

ANTI-THESIS

“Popular Culture” and the Academy

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The term “popular culture” is mostly used to describe either cultural practices or products that are widespread and available for mass consumption or those practices that belong to the cultural sphere of “ordinary” people. The use of this concept in scholarly research and debate, however, is far from concise and often lacks the analytical clarity needed for sound and convincing knowledge production. Lacking a precise and viable definition for this concept, this essay argues for abolishing it in favor of the con-

cept of “culture,” which in itself can be operationalized so as to accommodate all forms and practices that can be perceived as cultural. The central argument consists of a critique of the inherent classifications of culture through respective adjectives that inevitably lead to normative assumptions and presuppose specific research questions or methods.

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The Residue of Culture

Researching culture incorporates the complex question of classifications, either implicitly or explicitly, of what kind of culture it is, to which part of the spheres of human existence it relates to, where it is situated in society. Mostly the respective practices of, e.g. hip hop, craftsmanship or club-culture, are viewed as being part of the realm of “popular culture,” as commodities for (mass-) consumption or as the practices and aesthetics of “ordinary” people. This perspective is problematic in a myriad of ways and leads to a row of difficult questions to properly situate the analysis of cultures that are perceived as “popular,” some of which I will address in this essay. First: What is it that makes a culture “popular” and how is this different than a culture being just that, without the adjective “popular”? By using the concept of “popular culture” one strengthens the notion of it being a residual category that can be placed in opposition to something most often called “high culture;” this, in turn, incorporates specific claims regarding the assumed “complexity,” “depth,” and “relevance” of certain cultural practices as opposed to others. Second: Is the Differentiation analytically viable? In scholarly treatments of the “popular” or, in connection, “the ordinary,” the use of these adjectives is often poorly reflected upon

and their meaning taken for granted, which eventually leads to a weakening of the respective argument.

In these cases, “popular culture” is a term adding rather than subtracting problems to research on specific cultural practices as it assumes some sort of normative disposition and general “quality.” On these grounds, my argument is to instead use the term “culture” and apply it to any situation or discourse that is concerned with ways and means of creating and sustaining shared meanings and concepts in a form that is social and quintessentially normative, but never temporally or spatially fixed.

In other words: “Culture [...] is involved in all those practices [...] which carry meaning and value for us, which need to be *meaningfully interpreted* by others, or which *depend on meaning* for their effective operation. Culture, in this sense, permeates all society.” (Hall 3)

Thus, the very concept of culture seems broad, but can be put to use in quite specific ways. On the one hand, by understanding the concept of culture as incorporating all forms and manifestations of cultural activity on disparate levels and in all segments of society, cultural practices can be analyzed while being unconstrained by perceived qualifications and categories with inherent normative

assumptions. Deconstructing those presumptive frames and discourses, the observer is enabling him– or herself to engage with cultural practices on their own terms; to ask what a specific practice or belief entails for the practitioner and why. Rather than assuming that the respective practices and beliefs are already located in a certain segment of society and discourse and by that, consequently, in need of some specific theoretical approach and methodological set of tools.

Ordinary

In his much hailed book *Life as Politics*, Asef Bayat sets out to describe how “ordinary people change the Middle East” in ways not hitherto covered by the theoretical approaches and concepts of social movement theory. Lacking organizational structures, an ideology or political program, and institutional foundations as well as acceptance by the state, people in the Middle East, Bayat claims, engage in a sort of activism on an everyday-basis in their daily conduct. What the author is trying to do is to describe these forms of contesting material realities by silently circumventing them in new terms. “Social nonmovement,” then, serves as the category to grasp the activities and practices of an unorganized collective in society

while the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” is introduced as a concept to think about political, social, and economic gains and liberties achieved by those “ordinary” people in their quest for a secure and dignified existence despite heavy constraints by their socio-economic conditions and the state. Published little more than a year before the eruptions of the uprisings in several Arabic states in 2011, commonly framed as “Arab Spring,” Bayat’s book seemed almost prophetic as it delivered perspectives on aspects of the society in the Middle East that could seemingly partially explain the reasons leading to the uprisings.

In some ways, Bayat’s book contains questionable concepts and implicit romanticism in its depiction of the “ordinary,” a category not delineated in a clear and concise manner, which as a result places the analytical clarity of the book in doubt. Additionally, while Bayat sketches out valuable information about the political and social conduct of disadvantaged segments and individuals in the Middle Eastern society, his treatment lacks the acknowledgment that those strategies are not reserved for the marginalized. On the contrary, just as James Scott makes clear in his book *Weapons of the Weak*:

“It would be a grave mistake, as it is with peasant rebellions, to overly ro-

manticize the 'weapons of the weak.' They are unlikely to do more than marginally affect the various forms of exploitation that peasants confront. Furthermore, the peasantry has no monopoly on these weapons, as anyone can easily attest who has observed officials and landlords resisting and disrupting state policies that are to their disadvantage." (30)

So, while insisting on the fact that the strategies of so called "ordinary" people and their quest for liberties in a state with a repressive government do matter, one should be acutely aware of the dangers of romanticizing these strategies as something only the marginalized populace can employ. Given the efficiency and the availability of instruments and means for circumventing the intended functioning of the state's regulations, one is tempted to rather speak of "the quiet encroachment of the privileged" if the concept would not be lacking analytical merit in itself. From the beginning, the strategies described by Bayat are far from "quiet" in the sense that they cannot be heard or make no sonic impression, but rather they occasionally include the deliberate and loud proclamation of discontent. Furthermore, the term "encroachment" suggests gradual territorial or discursive gains while throughout

the book, and in reality, this impression clearly does not materialize.

In *Life as Politics* the "ordinary" becomes a residual category to refer generally to people—women, youth, unemployed, workers, the poor—instead of institutions, agencies, parties or movements. On the one hand, this category is rather heterogeneous and broad. On the other hand, however, it is concise enough to suggest a dichotomy in society, a differentiation between the "ordinary" and the "not-so-ordinary," where the "ordinary" lacks the level of organization, institutionalization and influence of its counterpart. Representing the institution of university, or at least its idea of knowledge production, scholars repeatedly and continuously ask questions concerning the "ordinary man/woman on the street" and his/her beliefs and actions. While these questions are vital for a viable understanding of society and the human being, the term "ordinary" at the same time signifies a form of "othering" and the amalgamation of diverse spheres of society into a single catchphrase.

Academic Myths

In its (re-)discovery of the "ordinary" the discourses around the events of 2011 share significant similarities with discourses around what is commonly

referred to as "popular culture" in academia. In most cases, it is not quite clear what exactly determines the identification of subjects or groups as belonging to the sphere of the "ordinary" or which practices are deemed a part of "popular culture." The usage of these categories in academic writing and debating resembles many aspects of what Edward Said termed "Orientalism" in the 1970s, referring to the relation between Western academics and the mostly Arab countries and societies in the Middle East and North Africa that figured as their area of interest. This relation, Said argued, is deeply flawed and problematic through the ways in which the "West" employs material and discursive agendas to stylize the "Orient" as the principal "other," making it at once a source of sensory indulgence and fear. Attempting to research cultural practices and communities deemed "popular," or "ordinary," from the perspective of the university contains similar dangers and dynamics. It produces claims to power and agency in the respective discourses, thereby establishing discursive power-relations where the "popular" often figures as the "other" to academia, which serves as the location of the production of "proper," "scientific" knowledge. These power-relations can be observed through a use of language that reveals a

specific understanding of the worth of either of these realms. During a conference on hip hop at the University of Cambridge in 2016, for example, the view was expressed that adherents of hip hop-culture should feel honored that academics see it as an object of study, ennobling hip hop through their time and attention. This argument can only be made regarding cultural forms deemed “popular,” or practices of “ordinary” people. It is difficult to imagine that scholars would demand this kind of gratitude, theoretically, from Goethe or Mozart, Elias Khoury or Daniel Barenboim. Consequentially, this perspective carries implicit qualifications regarding different cultural practices, their worth, relevance, or complexity, without ever clarifying that difference in an analytically sound and convincing manner. The conviction that an object of inquiry is elevated and made more relevant by being subject to scholarly scrutiny comes with implicit forms of discrimination that discredit the academic endeavor considerably as it unmasks qualitative assumptions regarding the object as well as the subject of research. Considerably adding to these problems, the understanding of the life-world of “academia” is poorly reflected upon while the object(s) of inquiry are deemed as requiring heavy scrutinizing. The university

passes unchallenged as a place of “higher learning” and “high culture,” home of the greatest thinkers and philosophers and constructive agents in the development of state and society. To my knowledge, there was never any meaningful attempt to scientifically engage in an analysis of the “culture” of academic institutions. Nonetheless, this culture does exist and it prefigures discourses and individual speech acts; it is involved in judging a research-question as significant or superfluous; it guides professional interaction and personal conduct like every other cultural sphere. Rituals and practices are as much part of the everyday conduct of scholars in university settings as it is part of the life of tribesmen in the Sahel, or, for that matter, of the local hip hop-community in Beirut or Hong Kong. Realizing differences between these practices should not lead us to deem the one precious and the other worthless, rather, in a quest for real apprehension, we should try to understand these rituals and practices as tools, as means and not as ends in themselves. While the latter could be reduced to a common human quest to make sense of life and the world, the means of doing so may vary without some inherent qualification as to the perceived usefulness. Indeed, the claim of superiority in the pursuit of knowledge must itself be understood as cultural, as a ritualistic

practice of institutions for “higher” education aiming to increase the relevance of their practices. In academia, this is tightly bound to the myth of objective knowledge production, which leads to the claim that this specific form and structure of the “scientific” pursuit of knowledge is more efficient than other forms or structures.

Popularity and Resistance

This brings me back to the concept of “popular culture,” a concept quite *en vogue* in academic debates concerned with the societies of states in the Middle East after 2011. One possibility for understanding “popular culture” seems especially likely in this context: popular culture as “resistance,” as the arena for “speaking truth to power,” the realm of the “average citizen” to create divergent truths and histories in the face of the hegemonic state apparatus. This reading places emphasis on the content and attitude of cultural practices and narratives and excludes other defining criteria like the popularity of those practices in society themselves. Instead of seeing “high culture” as the antagonist concept, it places the “hegemonic bloc” on the other side of the cultural divide. While this definition of popular culture seems attractive and sufficient in some contexts, and although it could be sufficiently rationalized for analysis, it still

reiterates some basic flaws concerning the persistent but vague antagonisms inherent in the concept itself. Also, the aesthetics of “rebellion” might be used and employed by the “hegemonic bloc” in its quest for the stabilization of its own rule. The researcher may be tempted to view such practices as belonging to the realm of popular culture—as resistance—while a closer look might reveal that the codes and signs employed already work to disseminate the meanings furthered by the hegemonic bloc.

Other than merely an institution of higher education occupied with the production of verifiable knowledge, the university itself offers excellent opportunities for political activism that use language and discourse as weapons of choice. This might be done deliberately or happen rather unconsciously. The same, in flipping the coin, is true about the cultural sphere most often referred to with the adjective “popular.” It can be the site of cultural resistance and opposition to something which can be called “hegemonic” culture (which most probably is, among others, situated or produced in university). However, it might as well be a site for the deliberate or subconscious confirmation of hegemonic discourse and culture. In hip hop, for example, the founding myth is strongly connected to the situation of

being denied a voice in society and consequently finding avenues to express discontent and alternative conceptions of life through cultural practices and language as well as appropriating the physical surrounding through art and movement (graffiti and breakdance). Nonetheless, the commodification of hip hop and the unparalleled success of its products in the music industry has led renowned and pioneering scholar of hip hop, Tricia Rose, to the conclusion that “American mainstream hip hop serves as the cultural arm of predatory capitalism”¹¹ and is consequently not challenging but rather reinforcing the central paradigms of hegemonic discourse in the US today.

By appropriating and diverting formerly rebellious subcultures to fit into a slightly adjusted hegemonic discourse, it is possible to divert the thrust coming from these divergent readings and interpretations of reality. When the rebel himself is being commodified, the rebellion has become part of the very system it rebels against. The rebellious posture inherent in the founding myth of hip hop-culture could in this way be made to lose much of its impact. The threat of a challenging discourse with wide appeal and potential to unmask iniquitous aspects of the hegemonic discourse are thus neutralized by appropriation. What is claimed to exem-

plify the cultural power for disrupting hegemonic notions and discourses can, thus, be appropriated and altered to fit the so called “mainstream” or the hegemony. This, of course, is congruent with the concept of culture itself, where signs, symbols, practices and myths delineate and configure a cultural sphere which is by definition neither stable nor fixed nor easily confined and put to use.

“Culture” is comprised of the very practices that are in themselves arbitrary and dependent on the spatial, social, economic, and political context. A practice judged as defective and useless by some might become the very cornerstone of another group's identity; a practice considered as outright rebellious by some can be rather conformist for others or that very same practice could be deemed central in the preservation of power by the hegemonic bloc in a different geographical or social environment (see also the contribution by John Story in this issue). Understanding this dimension of culture as crucial for every cultural practice and discourse makes the differentiation between “popular” and “high” redundant. This leaves us with the problem of properly and sufficiently understanding the concept of “culture” itself in order to give it practical application through a sound

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and well defined analysis of anything "cultural," whether it be punkrock or Beethoven, fashion or eating habits, gossip or opera, or the cultural practices on construction sites or those at academic conferences.

Notes

¹ „Versus Hip Hop on Trial Debate.“ *YouTube*. 27.06.2012. Web. The quote in question can be found at about 35:00.

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