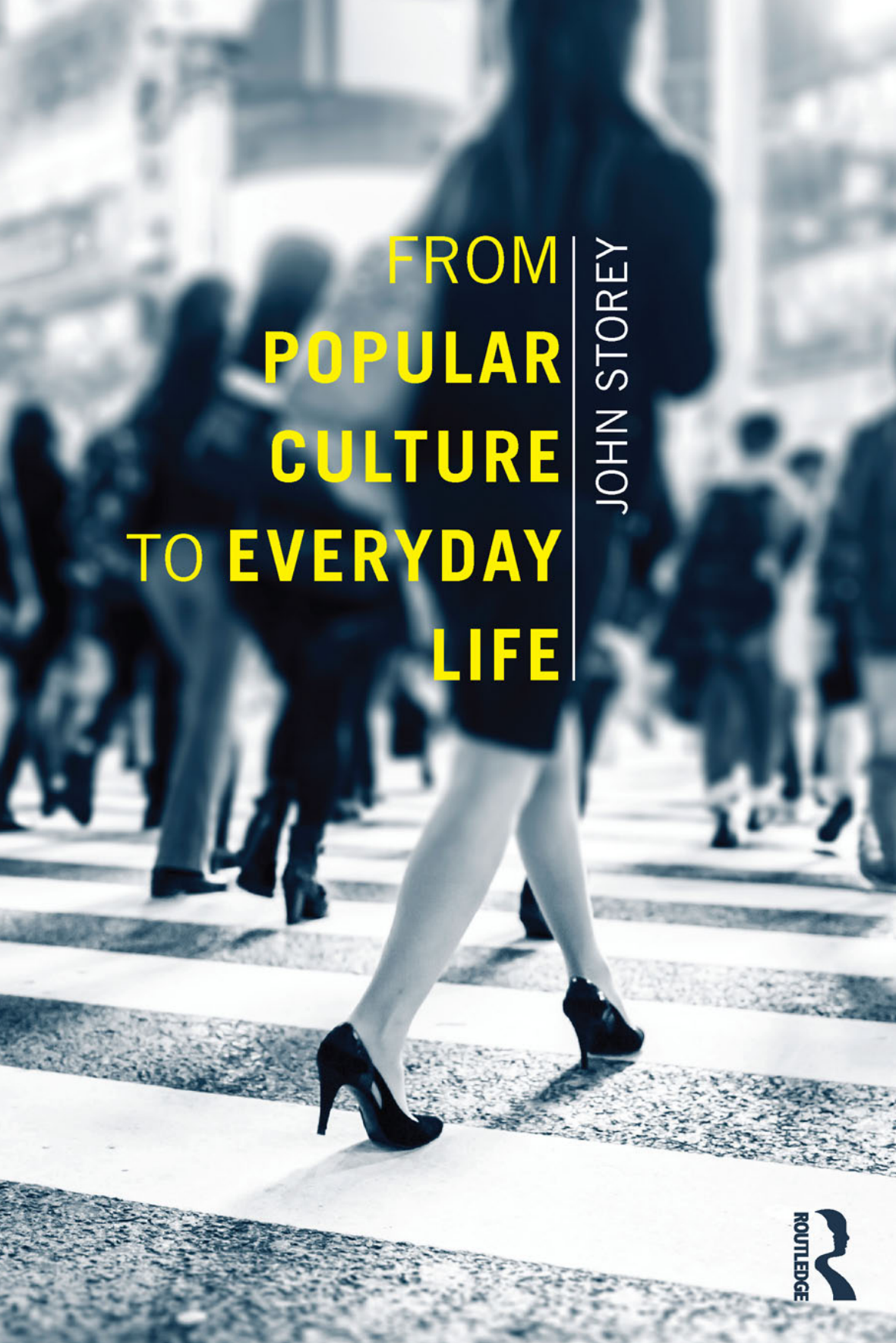
FROM POPULAR CULTURE TO EVERYDAY LIFE

JOHN STOREY



ROUTLEDGE

FROM POPULAR CULTURE TO EVERYDAY LIFE

From Popular Culture to Everyday Life presents a critical exploration of the development of everyday life as an object of study in cultural analysis and addresses the way in which it is beginning to replace popular culture as a primary concept in cultural studies.

John Storey presents a range of different ways of thinking theoretically about the everyday; from Freudian and Marxist approaches, to chapters exploring topics such as consumption, mediatization and phenomenological sociology. The book concludes, drawing from the previous nine chapters, with notes towards a definition of what everyday life might look like as a pedagogic object of study in cultural studies.

This is an ideal introduction to the theories of everyday life for both undergraduate and postgraduate students of cultural studies, communication studies and media studies.

John Storey is Professor of Cultural Studies and Director of the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sunderland, UK. He has published widely in cultural studies; *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life* is his tenth book. He is also on the editorial/advisory boards of journals in Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Lithuania, Spain, the UK and the USA, and has been a Visiting Professor at the University of Vienna, the University of Henan and the University of Wuhan.

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PREFACE

Once upon a time popular culture was an innocent concept that could be used in an easy and straightforward way to indicate that we had left the highway of real culture. Cultural studies changed this with its insistence that we understand popular culture in all its multi-accentual complexity. The purpose of this book is to perform a similar theoretical trick on the concept of everyday life, that is, to bring conceptual clarity to the study of everyday life in cultural studies.

The book will present a critical exploration of the development of everyday life as an object of study in social and cultural analysis. My reason for doing this is my belief that everyday life is beginning to replace popular culture as a primary concept in cultural studies. If I am correct in this assumption, it is absolutely essential that we have a coherent understanding of what we mean when we use the term. With this in mind, the book will begin with a general discussion of popular culture and everyday life before examining a range of different ways of thinking conceptually about the everyday. The book will conclude, drawing from the previous nine chapters, with notes towards a definition of what everyday life might look like as a pedagogic object of study in cultural studies.

What the book will try to do is draw out definitions as they have emerged, explicitly and implicitly, in a range of work that has paid significant attention, knowingly and unknowingly, to everyday life. Some of the theoretical work I will discuss contains a very explicit definition of everyday life; in other work a concept of the everyday is only found in its proposed methodologies and its theoretical assumptions. As a consequence, sometimes I will need to explain how a tradition proposes to study it in order to be able explain what they understand by it. Paradoxically, then, the book will critically examine a series of traditions that use a concept of everyday life explicitly without defining it, and other traditions that do not seek to define it, but that nonetheless make an implicit contribution to how it might be defined.

Like popular culture, everyday life is a complex multi-accentual concept. There is, as Henri Lefebvre points out, 'a certain obscurity in the very concept of everyday life. Where is it to be found? In work or in leisure?' (1991b: 31). Rather than seek to answer this question in an absolute way, I will instead chart the various answers given in the different attempts that have been made to know and understand everyday life. Part of the purpose of this book is to provide a historical and theoretical account of the formation of this complexity. The book will take the reader on a journey through its uses and formations. As we shall see, everyday life can be many things to many people, a site of parapraxes, for example, or a human accomplishment. However, these different understandings can be divided, roughly, into two main groups, those that see everyday life as an ongoing human construction, only visible in social actions and interactions, and those that see it as a passive receptacle of these actions and interactions. Ultimately, it is my hope that the book will increase critical discussion and further work in this area.

Acknowledgements

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POPULAR CULTURES AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN CULTURAL STUDIES

Everyday life

When Henri Lefebvre embarked on his three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947, 1961, 1981) his aim was to formulate 'the concept of the everyday, bringing to developed language and conceptual clarity a practice that was named and yet not recognized – adjudged unworthy of knowledge' (2008: 10). As a result of his work, and the work of others, everyday life is no longer adjudged unworthy of knowledge. However, although there are now many books and articles that include everyday life in their titles, it is not clear that we have arrived at a clear definition. In other words, everyday life is continually named but rarely presented with enough precision to really know what it is that is being described or discussed. Let me give an example of the academic taken-for-grantedness of everyday life. It comes from an excellent book on *place*. I have chosen it because it occurs in a very knowing discussion of the problems of definition.

> Place is a word that seems to speak for itself. It is a word we use daily in the English-speaking world. It is a word wrapped in common sense. In one sense this makes it easier to grasp as it is familiar. In another sense, however, this makes it more slippery as the subject of a book. As we already think we know what it means it is hard to get beyond that common-sense level in order to understand it in a more developed way. Place, then, is both simple (and that is part of its appeal) and complicated. It is the purpose of this book to scrutinize the concept of place and its centrality to both geography and *everyday life*.
>
> *(Cresswell 2004: 1; my italics)*

Everything Tim Cresswell says about place is also true of everyday life. However, it is presented here as something that can speak for itself, but in seeming to be able to

do this, and being accepted as doing it, it is something that always runs the risk of everyone thinking they *just know* what it means, so there is no need to attempt to actually define it in a way that might be useful for academic discussion and debate.

It is almost at times as if everyday life is a concept without a critical history. It is so self-evident that there seems little to say about it. Its obviousness is captured in the saying, 'The birds don't talk about the sky'. But I think we should always be suspicious of what seems obvious. As Bertolt Brecht once said, 'When something seems "the most obvious thing in the world" it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up' (1978: 71). Roland Barthes makes a similar point: we should always challenge 'the falsely obvious' and interrogate 'what-goes-without-saying' (1973: 11). As Brecht and Barthes suggest, it is always best to press beyond the obvious to try to understand what it might be concealing. Both would agree with Henri Lefebvre's point about the everyday, 'it is essential not to take it for granted but to see it in critical perspective' (2002b: 73).

Avoiding the falsely obvious does not mean that everyday life is easy to understand. Like popular culture, it is in fact a very difficult concept to define. But too often it is used without worrying too much about what it might mean. But of course in one sense it is difficult not to take it for granted: because we all *just know* it is the experience of the ordinary routines of daily existence and the structures and assumptions that normalize and legitimate these routines and make other routines seem abnormal and illegitimate. Such a definition tells us something we can all agree on, but it does not tell us much beyond this. It is in effect the equivalent to defining popular culture, to be discussed shortly, as culture liked by many people. While it seems fundamental to any definition, it is not in itself a fully adequate conceptualization. Should we, for example, accept everyday existence as a realm of only ordinary routines? Should we not be suspicious of the origins of such a way of seeing the everyday? Should this not make us think back to definitions of popular culture, again, to be discussed shortly, that see it as mass culture for duped masses?

Like popular culture, the everyday has tended to carry mostly negative connotations. As Michael Sheringham points out, 'Everydayness is more or less exclusively associated with what is boring, habitual, mundane, uneventful, trivial, humdrum, repetitive, inauthentic, and unrewarding' (2006: 23). To live an authentic and exciting life we have to escape the everyday, much in the same way as to produce culture we have to reject the popular (Storey 2003). But is this really true? It could also be argued, and sound just as convincing, that the everyday includes the extraordinary, the wonderful, profound sorrow and profound joy, love and sacrifice, politics and poetics. It should not, therefore, like popular culture before it, be seen as a residual category, the place for human experience once we have removed the beautiful and the sublime. What is certain is that everyday life has been made to carry many different meanings, many different ways it can be articulated and used. Paradoxically, for something that seems so obvious, as we shall see in the course of this book, it has been the subject of a great deal of debate and discussion. As Norbert Elias points out, 'the concept of the everyday has become

anything but everyday: it is loaded with a freight of theoretical reflection' (1998: 167). But almost all of this theoretical reflection has happened outside cultural studies. The chapters that follow will seek to explore and explain some of the different ways it has been or might be conceptualized.

But why worry about definitions of everyday life? Well, for the simple reason that how we define it determines how we study it. All the presuppositions of our theoretical framework help shape our perception of what we think we simply see as the everyday. We have to reject the conservative fantasy of the disinterested gaze. Everyday life is not self-evident; it has to be constructed as an object of study and how it is constructed matters in terms of what then counts as everyday life. This does not mean that everyday life is a mere fiction, invented differently by different theoretical traditions. However, what it does mean is that each different conceptualization makes everyday life visible to the critical gaze in a very particular way. Each competing conceptual framing, constructing it as an object of study, determines, by and large, what is seen when we fix our critical gaze on the everyday. But to say that something is constructed is not the same as saying that something is not true. Made up and made are not the same things: a well-constructed argument or a well-constructed building are not untrue but they have been made, they have been humanly constructed. The use of the word constructed is not intended to suggest that something is a fiction but to draw attention to the fact that it is not a simple gift of nature, it has been humanly made and could have been made differently. Therefore, before we study everyday life we have to construct it as an object of study.

Something else that might also seem obvious is this: there is a sense in which everyday life has always been an object of study in cultural studies. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* might have been called *The Uses of Literacy in Everyday Life*. Similarly, Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution* could have been called *The Long Revolution in Everyday Life*. Therefore, it could be argued that everyday life has always been a central concept in cultural studies, and to a certain extent this is true. But what is also true is the fact that it has always been an undefined or under-defined concept – something too often assumed without adequate conceptual definition. Too often it is simply assumed that we *just know* what it means and what it means is too obvious to need to waste time on explanation. There are of course some very good books in cultural studies that include everyday life in their titles. However, with few exceptions these tend to focus on examples (media, music, fashion, tourism, for instance) rather than on the concept itself. Sometimes the focus is entirely on examples, while at other times the examples are prefaced by a short survey of the problems with defining everyday life. But even when everyday life is approached as a concept, it is approached schematically in an introductory chapter in order to get to examples as quickly as possible. The problem with this is that a quick survey of competing definitions is presented as sufficient to then be able talk about examples as if they are now underpinned by a full conceptualization of everyday life. In other words, although everyday life is part of the vocabulary of cultural studies it is rarely defined as a working concept. I suppose

my argument is that we often use the term everyday life without being fully explicit what we mean by it. I have done this myself. In *Cultural Consumption and Everyday Life* (Storey 1999) I simply assumed that we know what I mean when I use the term. I had inherited a way of working that did not consider it necessary to actively engage with the everyday as a theoretical concept. The purpose of this book is to make it more difficult to act as I, and others, have acted in the past.

Popular cultures

When in the early 1990s I first started to think about the serious study of popular culture almost everything I read seemed to assume we knew what it was and, moreover, it was one thing; there seemed to be not any need to conceptualize it or historicalize it, but instead just analyse a wide variety of examples of it. Everything appeared so obvious and taken for granted. The rest of this chapter will concern itself with the difficulties of defining popular culture. In the first edition of my first book, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1993), I attempted to move beyond examples of popular culture as obvious, self-evident and taken for granted, to an understanding of it as a theoretical and historical construct with a range of often-conflicting meanings. I later explored this from other perspectives in other published work (Storey 2003, 2005, 2009, 2010b). What follows will draw on this previous work. I am afraid that most of the examples I will use are from England. This means that the argument I make about the different ways of defining popular culture will have to be tested against other national traditions.

'Popular' is first used in England in the late fifteenth century as a legal term. An 'action popular' is a legal action which can be undertaken by anyone. For example, 'Accion populers in divers cases have ben ordeigned by many gode actes and statutes' (1490; quoted in Storey 2005: 262). Similarly, 'Accion populer. is not geeuen to one man specyally but generally to any of the Queenes people as wyll sue' (1579; ibid.). By the early seventeenth century popular is no longer restricted to legal discourse and is now being used to indicate something that is widespread or generally accepted:

1603: 'popular sicknesse'
1608: 'they keepe him, safe, rich, and populaire'
1616: 'popular error'
1651: 'where the diseases are most popular' (ibid.).

Building on this usage, from the beginning of the nineteenth century popular is used to designate forms of entertainment that are said to appeal to the tastes of ordinary people. For example:

1835: 'popular press'
1841: 'popular songs'
1855: 'popular music'
1898: 'popular art' (ibid.).

Across a period of about four hundred years the meaning of popular had expanded from non-elite legal practices to anything widespread and generally accepted to culture that is popular. The common thread in these shifts of meaning is the idea of non-elite practices of production and consumption. As we shall see, this haunts every further definition, sometimes as something positive, but mostly as something negative. It is the nineteenth-century use of popular that finally generates the definition of popular culture as culture that is liked by many people. This is mostly a quantitative definition. Although it is often not without a sense of evaluation, it mainly depends on counting the sale of things. Such counting now might include, for example, the sales figures for CDs, DVDs and books; the examination of attendance records at concerts, sporting events; the scrutinizing of market-research figures; looking at audience preferences. In other words, the popular is confirmed by its popularity. Although this may seem like an obvious way to define popular culture, the difficulty with the coming together of culture and popular in this way is that we are required to agree on a figure over which something becomes 'popular culture' and below which it is just 'culture'. Does something become popular after sales of one, four, ten or twenty million? Unless we can agree on such a figure we might find that liked by many people would include so much, including so-called 'high culture', as to be almost unworkable as a conceptual definition of popular culture. On the other hand, if we want a mostly non-evaluative, purely descriptive definition, this may be the only useful one.

The first really sustained, detailed and explicit intellectual linking of popular and culture was developed in the late eighteenth century, as a result of a growing interest in the culture of the so-called 'folk' (see Storey 2003). This is popular culture as culture that originates from 'the people'. In the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries and into the early part of the twentieth century different groups of intellectuals, working under the different banners of nationalism, romanticism, folklore and, finally, folk song, 'invented' the first 'intellectual' concept of popular culture. For the 'folklorists', popular culture is culture that originates from 'the people' (i.e. the 'folk'). This produces a definition of popular culture as a form of agency that spontaneously emerges from 'below' as something communal and self-made.

According to this definition, the term popular culture should be used only to indicate an 'authentic' culture of the people. One problem with this approach is the question of who qualifies for inclusion in the category 'the people'? For example, the intellectuals involved in the 'discovery' of the folk distinguished between two versions of the people, the 'rural folk' and the 'urban masses', and, according to this distinction, only the 'folk' were producers of popular culture. Another problem with this definition is that it evades any significant discussion of the commercial nature of much of the resources from which popular culture as folk culture might be produced. For example, many of the so-called folk songs collected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries turned out to be versions of once popular 'commercial' songs. Moreover, in modern capitalist societies it is very difficult to find instances of popular culture that can be really defined in this way. For

example, youth subcultures are often presented as folk cultures. But the problem with such analysis is that it evades the commercial commodities from which the subculture is constructed. What ever else they are, youth subcultures are particular patterns of conspicuous consumption. In other words, we recognize them by the commodities they consume that are crucial to their social visibility – a particular drug of choice, a specific dress code, the occupation of certain social spaces, the consumption and/or production of a particular type of music, etc. If there is authenticity here, it is authenticity in use, not in original production.

Rather than a problem with this definition, this may in fact point to a sub-division in the definition of popular culture as folk culture, in which the 'folk' element is not found in production but in consumption. The French theorist Michel de Certeau (discussed in Chapter 7 here) defines popular culture as the 'art of using' (1984: xv). While it may seem obvious that popular culture is produced by the culture industries, this is not true; what they produce are a repertoire of things that can *become* popular culture. What he means is this: it is what consumers do with these products, how they utilize them, how they make them 'habitable' (xxi) for their own uses and desires, that transforms them into popular culture. In other words, popular culture is the 'cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, [but] remains the only one possible through which a productionist economy articulates itself' (xvii). The key question to ask is this: 'The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends – what do they make of what they "absorb", receive, and pay for? What do they do with it?' (31). It is what they do with it that decides whether it becomes popular culture. From this perspective, youth subcultures and fan cultures for that matter are both folk cultures in that, through acts of consumption, they make popular culture.

The 'discovery of the folk' not only produced a concept of popular culture as folk culture, it also helped to establish the intellectual tradition of seeing ordinary people as masses, consuming mass culture. This is because the 'discovery' of the rural folk was accompanied (and no doubt driven) by the 'discovery' of the urban masses. If the folk represented a disappearing 'positive' popular, the new urban masses represented an emerging 'negative' popular. This is popular culture as 'mass culture'. As Cecil Sharp, folk song collector and very influential advocate of this idea, made very clear in 1907,

> Flood the streets with folk-tunes, and those, who now vulgarise themselves and others by singing coarse music-hall songs, will soon drop them in favour of the equally attractive but far better tunes of the folk. This will make the streets a pleasanter place for those who have sensitive ears, and will do incalculable good in civilising the masses.
>
> *(quoted in Storey 2003: 12)*

According to this way of seeing, folk tunes are popular culture (produced by the rural folk) and music hall songs are mass culture (consumed by the urban masses).