistent with other themes in contemporary sociology. Unsurprisingly, from the late 1960s appointments were being made to lecture on culture in departments of sociology. There was great variation in how the brief for such positions was interpreted – from, for example, a commitment to theorizing in cultural studies, to film studies and popular culture more generally, to more traditional concerns with the sociology of art and literature (the extent to which form and content – particularly in high art – can be interpreted from sociological perspectives). A number of innovations in related work also occurred, which have continued to reshape the academic syllabus under a variety of disciplinary rubrics. These included studies in folk and popular music, leisure and entertainment, mass communications, and consumer culture and fashion.[2] Such a variety of topics generated an equivalent variety of styles of work, from exclusively theoretical to various modes of empirical study; however, perhaps the greatest interest was in the area of social

theory (the title of the influential journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, founded in 1982, locates these overlapping interests very clearly).

Faced with the self-evident inadequacies of the repressive regimes of self-styled communist states, in conjunction with the stuttering compromises of social democratic movements in Western Europe, it is not surprising that those caught up in a radicalized environment felt the need for new ideas regarding how to proceed. Neither should it be surprising that in the rapidly expanding sociology departments of the 1970s, the syllabus of social theory moved well beyond the previously dominant perspectives of American social theory. This broadening of horizons was greatly facilitated by translation and publication in English of a range of authors who quickly came to be seen as central to the concerns of those working in both cultural studies and sociology. Rather than review this enormous bibliography, it is sufficient to say that in the 1970s work by authors as diverse as (and not in any order of significance) Foucault, Barthes, Elias, Simmel, Benjamin, Adorno, Bourdieu, Habermas and Brecht, as well as others, was either published in English for the first time or the corpus of their work expanded.

One effect of this new body of work, particularly in the context of a revived interest in and reworking of the Marxist tradition, was that sociologists in general reoriented their work from the perspectives of American to European social thought. Sociologists increasingly saw themselves as engaging in a normative critique of late capitalist society as an empirical analysis, and under this rubric there was a strong sense of a common bond between staff and students, which sometimes acted to exclude 'unbelievers'. A sense of a common ground between those addressing issues in cultural theory and social theory more generally – also grounded in a common commitment to European social thought – was intensified by the rise of a diverse body of work loosely interested in notions of postmodern society and postmodernism (Harvey 1989; Seidman 1994; Owen 1997).

While in certain respects an emphasis upon contemporary culture in sociological work was consistent with other changes and developments in the discipline, there were at the same time many working in sociology who saw cultural studies as a cuckoo in the nest. This constitutes the second, more negative, response to the cultural turn. Within the ranks of the broader sweep of sociology departments that were likely to contain social policy specialists – perhaps criminologists or even anthropologists as well as more traditional sociological specialists – there was a considerable amount of distrust and even resentment of what might have been seen as the glamour attaching to the now-fashionable cultural studies.

This can be attributed to a combination of attitudes. First, British sociology was greatly influenced by strong traditions of commitment to social amelioration (or, more pejoratively, social engineering). Second, there was a strong suspicion of a lack of methodological rigour among cultural theorists. These attitudes were expressed as scepticism over the relevance of the topic of culture – a scepticism reinforced by the greater salience of philosophy as a meeting ground for social theorists and those working in cultural studies. English philosophy had been so sterile for at least a century that new philosophical currents (particularly from Europe) were very welcome, but often seemed alien in both manner and terminology to the sensibilities of conventional sociology. The suspicion was also undoubtedly heightened by the subsequent association of cultural themes with postmodernist ideas, together with a presumption that this implied uninhibited relativism.

To many, the new concern with culture as a sociological topic thus seemed to challenge the character of the sociological perspective. Because the main concerns of the 'culturalists' were with meaning, ideology and a background of critical reading, it seemed that the focal problem should be seen as the character of representation in cultural forms and social discourse more generally. Although I have stated that a commitment to deconstructing social order and associated relations of power and privilege are central to the cultural project, for many in sociology it was hard to see these aims being addressed in readings of cultural forms – however critical. An emphasis on representation, with its consequential implication that 'everything that passes for knowledge' in society can be subject to a critical reading, should not have been surprising to those familiar with work in the sociology of knowledge. However, a large proportion of the constituency of sociology proved to have an obstinate commitment to the graspable – indeed self-evident – reality of the social world, thus finding deconstructing reflexive representations at best distracting and at worst perverse.

An attempt to bridge the gulf between positive and negative attitudes to cultural perspectives can be found in the collection of papers from the first national conference of the British Sociological Association (1978), focused on culture (Barrett *et al.* 1979). The organizers of the conference saw themselves as opening new territory: 'Given the virtual non-existence of any sociology of culture we were confronted by a field that was largely unmapped' (Barrett *et al.* 1979: 9).[3] In practice, though, the novelty of the situation was neglected by these authors in favour of a more traditional sociological determinism.

Thus their approach was to treat the representations of cultural practice as essentially epiphenomenal – that is, as something determined by forces 'outside' cultural practice. Such an approach is locked into an epistemology of material 'reality' and representational 'illusion'. It neglects the constitutive power of narratives to make experience meaningful – that is, to become ways of staging social practice that frame and shape actors' understandings of meaning and possibility. Second, an epiphenomenal perspective effectively leaves those who use representations – audiences, consumers, and so on – as passive cultural dupes. In the years that have followed this conference, there has been a massive amount of work on how audiences actively interact with representations in making them meaningful (Morley 1992). One can go further and make a more subversive sociological critique of an account of culture in which the determination of representation is emphasized above all else. In this critique, key features of the character of representation in modernity which would otherwise have been neglected are rescued. Three themes in this critique are outlined briefly below.

First, a persistent strand in the culture of modernity is that critical representation has typically sought to escape being explicit or too clearly determined by what it represents (Eagleton 2008). Our words, pictures, films, sounds and buildings are, to differing degrees, abstract allusions to the reality of the world we inhabit. In this lies much of the power of representation, but it also entails an essential open-endedness in interpretation. The second theme is almost self-evident in a culture of spectacle. As the world has become more modern, the illusions and spectacles of entertainment and persuasion have moved out of specialist sites such as theatres and cinemas to become universally present and thus pervasive in every aspect of life. In important ways, culture has become the basis for rather than the reflection of social life (Chaney 1994: ch. 5). Third, an epiphenomenal approach assumes that there is 'a real', which somehow exists prior to the way in which

it is represented; yet in so many ways what we take to be real is that way because of how it is mediated or represented. Our grasp of the real is therefore doubled or made reflexive through the ways in which we can represent, narrate, account for and dramatize an iconography of social life (Chaney 1996, 2002).

These critiques are based on an account of representation in culture in which representation both helps to shape the world of meaning and is at the same time formed or determined by the social relations of that world. In writing a history of the present day – that is, an interpretation of social process and cultural change as it is unfolding – we need to be aware of both the constraints on and possibilities for action and understanding.

It should be becoming clear that, in turning to the study of culture, sociology was at last engaging with the character of modernity. This was not an arbitrary fashion of a particular era but rather an expression of a complex battle over who was going to be able to write the history of the present day, and in what ways. Modernity is a historical phenomenon, and thus one that will change over time. Modernism as a movement of distinctive aspirations in the representation of modernity may well be exhausted (Clark 1999), but the problems posed by, as well as the achievements of, modernism have not been discarded. There is an enormous literature on how culture has changed and is changing, but the ways in which we recognize, describe and interpret these changes shows that they are not meaningless. It may well be that one of the most fruitful ways of beginning to open up the character of recent change is through recognizing that, as contemporary culture has changed the status, authority and social character of the intelligentsia – the group particularly charged with the production and interpretation of culture – that group has changed too (Bauman 1987).

Cultural change

The turn to culture as a sociological topic led to a fundamental reconsideration of the sociological project and appropriate methodologies. Sociological engagement with the nature of cultural representation – that is, all the ways we have of talking about, picturing and understanding ourselves, the repertoire of social knowledge in effect – requires a concern with how to write a history of the present day – or, to put it more simply, how to write about cultural change. In this section, some contemporary developments in the theme that has run throughout the chapter – the interrelationships of popular taste and the culture of social and intellectual elites – will be discussed.

The mode of change to be considered concerns the relationship of popular taste with the orthodoxies of elite culture. The argument will not be that cultural hierarchies have disappeared, or the even less likely proposition that social hierarchies have disappeared, but that their persistence has been masked by a display of cultural ordinariness. This takes two main forms: first, that the boundaries differentiating class hierarchies of taste are ostensibly denied; and second, that the tastes of ordinary people are not only not ignored, but ostensibly celebrated. These modes of populism will be characterized by the – ironic – heading of radical democratization.

To begin, we should be reminded of the points already made concerning the class-based segregation of cultural taste in earlier phases of the modern era. Although the character of popular culture changed to an extraordinary degree in the first half of the

twentieth century, class cultures remained largely separate, with the middle and upper classes maintaining an effective monopoly of high culture and the discriminations of good taste. From the perspective of elite standards, popular culture was trite, formulaic, lacking in sensitivity and reliant on spectacular effects rather than a nuanced exploration of character. The primary responsibility of elite institutions such as universities was therefore understood to be to defend cultural standards, and where possible help to elucidate them and make them accessible to the less advantaged. It has also been noted that the authority of these standards and the elites' confidence in them began to wane in the years following World War II.

Popular culture in the 1960s began to break out of its ghetto, and hierarchies of taste became considerably more confused. One way of illustrating this point is to say that when 'toffs' patronized the music halls at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were self-consciously slumming it, enjoying the vulgarity of popular taste. When young men at art schools (or private schools) started forming rock bands (such as Pink Floyd), they were aping popular taste – but now because it was fashionable, even avant-garde. Another area in which boundaries between class cultures became blurred was television audiences. Television became a mass medium for the first time in the 1960s, as coverage became nationwide and sets were a lot cheaper to buy. There were still presumptions of a stratification of taste, as in the distinction between BBC2 and the other channels, but mainstream television became fashionable and innovative too. Or one could mention the development of popular holiday-making outside Britain at this time, with innovations in transport such as cheap air travel making mass tourism possible (Rojek and Urry 1997). More generally, fashion itself became fashionable, with a vast expansion of consumer culture and youth culture as heterogeneous melting-pots for new lifestyles.[4]

Of course, it is essential to emphasize that discriminations in taste remained potent indices of class affiliations. Holidaying on the Costa Brava was not the equivalent of a holiday cottage in the French countryside, and shopping at even Marks & Spencer was not the same as patronizing Harvey Nichols. In a society structured by inequalities in class and **status**, such distinctions were essential in order to sustain the social fabric (the power and persistence of class-based discriminations has been demonstrated most powerfully in Bourdieu's (1984) study of taste; see also Bennett *et al.* 2009). It is also important to recognize that certain high arts, such as opera, literary novels and abstract art, retained their privileged status and were certainly not opened up to popular audiences.

Yet it remains true that the terrain of the cultural landscape began to change markedly towards a more widespread acceptance that the forms and styles of popular culture were no longer to be patronized only by social elites. In all sorts of ways, the opinions of the masses were continually sought and ostensibly given equal weight with so-called experts. As part of this shift in perspective, academic commentary on culture was no longer confined to high art in fields such as art history, literary criticism and music schools. Film studies, popular music, media studies and mass leisure became – albeit gradually – recognized as respectable fields for academic study.

There has been a development then of a strong populist current in which aspects of the privileges of established elites were increasingly called into question. This current was not confined to cultural hierarchies, but became part of a general social climate. For example, the Thatcherite revolution was not just an attack on public services or professional autonomy, but also involved unseating the land-owning gentry from their

dominance in Conservative politics. Margaret Thatcher's political heirs – most markedly Tony Blair – have attempted to mask their privileged backgrounds by putting on 'mockney' or 'estuarial' accents, and lying about a childhood commitment to regional football. More generally, the form of address in public life has shifted as the demotic has become standard and marks of education or privilege are avoided. Even the Queen has shifted the social register of her public voice downwards. The tone of public discourse displayed by the BBC, as the guardian of a national culture, has broadened very considerably and become more popular. Even what used to be called broadsheet or quality newspapers have in general shrunk to tabloid size and adopted more populist forms of presentation and subject matter.

In a recent book (Chaney 2002), I summarized this current with the label of radical democratization. I mean by this term that, although Britain formally became a popular democracy early in the twentieth century, the structures and privileges of social hierarchy continued to dominate the institutions of public life, such as law, medicine, education and politics, as well as culture. In the latter years of the twentieth century, the populist current purported to complete the unfinished revolution of democratic change, and thus its radical import. In this current, every opinion is presumed to be of equal value, and the authority of expertise is widely discredited.

Despite this, it is of course accepted – although some find this surprising – that a democratization of tone has served only to mask the persistence of social and cultural inequalities. Not only has Britain *not* become a more egalitarian society, with differences in standard of living between social groups widening it has actually become *less* equal. My use of the term 'radical democratization' is therefore meant to be ironic, and thus to direct attention to how and why a populist ethos functions as an ideology in which the illusions of choice mystify the inequalities of contemporary society.[5]

While critical research into the character and function of populism should not be confined to the cultural sphere, this is an area in which populism has become more pervasive. The changing character of culture is particularly relevant to both the status and character of the intelligentsia and creative producers, and to the nature of cultural objects. What have the implications of changes in the production and marketing of culture been for creative personnel? The production of culture for mass audiences has always necessitated distinctive modes of industrialization (Power and Scott 2004; Hesmondhalgh 2002). Typically, culture industries have sought to rationalize processes of distribution as far as possible, while allowing production units high degrees of autonomy and informality in order to facilitate innovation.

One way in which forms of change might be addressed is by considering changing roles and functions associated with new technologies. It has, for example, frequently been remarked that the 'news' function of newspapers has been changed by the development of rolling news channels on radio and television, as well as news access on web sites. Newspapers have been forced to shift away from an emphasis on breaking news – apart from occasional pieces of investigative journalism, although those are becoming increasingly exceptional with greater reliance on agency sources (Davies 2008) – to a much more extensive use of columnists providing commentary on public affairs and/or a concentration on entertainment news, principally the activities of celebrities and sports stars. Curiously, their diminished role in generating news seems to have been associated with a greater influence over shaping news, so that politicians are now more influenced by

newspaper-set agendas than previously. However, even this conception of journalism as a print medium is hard to sustain in light of falling advertising revenues, and is changing with increasing use of web sites set up by newspapers and the rise of the blogosphere. It is therefore possible that the future newspaper is more likely to function as a gateway or set of portals to more specialized news resources or commentaries.

Clearly, these sorts of changes have major implications not only for columnists, journalists and other public figures mediating the news, but also for the character of public discourse. The traditional model of the public sphere has been a small focus of metropolitan sources radiating out through gatekeepers and other influentials to mass audiences. Whether or not such ideas of mass-ness were ever justified, changes in the organization of the production and marketing of culture partly induced by technological developments have meant that audiences are no longer masses in the same sense. Increasingly, it seems that older conceptions of 'the performance' that is the cultural text – whether it be film, book, sports event or art exhibition – which is the object of their collective attention are being superseded.

Traditionally, performances were resourced by charging audiences an admission fee to the event. In an era of mass production, that model could be retained while it was possible to sell audience members individual copies of a cultural good. Newspapers and television developed an alternative model in which the good was itself subsidized or free, but resourced through the willingness of advertisers to pay for the right to hitch their marketing to the object. In both cases, though, the distinctiveness of the cultural good being sold was enshrined in a notion of copyright so that ownership of the good was restricted – usually to the distribution agency. Now both of these models are being undermined – in one way, because the good (for example, a book or record or film) can be accessed online and copying by downloading cannot be controlled, and in another way, because the good might not exist as a discrete event but simultaneously be happening over a multiplicity of sites. In effect, this has meant that copyright has become intensely contested and, in the judgement of some commentators, is being superseded to the point of becoming irrelevant.

The significance of the legal notion of copyright is that it makes a cultural production into a marketable commodity. It has therefore underlain the character of cultural work since at least the Renaissance in fifteenth-century Europe. It is in this sense that the concept of the artist is inseparable from the notion of a commodity, with value that can be bought and sold. If the notion of copyright – and thus the uniquely valued object – is changing, then the character of authorship is also changing. A notion of individual authorship traditionally has been more significant in the sphere of high culture where value – both commercial and aesthetic – typically has been very dependent upon an attribution of particular authorship. Thus marginal and trivial jottings can be found to have a significant value if they can be reframed by being shown to be the work of a high-status individual. A deconstruction of authorship is thus likely to prove particularly tricky for aesthetic and commercial discourses.

One solution to the problem of selling cultural goods when they are produced in digital formats that can be copied quickly, infinitely and in ways that cannot be controlled has been to abandon the 'good' as the object being sold. In this approach, the object – for example, a recording of a group performing a collection of songs – is given away free or for a nominal sum in the expectation that substantial revenues can be generated

by associated para-textual goods such as live performances by the group or endorsed clothing. These new forms of marketing will require a considerable amount of ingenuity on the part of those selling culture, and clearly many organizations have been reluctant to abandon entirely the traditional conception of 'the work of art' as that which is being sold. More generally, it seems that contextual or supplementary 'cultural goods' may be becoming more significant in their social effects.

An interesting example is provided by the ways in which high cultural objects have been found to be important factors in schemes of social and cultural regeneration. A number of unlikely places – such as the Baltic Centre, the Sage concert hall and the Angel of the North, all on the South Tyneside bank in the United Kingdom – have found that investment in prestigious cultural developments works very effectively to generate new housing developments and generally to completely change the character and perceived identity of an area. In part, these developments work through attracting tourists, both nationally and internationally, as in the case of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the Tate Modern gallery in south London, and in part they function through changing the meaning of a place. In these situations, the culture that is being produced is less about individual works – indeed, the content of museums and galleries often seems fairly irrelevant – than a claim for a distinctive identity as in the European City of Culture appellation. Culture becomes integral to the marketing of a place that is usually, but not exclusively, a city and as such has come to function as an end in itself.

Conclusion

I should clarify that my central concern has been with some aspects of how the syllabus of sociology has changed and developed in response to cultural change, and how continuing processes of change will present further challenges in understanding both the character of contemporary culture and the forms of the social world. I hope to have shown that the essential cultural change to which all those concerned were responding was everything that was involved in the emergence of a mass culture. The implication of the discovery of culture for academic sociology was that it put the theme of the character of modernity firmly back at the heart of the sociological enterprise. It is a perfectly reasonable argument to say that the meaning and implications of modernity have been the key problematic of sociology for and since the 'founding fathers'; too often, though, the practice of sociology has drifted or been directed into the management of social order. Themes of cultural sociology require us instead to consider the ways in which social order has been, and is being, made meaningful for the new publics of modern experience – to write a history of the present day. Only in the light of these reflections can we begin to contest and change the terms of that order.

Notes

1 In the book referenced here, I characterized the emergence of culture as a distinctive focus as a 'cultural turn', punning on the use of the term 'linguistic turn' to refer to the distinctive focus on language studies earlier in the century.

2 Later developments in fields such as the sociology of the body and everyday life were excavations of neglected themes in the sociological perspective that can largely be attributed to the influence of the discovery of culture.
3 Williams (1980) is interesting both for what it says about the time and for illuminating how far Williams had moved in the nearly 20 years since he began to shape 'the discovery of culture'. See also Eagleton (1989).
4 A contemporary view that class structures were becoming less entrenched was expressed by Harold Macmillan after being elected prime minister in 1959 when he wrote to the Queen about the current state of the nation: 'The most encouraging feature of the Election . . . is the strong impression that I have formed that Your Majesty's subjects do not wish to allow themselves to be divided into warring classes or tribes filled with hereditary animosity against each other. There was a very significant breakdown of this structure of society' (quoted in Hennessy 2006: 1). However, some may feel that this 'optimistic' view was more likely to be held by a member of traditional social elites such as Harold Macmillan.
5 Recently Ross McKibbin (2008) has also sought to describe this trend: 'In its social manners Britain has rapidly become a very democratic society. Old forms of respect and the deference due to traditional hierarchies have not altogether disappeared, but they have been profoundly weakened. In the daily exchanges of life Britain is now very like North America or Australia'. However, he does go on to note that: 'Britain is now a very much more unequal and less socially mobile society than it was thirty years ago' (McKibbin 2008: 22).

Acknowledgement

I am really grateful for the helpful advice Stephanie Lawler and Andy Bennett gave me in the preparation of this chapter.