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Popular Culture, Popular Literature, and Literary Criticism Theory as the Politics of a Term

For some years, it has been possible to detect an obvious increase in studies of objects and products that are considered part of popular culture. Even so, overall, the gaps in research remain considerable. There are numerous subjects on which hardly any work is available – magazines, best-sellers, television programmes, internet pages, for example. What is not lacking at all, though, are definitions of popular culture. At a rough estimate, there must be one to two thousand scholars in the English- and German-speaking countries who have already tried their hand at providing such a definition. Even if precise, sustained consideration of works of popular culture is an exception, abstract reflection about popular culture per se is clearly nothing of the sort.

These abstractions are predominantly provided in the form of nominal definitions. The present article identifies a total of twenty-three definitions that in some cases differ considerably from one another and each of which works with a particular component in its definiens (different combinations of such components then yield numerous further definitions). This lack of consensus is notable in so far as the term ›popular culture‹ has a history of some length that provides the background for many of the examples listed; despite this, a routine or exemplary usage has manifestly not established itself. This might give rise to the view that it is impossible to

define popular culture precisely – but hardly anyone is prevented by this from presenting their own definition, as is readily apparent from the number of existing suggestions.

This kind of definition binds those who make it: the writer makes a commitment, for the duration of the text or speech at least, to use ›popular culture‹ to refer to everything that falls within the scope of the definition. One person will then intend, indeed have to treat as part of ›popular culture‹ all things, games, symbols, festivals, forms of perception, and so on that are popular across all classes, another everything that is entertaining, another again that which they consider low, trivial cultural material, and so forth.

The possible confusion could abate rapidly because of this. Far from contradicting one another in an irresolvable sense, the definitions merely use the same sequence of sounds or letters to indicate different quantities. Certainly, a constructivist who denies that the world by its nature breaks down into pieces that are noticed or discovered by human perception is unlikely to have a problem with this, and the same goes for those for whom words refer to invariably predetermined things and states of affairs. It would be unacceptable only for a Platonist, who gives a concept the status of an immutable idea distinct from human postulations. Given that Platonic thought is not widespread any more now, it would be easy to conclude that the many different definitions of popular culture are not a particularly significant problem for most scholars.

This, however, is not the case. Many authors insist on their form of language and treat that of others as inappropriate, misleading, and so on. The reason for this lies in the fact that the rubric ›popular culture‹ has for many become a special expression that also has a prominent position on an institutional level. Popular culture is, according to the terminology of discourse analysis, a ›disciplinary invention, a notion circulating in a particular set of disciplinary discourses‹. Even this, though, is not enough to explain why ›popular culture‹ is at the centre of so many debates and why there are such strikingly conflicting attempts to pin the term down. Referring to the ›disciplinary‹ composition of popular culture is not sufficient because nowadays there is no field that is not spared from legislation and critical scrutiny. Community facilities, authorities such as ministries of state and standardization bodies, courts, accredited experts, research institutions, and so on make their meticulous and wide-ranging contributions to the discourse of definitions, yet in the vast majority of cases there are no substantial debates about them.

The specific reason for the prominent and furthermore controversial meaning of ›popular culture‹ is to be sought in the central position of the term on the political and aesthetic map. The act of describing or designating something as part of ›popular culture‹ is accompanied very frequently indeed by an unmistakable positive or negative value judgement. This means that it is easy to explain why the definitions of popular culture are of such significance: the definition is often meant to anticipate or subsume the value judgement, or at least point to it.

In view of this situation, it is suggested that, before making further attempts at a definition, it would be better to exploit the possibilities that lie in a serious investigation of the areas touched on by the various definitions of ›popular culture‹. The ›theories‹ have done their bit as nominal definitions: they have revealed an abundance of possibilities for providing comprehensive descriptions and seeking explanations for the things described. There are great opportunities to be drawn from the various definitions, some of which are contradictory or in open conflict with one another, for to date they have amounted mostly to brief statements and prescriptions on the printed page. They provide a vocabulary and channel interest and attention in a particular direction – but what comes (or could come) into view as a result, in individual cases or more comprehensively as a result of systematic study, has to date been described very rarely or not at all.

What, for example, *are* the products or artefacts that ›are popular across all classes‹ at present? Do they (still) exist at all? What *is* the difference between the schemata and formulas that should be highlighted in the analysis of works of popular and high literature? Does it lie primarily in particular textual features or rather in publishers' practice of collecting literature that is classified as entertaining material in series and under headings of genre? These are just a few of many questions that arise from the twenty-three nominal definitions of ›popular culture‹ that are identified. Many more could easily be derived. At least one conclusion thus presents itself: if anything is needed in the field of the academic treatment of ›popular culture and literature‹, it can, at present, only be more empirical research.

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