CHAPTER 2

Culture and Identity

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The meaning and importance of culture

As discussed in the first chapter, the term ‘culture’ is used by sociologists to refer to the language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, dress, diet, roles, knowledge and skills, and all the other things that people learn that make up the ‘way of life’ of any society. Culture is passed on from one generation to the next through the process of socialization. Although there are many aspects of everyday life which are shared by most members of society, there are a range of different aspects of culture within this general concept of culture, such as subculture and dominant, folk, high, low, popular, mass and global cultures. These different aspects of culture are discussed below.

DOMINANT CULTURE

The dominant culture of a society refers to the main culture in a society, which is shared, or at least accepted without opposition, by the majority of people.
white, patriarchal and unequal, with those who are white and male having things they regard as worthwhile rated as more important than those who are female or from a minority ethnic group. Similarly, those who are rich and powerful (who are mainly also white and male) are in a position to have their views of what is valuable and worthwhile in a culture regarded as more important, and given higher status, than those of others.

**SUBCULTURE**

When societies are very small, such as small villages in traditional societies, then all people may share a common culture or way of life. However, as societies become larger and more complicated, a number of smaller groups may emerge within the larger society, with some differences in their beliefs, values and way of life. Each group having these differences is referred to as a subculture. Figure 2.1 illustrates this.

A few subcultures, like some of those found in schools, among young people or in minority ethnic groups, may be not simply different from the dominant culture in some ways, but also in active opposition to it. In these cases we might refer to them as subcultures of resistance. For example, Willis (1977) found an anti-school subculture in his study of a group of working-class lads, in which resistance to schooling and the culture of the school was highly valued. Among younger South Asians and African Caribbeans, ethnic subcultures may form as a way of resisting racism and disadvantage. Hall and Jefferson (1976) saw particular youth subcultural styles (such as among Teddy Boys, Mods, Skinheads and Punks) as forms of resistance to dominant culture.

Further discussion of various subcultures can be found on pages 55–60 (class subcultures), pages 77–82 (minority ethnic group subcultures), pages 95–8 (youth subcultures), pages 247–8 (subculture of poverty) and pages 360–3 (anti- and pro-school subcultures).

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**Figure 2.1 Culture and subcultures**

A subculture is a smaller culture held by a group of people within the main culture of a society, in some ways different from the main culture but with many aspects in common. Examples of subcultures include those of some young people, Travellers (including New Age Travellers, Irish Travellers and Romanies (commonly called ‘Gypsies’)), gay people, different social classes and minority ethnic groups.

A subculture of resistance is one that not only has some differences from the dominant culture, but also is in active opposition to it.
Folk culture is the culture created by local communities and is rooted in the experiences, customs and beliefs of the everyday life of ordinary people. It is ‘authentic’ rather than manufactured, as it is actively created by ordinary people themselves. Examples include traditional folk music, folk songs, storytelling and folk dances which are passed on from one generation to the next by socialization and often by direct experience. Folk culture is generally associated with pre-industrial or early industrial societies, though it still lingers on today among enthusiasts in the form of folk music and folk clubs, and the Morris dancing which features in many rural events.

High culture refers to cultural products seen to be of lasting artistic or literary value, which are particularly admired and approved of by elites and the upper middle class. An elite is a small group holding great power and privilege in society.

High culture is generally seen as being superior to other forms of culture, and refers to aspects of culture that are seen as of lasting artistic or literary value, aimed at small, intellectual elites, predominantly upper-class and middle-class groups, interested in new ideas, critical discussion and analysis, and who have what some might regard as ‘good taste’.

High culture is seen as something set apart from everyday life, something special, to be treated with respect and reverence, involving things of lasting value and part of a heritage which is worth preserving. High culture products are often found in special places, like art galleries, museums, concert halls and theatres. Examples of high culture products include serious news programmes and documentaries, classical music like that of Mozart or Beethoven, the theatre, opera, ballet, jazz, foreign language or specialist ‘art’ films, and what has become established literature, such as the work of Charles Dickens, Jane Austen or Shakespeare, and visual art like that of Monet, Gauguin, Picasso or Van Gogh.
MASS, POPULAR AND LOW CULTURE

Mass culture, sometimes referred to as popular culture or low culture, is generally contrasted with high culture. The term ‘low culture’ is a derogatory term (critical and insulting) to describe popular culture. Its usage suggests popular or mass culture is of inferior quality to the ‘high’ culture of the elite discussed above. The term ‘popular culture’ is often used as an alternative, suggesting it is culture liked and enjoyed by ordinary people, worthy of study, and avoiding and rejecting the suggestion that it is somehow of an inferior quality or of lower value than high culture.

Mass or popular culture is a product of industrial societies. It is commercially produced culture, spread on a wide scale throughout society, and aimed at the mass of ordinary people, but it lacks roots in their daily experiences as in folk culture, and is commercially manufactured by businesses for profit rather than created by the community itself and reflecting its own experiences of daily life. Strinati (1995) sees mass culture as popular culture involving cultural products produced for profit by mass-production industrial techniques, for sale to and consumption by the mass of ordinary people. These mass-produced, standardized products are generally short-lived, and regarded by many as inferior to high culture. Rather than something ‘set apart’ and ‘special’, mass culture is seen as consisting of trivial products, dumbed down to appeal to as many people as possible, which demand little critical thought, analysis or discussion, and are of no lasting artistic value. Mass culture is everyday popular culture – simple, undemanding, easy-to-understand entertainment. It is often produced on a global scale, appealing to millions of people across local communities and national divisions, with the mass media spreading a common mass culture across the globe. It is largely concerned with making money for large corporations, especially the mass media.

Popular culture might include mass-circulation magazines, with extensive coverage of celebrities and lifestyles, ‘red top’ tabloid newspapers like the Sun or the Mirror, television soaps and reality TV shows, dramas and thrillers, rock and pop music, video games, and other forms of entertainment that appeal to a broad audience.

Mass culture, sometimes called popular culture or low culture, refers to commercially produced culture, involving cultural products produced for sale to the mass of ordinary people. These involve mass-produced, standardized, short-lived products, which many see as of little lasting value, and which demand little critical thought, analysis or discussion.

Low culture is a derogatory (critical and insulting) term used to describe mass culture or popular culture, suggesting these are of inferior quality to the high culture of the elite.

Popular culture refers to the cultural products liked and enjoyed by the mass of ordinary people. It is sometimes referred to as mass culture or low culture.

Video games are an example of popular culture.
games, blockbuster feature films for the mass market, romances and thrillers bought for reading on the beach, and websites like Facebook. Such culture is largely seen as passive and unchallenging, often fairly mindless entertainment, aimed at the largest number of people possible.

Evaluation of mass culture

Bourdieu (1971) was a French Marxist, who argued that the alleged superiority of high culture compared to mass or popular culture was because the dominant class had the power to impose on the rest of society its own cultural ideas about what counts as good and bad taste, worthwhile knowledge, good books, music, art, films and so on. The rest of society are socialized into accepting the continuing superiority of high culture, although they themselves are more likely to participate in mass or popular culture, which is regarded by the dominant class as an inferior and worthless low culture.

Strinati (1995) suggests that mass or popular culture is often attacked for diverting people away from more useful activities, for driving down cultural standards (like those established in high culture art and literature) and for having harmful effects on audiences.

Frank and Queenie Leavis, writing between the 1930s and 1960s, had nothing but contempt for mass culture, which they saw as processed, packaged, trivial and mindless escapist fantasy, and inferior to the lasting artistic and literary value found in high culture. They saw it as ruining the proper use of language, exploiting people’s emotional needs and fears, and encouraging greed and mindless social conformity.

MacDonald (1965) was another critic of mass culture. Unlike folk culture, which he saw as authentic and generated by ordinary people, and high culture which expressed serious and long-established authentic cultural values, he saw mass culture as trivial and inauthentic. He saw mass culture as simply mass-produced manufactured products imposed on the masses by businesses for financial profit. This view is also shared by some Marxists, who argue that the culture industries produce mass cultural products of little artistic merit to make a profit, and manipulate people into wanting and consuming them through advertising and the mass media.

Some Marxists and other critical theorists argue that mass culture is a form of social control, which maintains the ideological hegemony (or the dominance of a set of ideas) and the power of the dominant social class in society. This is because the consumers of mass culture are lulled into an uncritical, undemanding passivity, making them less likely to challenge the dominant ideas, groups and interests in society. Marcuse (2002 [1964]), for example, suggested consumption of mass culture, particularly the mass media, undermined people’s ability to think critically about the world, or to oppose and change it. Marcuse saw this as a form of social repression – a means of locking people into the present system, and undermining the potential for revolution.

Strinati rejects these views. He sees mass culture as popular culture, having value and as worthy of study. He doesn’t accept the suggestion that there is a single mass audience and mass culture, which people passively and uncritically consume, and points to a wide diversity and choice within popular culture, which people select from and critically respond to.

Livingstone (1988) found that the writers and producers of TV soap operas, a form of popular culture watched by millions, saw them as having positive benefits for society. They saw them as educating and informing the public by raising and commenting
on important or controversial social issues, presenting a range of political opinions, generating public controversies and discussion, and giving insights into the sometimes tough and grim lives of others. Rather than killing off public debate and lulling mass audiences into uncritical passivity, soap operas like *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street* have generated huge debate and critical discussion about issues that might otherwise rarely get aired in public, or only in crude media stereotypes. In recent years the public has been encouraged to discuss social issues through soap stories about, for example, child rape, incest, false imprisonment, lesbianism, child cot death, child abuse, religious cults, paedophilia, drug addiction and relationship breakdown. The controversies surrounding these soap stories have frequently dominated the headlines of the red-top tabloid press, promoting public discussions that might never otherwise have happened.

Many of those who consume and enjoy popular culture suggest its critics are basically elitist snobs, who rank cultural preferences on a ‘snob-to-slob’ scale based on their own cultural preferences. These snobs simply prefer high culture and have contempt for what they regard as the slob culture of the masses.

**The changing distinction between high culture and mass culture**

Some now argue that the distinction between high culture and mass culture is weakening. Postmodernist writers, in particular, argue that mass markets and consumption now make the distinction between high and popular culture meaningless. There has been a huge expansion of the creative and cultural industries, such as advertising, television, film, music, and book and magazine publishing. This means there is now a huge range of media and cultural products available to all.

Technology in industrial societies makes cultural products of all kinds almost infinitely reproducible. Mass-communication technology like the internet; music downloads; cable, satellite and digital television; film and radio; printing for both mass production and personal use in the home; the global reach of modern mass-media technology; the mass production of goods on a world scale and easier international transportation – these make all forms of culture freely available to everyone. Such technology enables original music and art and other cultural products to be consumed by the mass of people in their own homes without visiting specialized institutions like theatres or art galleries. High culture is no longer simply the preserve of cultural elites.

People now have a wider diversity of cultural choices and products available to them than ever before in history, and can pick ‘n’ mix from either popular or high culture. High culture art galleries, like Tate Modern in London, are now attracting huge numbers of visitors, from very diverse backgrounds. Live opera is now available to the masses, through popular figures like the OperaBabes, or concerts in the park.

Strinati (1995) argues that elements of high culture have now become a part of popular culture, and elements of popular culture have been incorporated into high culture, and that there is therefore no longer any real distinction between high and popular culture, and it is ever more difficult for any one set of ideas of what is worthwhile culture to dominate in society.

Storey (2003) points out that what is also changing is that members of the dominant class are no longer only consuming high culture, but now consume much of what they had previously dismissed as mass culture, and the masses themselves are now consuming high culture through mass production. For example, artist Andy Warhol painted thirty pictures of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* in different colours, arguing that ‘thirty
was better than one’, turning high culture art into popular culture. Although Warhol’s work has been marketed to millions through postcards and posters, at the same time it is widely admired by the supporters of high culture, and original Warhol paintings and creations now sell for millions of pounds. In 2007 there was some controversy in Britain when the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, generally seen as an institution of high culture, held ‘Kylie: The Exhibition’ – an exhibition of costumes, album covers, accessories, photos and videos from the career of the then 38-year-old pop singer Kylie Minogue. This drew widespread accusations from critics that high culture was being ‘dumbed down’.

High culture art forms are themselves increasingly being turned into products for sale in the mass market for consumption by the mass of ordinary people, and there is no longer anything special about art, as it is incorporated into daily life. Giddings (2010) points out that forms of high culture are now often used to produce mass culture products; he gives the example of modern video games – which are considered to be part of mass culture – which often bring together art, architecture, classical music, actors and writers which alone would be classified as ‘high culture’.

Technology now means mass audiences can see and study high culture products, such as paintings by artists like Van Gogh, on the internet or TV, and have their own framed print hanging on their sitting-room wall. Internet websites, like those of museums and galleries and Google (see www.googleartproject.com), mean people can build their own private high culture virtual museums and art galleries. The originals may still only be on show in art galleries and museums, but copies are available to everyone. High culture art like the Mona Lisa or Van Gogh’s Sunflowers are now reproduced on everything from socks and T-shirts to chocolate boxes and can lids, mugs, mouse mats, tablemats, jigsaws and posters. (Visit www.studiolo.org/Mona or www.megamonalisa.com for some bizarre images and uses of the Mona Lisa.) Classical music is used as a marketing tune by advertisers, and literature is turned into TV series and major mass movies, such as Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice.

Giddings, from a postmodernist approach, suggests the lines between high culture and mass culture are like the borders between countries: ‘they are only there because we are told they are there, and people will always disagree on where those borders lie, whether they should be acknowledged at all, or who has the right to move them’. He suggests it is impossible to draw distinctions for anyone other than oneself, and this effect is amplified as mass culture becomes more globalized and cultures intertwine.

GLOBAL CULTURE

Global culture refers to the way globalization has undermined national and local cultures, with cultural products and ways of life in different countries of the world becoming more alike. The same cultural and consumer products are now sold across the world, inspired by media advertising and a shared mass culture spread through a media-generated culture industry, and they have become part of the ways of life of many different societies. The globalization of culture has meant that people now have access to a wide diversity of global media, and to religions, music, food and clothing from across the world. For example, television companies sell their programmes and programme formats like Big Brother, The X Factor, The Weakest Link and Who Wants to be a Millionaire? globally. Companies like McDonald’s, Coca Cola, Vodaphone, Starbucks, Nescafé, Sony and Nike are now symbols that are recognized
In what ways do these pictures illustrate the erosion of the distinction between high culture and popular culture? Try to think of other examples of this.
Globalization means that many of the same product brands are now found in many countries of the world across the world, along with the consumer lifestyles and culture associated with them. As Ritzer (2004) shows, using the example of the American food industry, companies and brands now operate on a global scale. For example, McDonald’s is a worldwide business, with more than 33,000 restaurants in 119 countries (in 2012), Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Subway operate in 100 countries, with Starbucks in 59 countries and growing at a colossal speed. It is now possible to buy an identical food product practically anywhere in the world, promoting a global culture and also weakening local cultures, as local food outlets close in the face of competition and local diets change. Combined with global marketing of films, music, computer games, food, clothes, football and other consumer products, these have made cultures across the world increasingly similar, with people watching the same TV programmes and films, listening to the same music, eating the same foods, wearing the same designer clothes and labels, and sharing many aspects of their lifestyles and identities.

Activity
1. Refer to the pictures on this page, and explain in what ways they illustrate global culture. Try to think of other consumer products that are also global.
2. In what ways do you think consuming these products also involves lifestyle choices? For example, what’s the difference between having a coffee in Starbucks and in the local café (apart from the coffee itself)? Explain what lifestyle you think is identified with your selected products.
**Exam-style questions**

1. Explain what is meant by a ‘subculture of resistance’. (2 marks)

2. Suggest two ways that folk culture differs from mass culture. (4 marks)

3. Explain the difference between ‘high culture’ and ‘popular culture’. (4 marks)

4. Explain the difference between a dominant culture and a subculture. (4 marks)

5. Suggest three ways in which globalization is affecting contemporary culture in the United Kingdom. (6 marks)

6. Suggest three reasons why the distinction between high culture and popular culture might be weakening. (6 marks)

7. Examine sociological contributions to our understanding of mass culture. (24 marks)

8. Examine the ways that technology and/or industrialization have influenced culture in contemporary societies. (24 marks)

9. Assess the view that the difference between high culture and mass culture has largely disappeared in society today. (24 marks)