



Edited by  
Imre Szeman and  
Timothy Kaposy

# Cultural Theory

## An Anthology

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# Introduction

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What *is* cultural theory? This is the inevitable and appropriate question with which to begin an introduction to an anthology on the topic; and it is perhaps just as inevitable that we might want to defer a direct and simple answer, preferring a careful, detailed, and nuanced response. But let's set such scholarly caution aside, at least to begin with. Cultural theory consists of theories about culture – how it works, what it means (and what it doesn't), how our understanding of it has changed over time (and all the ways in which it hasn't), and how it relates to processes which are commonly thought to take place apart from culture. There are innumerable studies *of* culture, which range from books of literary criticism to studies of cultural practices in different historical periods and countries, from sociological analyses of subcultures to anthropological accounts of the lives of tribal communities, and from explorations of the themes hidden in the latest hit television series to the significance of trends in popular self-help writing. Cultural theory, on the other hand, constitutes a step back from an immediate engagement with culture to a place of critical reflection where insights gained and lessons learned in the study of culture are consolidated into general frameworks and organizing principles for future analysis and investigation. It consists of the body of ideas and concepts which have helped, in the first instance, in the identification of appropriate objects of study: that is, with a sense of which sorts of activities and practices are properly understood to be “culture” (e.g., skateboarding, watching films and listening to music, notions of what constitute social success, etc.) and those which might not be (e.g., parliamentary politics, economic laws, sewage-management plans, design schemes for microprocessors). Cultural theory provides us with tools for analyzing these activities, practices, and artifacts, for understanding the ways in which they are connected to the broader forces and developments which comprise human societies, and for providing an assessment of the contribution they make to the societies to which they belong, e.g., why they exist and what purposes they serve with the overall framework of social life.

The immediate problem with such a definition of cultural theory is its immense scope. Many (if not all) of the academic fields of study grouped into the humanities and social sciences address culture, each doing so in its own unique way. Linguistics has developed important theories about the operation of language; the field of Classics has created classificatory schemes for Roman and Greek architecture and theories about the causes of the decline of the Roman Empire; and Art Historians have developed their own important and influential theories about various aspects of visual culture, including what sorts of objects qualify as art. When these fields and their particular cultural objects (i.e., language, architecture and civilization, art) are added to the areas of study already named above (anthropology, literary studies, sociology, media studies, etc.), it is legitimate to wonder whether this anthology has set itself an impossibly large task. But while there are many theories about various aspects of culture, what has come to be known as cultural theory (in the singular) has a smaller and more defined frame of reference. The aim of *Cultural Theory: An Anthology* is to bring together the most important readings which have helped to shape and define the contemporary study of culture, specifically the area of



scholarship to which cultural theory is most closely related: cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> While there are many existing anthologies of cultural studies available today, for the most part these assemble work done on various cultural artifacts and practices with the intent of showcasing the rich and complex work taking place under the aegis of this term around the world.<sup>2</sup> This anthology has a different goal: with an eye to its use by students and scholars working in many different areas of study, it brings together the theories and concepts which lie at the core of cultural studies – that is, those writings which have had a determinate impact on the direction and the shape of the field and which animate the study of culture today.

The book is organized around key areas of theoretical inquiry in contemporary cultural study: the status and significance of culture itself, power, ideology, space and scale, temporality, and subjectivity. It is more common in anthologies or introductory textbooks in cultural studies or cultural theory to frame the study of culture around distinct “approaches” (such as feminism, formalism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, structuralism, and post-structuralism) or schools of thought which often have a genesis in specific national locales (such as British cultural studies, the Frankfurt School, Russian Formalism, French feminism, or the Subaltern Studies group from India). One of the interventions made by this anthology is to focus attention back on the conceptual problematics around which cultural theory is produced. The theorists collected here don’t confine their work to a school or a specific approach when they set out to understand an artifact, practice, situation, or problem. While the work of theorists such as Fredric Jameson, Judith Butler, and Ranajit Guha (for example) contribute to the fields of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial studies respectively, to narrowly confine their work to these areas of study is to misrepresent not just their wider influence, but the questions and problems which drive their inquiries. In the examples of their work included in this book, these theorists investigate the politics and nature of culture (Jameson), the character of subjectivity (Butler), and the shape of history and temporality (Guha) – issues which thinkers working with different theoretical backgrounds and influences also address. By dividing the anthology into topics of study instead of schools of thought, we hope to mobilize and enable new uses of the powerful tools, provocative concepts, and productive insights generated by the essays we have selected.

While the theorists compiled in this volume have each made contributions vital to contemporary cultural studies, it will be clear immediately that many of the essays and excerpts included here are not always focused on culture *per se* – even in the expanded sense of culture that cultural studies has given us. Michel Foucault’s theories of power, Carl Schmitt’s reflections on sovereignty, and Gilles Deleuze’s provocative description of “societies of control” may not speak directly to (say) the nature of contemporary media systems or the circulation of world literatures. Nevertheless these ideas have proven to be crucial for thinking about the forces and relations that shape contemporary culture and for describing the differences between present and past social formations. The changing conceptions of power, sovereignty, and social control mapped out in the section on “Power” are fundamental for work that renders visible dominant and emergent forms of political exclusion, such as the tightening controls placed on migration, the global expansion of slum dwellers, and the increasing restrictions on citizenship. In addition to being a repressive force currently fostering our own “states of exception,” this section presents power as a normative force of assimilation: that is, power is located in the imperatives contained in self-help books and aspirations to accumulate wealth as much as in drone bombers and physical imprisonment. Medical diagnostics of the healthy body, the management of populations through precarious labor, and a pervasive culture of indebtedness all impel us to reckon with the vicissitudes of power – a reckoning which also limns their possible interconnection. The other sections of this anthology do similar work in framing the key ideas and theories behind some of central conceptual issues that have been taken up in cultural studies.

It might seem as if this anthology reproduces a questionable or dangerous divide between theory and practice, the abstract and the concrete – or in classroom terms, between “primary” and “secondary” texts. What differentiates these texts from others that might have been included is not the fact that they engage solely in theoretical or philosophical reflection and leave the work of on-the-ground ethnographic study, sociological number crunching, or focused close reading of literary texts to others. “Theory” does not name some artificial

separation from “practice,” such that the essays collected here are intended to provide the “form” into which might be placed all manner of specific cultural “content.” Rather, theory is better understood as “the guiding compass of empirical investigation.”<sup>3</sup> The impact and influence of the essays collected here is the result of the ways in which each follows its compass points unwaveringly to the ends of the problems they have set for themselves: in every one of these texts, theory emerges from an encounter with cultural and social phenomena, whether this is the situation of postcolonial nationalisms (in the case of Fanon), new urban youth culture (for Hebdige), the sensation of cultural inauthenticity felt in Brazil (Schwarz), or any of the other sites of investigation whose shape and character have demanded the creation of new theoretical pathways.

Cultural theory is animated by a progressive politics whose intent is to help bring about significant social change through a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the complex character of social, political, and cultural structures and antagonisms. It is this politics which finds expression in one form or another (if to varying degrees) in all the essays in this volume. Michael Denning has described cultural studies as “a fundamental break with the notion of the humanities, with the assumption that the study of arts and letters is separate from the study of society, that the humanities are best represented by a canon of classics, and that the arts and letters are primarily reflections on the human.”<sup>4</sup> “If the humanities are about humans,” he writes, “cultural studies are about people.”<sup>5</sup> What distinguishes “people” from the “human” (as we make clear in the section on “Subjectivity”) is that while the latter falls back on ideas of apparently natural and unchallengeable ways of being, the former category is necessarily an invention of societies and individuals, shaped by divisions, antagonisms, and processes of inclusion and exclusion occurring at multiple levels. Cultural studies displaces the human from the center of culture and in doing so introduces two additional innovations to the study of culture. The first is to insist on the importance of economics and politics for understanding culture *and* on the significance of culture for making sense of economics and politics. To put this differently, history plays a central role in cultural theory: culture is malleable, ever changing, buffeted by all the forces making up social life, and not a space of immutable and transhistorical essences. What this means is, second, that cultural theory is of necessity relentlessly self-reflexive, challenging its own preconceptions and framing assumptions even as it identifies the gaps, elisions, and preconceptions of so many of the beliefs taken for fact about the world. If cultural studies is, as Denning puts it, “a new name for the humanities, or more accurately, the key slogan in the left’s redefinition of the humanities,”<sup>6</sup> cultural theory is that part of the new humanities in which one can find both the conceptual resources for questioning existing modes of thought and those needed to construct the new ones we need for creating more equitable and just futures.

In a recent essay outlining the pre-eminent modes of critique since 1989, Göran Therborn describes social theory as “strung between two ambitious poles: on the one hand, providing a comprehensive explanatory framework for a set of social phenomena; and on the other, something ‘making sense’ of such phenomena ... this is an ecumenical conception of ‘theory’ that applies both to explanation, the more wide-ranging the more important, and to *Sinnstiftung*, the constitution of meaning.”<sup>7</sup> Replacing “social” with “cultural” brings us close to what we described as “cultural theory”: an explanation of and accounting for cultural phenomena (socially, politically, structurally, historically, and so on) which also pays attention to the way in which such phenomena are endowed with meaning. This movement between poles is unavoidable in the study of culture. Cultural theory contends with the often perplexing nature of constitutive social, political, and cultural antagonisms; it does so through an attention to those practices, activities, and artifacts that we have understood to be “culture,” but with an awareness of the shifts and deformations that this concept has undergone over the past century – developments which have made it increasingly difficult to meaningfully separate the levels of the social (cultural, economic, politics, etc.) from one another.

*Cultural Theory: An Anthology* is organized into six sections. Each section is prefaced by a short introduction which makes connections between the essays and relates them to the framing concept or problem; these sections are followed by a list of relevant texts which can be consulted for further information about the topic or author.

## Notes

- 1 Of the major existing reference works in cultural theory, only Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (in the Introduction to their *Key Concepts* volume) feel the need to pause to point out the link between cultural theory and cultural studies; the remainder just assume it. See Peter Brooker, *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory* (London: Arnold, 1999); Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and *Cultural Theory: The Key Thinkers* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Philip Smith and Alexander Riley, *Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009).
- 2 See, for example, Ackbar Abbas and John Nyuget Erni (eds.), *Internationalizing Cultural Studies: An Anthology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004); Pepi Leistyna (ed.), *From Theory to Action* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004); and Michael Ryan (ed.), *Cultural Studies: An Anthology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008). See also the reviews of such texts offered by Greg Noble, "How Do You Teach Cultural Studies? Or, the Uses of Textbooks," *Continuum* 23.2 (2009), 401–8; and Julian Murphet's review of Ryan's anthology in the same issue, pp. 416–22.
- 3 Göran Therborn, "After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in a Post-Communist World," *New Left Review* 43 (2007), 79.
- 4 Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004), 148.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 7 Therborn, "After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in a Post-Communist World," 79.

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## Part 1

# Reforming Culture

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### *Introduction*

Matthew Arnold, "Sweetness and Light" (1869)

Thorstein Veblen, "Conspicuous Consumption" (1899)

Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture" (1937)

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944)

Raymond Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary" (1958)

Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" (1979)

Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" (1981)

Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" (1986)

### *Additional Readings*



# Introduction

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“Culture,” Raymond Williams reminds us at the beginning of his entry in *Keywords*, “is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.”<sup>1</sup> Yet it is also one of the most common concepts used in public discourse, a concept that despite its complexity is freely employed by everyone and used fearlessly in political debates, newspaper editorials, and coffee-shop banter. Culture is also a word that despite its significance (or perhaps, because of it) defies rigorous attempts at clarification or definition. An enormous fault line cuts the term into two: “culture” can be the name for a whole way of life, or can describe those specific arts and practices typically connected to social meaning making. The fact that the latter (for instance, writing, music, painting, and so on) are often seen as playing a key role in defining the former (French culture, Roma culture, hippie culture) adds to the confusions which exist when we try to consider either side of the dividing line on its own in an effort to simplify things. Everyone would agree that opera, jazz, and rock music are practices readily described as cultural. But what about singing (badly) with one’s friends in the basement with the help of the video game *Garage Band*? And what size or shape do whole ways of life take? Do they have to come packaged in the form of nations (French) or in conjunction with ethnicities (Roma), or is it enough to point to the specific ways of life of hippies, b-boys, WASPs, DINKs and all the other subgroupings that have accumulated in a giant conceptual heap in recent years? It might seem to be especially important for a practice called “cultural theory” to be absolutely clear about the subject about which it generates theories. But in many respects, it is the uncertain terrain around the concept of culture which cultural theory mines for insights. It does so not in order to settle the question of what, finally, culture *is* – an impossible and ultimately unproductive aim, since any single definition would fail to capture all the uses of the term – but to better grasp the range and overlap of meanings in an effort to explain what culture *does*. Cultural theory deals with culture both as a form of life and as distinctive kinds of social practices, not in the hope of simplifying its complexity but to make sense of the social processes, forces, relations, and imaginaries which the concept folds together and pushes apart.

As a distinct sphere of human activity and critical inquiry, culture has long been associated with those values and norms absent from the hurly-burly of the economic life of capitalism. The latter is utilitarian, characterized by a means–ends rationality which ties it indelibly to the messy materiality of daily life. By contrast, culture has been imagined as a sphere of transcendence, an expression of the very best to which humanity can aspire, the locus of the good which makes the agony, injustice, and banality of everyday class society bearable; it is the soul of humanity which animates and gives meaning to the flesh and bones of the social body. By such measures, only certain practices have been deemed to be of significant quality or elevation to count as “Culture,” especially when it comes to its study and analysis; working-class culture or popular cultural forms – long seen as more flesh and bones than soul – have generally been thought to lack the appropriate gravitas and timeless significance. If we spend our days engaged in the drudgery of those activities which pay the bills, culture is what we reward ourselves with in the evenings. But there’s a difference between culture and Culture,

between spending time on the couch in front of the television and taking in an exhibit at a museum. Only the latter represents the values, seriousness, and higher ends of our society; visiting a museum is more than just killing time, which is why we drag our children away from the flat screen to see paintings on the wall or to wander in sculpture gardens.

In the twentieth century, this view of culture, which has lingered despite the predominance of all manner of commodity culture – cultural objects, activities, and experiences made for sale, exchange, consumption, and profit – has drawn repeated criticism due to its exclusion of a huge range of cultural objects and practices which give shape to social experience. Cultural theorists insist on an understanding of culture that allows for the study of graffiti art as well as neoclassical poetry, and websites as well as Renaissance paintings. Within cultural theory, criticism has also been directed not just at the content of culture – those topics, issues, and genres which gate-keeping scholarly elites have decided are legitimate and permissible – but the ideological function of the very concept. The reason this section is named “reforming culture” (as opposed to just “culture”) is to capture the intent of some of the most important and influential works of cultural theory in the twentieth century, which has been to reveal the myriad ways in which culture has been imbued with a politics which has shaped not just the study of culture but the very shape and structure of contemporary societies. Critics have argued that the constitution of culture as a category that captures the higher values of humanity has merely excused the strife and pain experienced by most people in everyday life. As Herbert Marcuse puts it in “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” “Man does not live by bread alone; this truth is thoroughly falsified by the interpretation that spiritual nourishment is an adequate substitute for too little bread.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, criticism has been directed at the use of culture in legitimating existing social divisions. Those in higher echelons of society have argued that they occupy their positions in part because they are appropriately “cultured,” closer to the higher things in life whether through nature, breeding, or education; the “masses” might be satisfied with television or the internet, but the chosen few require paintings and sculpture to elevate and nourish the spirit. Against such claims and beliefs, cultural theory has sought to expose the manner in which control over access to cultural goods (through education, for example) and the power to define what counts as appropriate acculturation (through control over social and cultural institutions) has fundamentally structured the production and reproduction of the status quo.

Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which has been described as “culture’s first sacred book,”<sup>3</sup> is a characteristic expression of the model of culture which has been seen by many theorists as in need of reform. Culture is viewed by Arnold as having important functions both internally and externally. Great works of culture – “the best that has been thought and known in the world,” or “the study of perfection” – nourish the soul, permitting individuals to define and develop toward higher ends in line with Enlightenment ideals of growth and progress. This internal development has an external purpose as well. Beauty and harmony, “sweetness and light,” are values which produce social order and keep anarchy at bay. The class bias of Arnold’s views on what constitutes perfect forms of culture is obvious; he believes, for example, that ordinary popular literature tends to “teach down to the level of inferior masses.”<sup>4</sup> Presumably, exposure to “higher” forms of serious literature would have the opposite effect: to elevate the masses and embody in them the values of their superiors, i.e., those who identify which forms of culture are higher to begin with! Arnold is reacting to a situation of social instability and uncertainty; he is alarmed by the waning of a moral order once guaranteed by religion and the emergence in its place of a soulless instrumentality connected to a capitalist market in which everything is for sale. His sense of culture as an arena of human possibility in a world otherwise structured by the empty utilitarianism of the bourgeois “Philistines” and aristocratic “Barbarians” alike has had a major influence on how we understand culture in the twentieth century. While he has become an exemplar of an elitist view of culture (the capital “C” idea of “Culture” we refer to in the opening paragraphs), Arnold’s views on the impact of commercial culture on cultural experience and expression shares more with many critical twentieth-century positions than is often imagined.

Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) paved the way for culture to be studied as a social phenomenon rather than imagined strictly as a practice of internal transformation and spiritual development.

“Conspicuous consumption” characterizes the behavior of the *nouveau riche* (Arnold’s Philistines) who emerged as a class at the end of the nineteenth century. Veblen seeks to understand the social rules that govern consumption above the level of absolute necessity – a circumstance which became more and more common as the century progressed and large middle classes emerged for the first time. It is one thing to buy food or clothing when you are just trying to survive; quite another when you have the means to experiment with haute cuisine or enter the game of ever-changing clothing fashions. Veblen finds that consumption takes “conspicuous” forms because “the only practicable means of impressing one’s pecuniary ability on these unsympathetic observers of one’s everyday life is an unrelenting demonstration of ability to pay.”<sup>5</sup> Social display and class distinction through consumption becomes an increasingly important part of twentieth-century culture, and not just through the social semiotics of luxury goods of all kinds (houses, automobiles, clothing, etc.), but in terms of the types of cultural objects made use of and identified with by people across the class spectrum.

In an expansion of Veblen’s ideas, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explores the ways in which aesthetic distinctions and dispositions are connected to class in his groundbreaking book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979). Through both empirical studies and theoretical reflection, Bourdieu outlines the important role of aesthetic and cultural discrimination in the establishment and maintenance of class divisions. In both *Distinction* and “The Forms of Capital,” he punctures the false divide that has been erected between culture and economics. Social hierarchies may be underwritten by divisions in economic capital (bluntly: how much money one has) but depend equally on the accumulation of “cultural capital” – one’s cultural experience and education – and “social capital” – the networks of influence in which one is positioned – which function to justify class divisions and help to reproduce the status quo. As Bourdieu writes, “the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore receives proportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, as the direct, visible forms of transmission tend to be more strongly censored and controlled.”<sup>6</sup> Knowing how to behave in different circumstances and what is appropriate to like and dislike (everything from clothing and furniture to novels and films) plays a role in managing and maintaining class divisions, as does the status of the educational and social institutions in which one participates; presumably one learns the same mathematical equations at Northeastern University as at M.I.T., yet an engineering degree from the latter invariably earns you a higher social status and income than the former. The assessments of the social function of culture offered by both Bourdieu and Veblen raise serious questions with which scholars are still grappling. Far from being the innocent, soulful “other” of economics, both theorists show that culture has a deep impact on the dynamics and politics of social life, in no small part by the very fact of its supposed distance from it, a gap which helps shield culture from being experienced and understood as part of a far from innocent social calculus.

Members of the Frankfurt School have also influentially examined the politics of contemporary culture. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s well-known chapter from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “The Culture Industry,” confirms Arnold’s fears about the evolving impact of economics on contemporary society. For Horkheimer and Adorno, however, culture has itself been subject to forms of standardization that have rendered it inauthentic and left it far from being a space of resistance to commodification and instrumental reason (the use of human reason for strictly means–ends calculations). While culture seems to offer endless possibilities for novel and meaningful experiences, this apparent freedom and choice disguises the very real limits of contemporary life: “Something is provided for all so that none may escape.”<sup>7</sup> There may be many kinds of films to see – from erudite art films to scream-filled horror movies – but the overall place and function of film in social life is the same: to give you something to do in the evenings so that you can return refreshed to the work the next day. “The Culture Industry” has become an important text for the development of theories of mass culture and is often taken as a key example of elitist dismissals of contemporary popular culture, despite the fact that Adorno’s later comments about the fate of culture in the twentieth century indicate a more wholesale (high and low culture alike) condemnation of what culture has become.<sup>8</sup> Less commonly read but perhaps more powerful in its assessment of the politics of culture, Herbert Marcuse’s “The Affirmative Character of Culture” analyzes the



deception enacted by the category of culture in an historical and philosophical register. Marcuse sees the problems with culture emerging not from the industrialization of cultural industry, but from the social logic which lies at the root of its establishment as a distinct, modern category. For him, the imaginative possibilities contained within culture for individual self-development and social transformation is a fiction. “Affirmative culture,” he writes, “uses the soul as a protest against reification, only to succumb to it in the end. The soul is sheltered as the only area of life that has not been drawn into the social labour process ... the freedom of the soul was used to excuse the poverty, martyrdom, and bondage of the body.”<sup>9</sup> Once again, culture is shown to be other than it claims – not a negation of class society, but evidence of its concrete reality and its solid hold on our political and social imaginations.

The exploration of the ideological and political function of culture offered by these writers might seem to suggest that we should reject the category and concept entirely. But other critics have taught us to tread more cautiously. While being cognizant of the problem of affirmative culture described by Marcuse, Raymond Williams insists nevertheless on the importance of culture for understanding the full complexity of social life. “Culture Is Ordinary” offers a defense of culture that is in many ways the inverse of Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticisms. “A desire to know what is best, and to do what is good, is the whole positive nature of man,”<sup>10</sup> Williams writes. Though this passage evokes Arnold’s view of culture as “the best that has been thought and known,” for Williams culture does not have more or less appropriate forms through which the best and good are articulated, nor is it the property of a single class for whom it serves to legitimate social and economic power. Its ordinariness means that culture – that is, socialization and social change, tradition and creativity, communal values and individual meanings – is a resource for all groups and classes. The worry that the masses are ignorant or duped by commodity culture is rejected outright by Williams: “there are no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses.”<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that culture is absent of politics or ideology, or that it isn’t used in games of distinction and class legitimation described by the other theorists in this section. But in contrast to Bourdieu or Marcuse, for Williams culture can be the source of a counter-politics which works to undermine class divisions as well. Stuart Hall’s description of “popular culture” as existing in a “continuing tension (relationship, influence, antagonism) to the *dominant* culture,” a site “where the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged,”<sup>12</sup> echoes Williams’s claims for the ordinariness of culture and for an understanding of the popular as something other than the debased commercial culture produced by the culture industry. Hall draws our attention not just to the continued existence of forms of cultural expression outside of the calculations of profit, but also to its potential to challenge those cultural games which divide us from each other and control access to social rights, privileges, and status. The idea that certain kinds of cultural activities might effectively undermine or subvert existing forms of power has fueled a great deal of scholarly research and debate in the field of cultural studies, especially in the 1990s as it developed and grew into an academic field in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

In light of these ongoing debates, the last essay we discuss in this section offers a model for how we might interpret culture at the present time. Fredric Jameson’s “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” approaches the oppositions between low and high culture, popular and elite culture, mass commodity culture and modernism (often framed as the former’s high art opposite) in a distinct way. He affirms neither high nor ordinary culture, and does not challenge the productivity of the category of culture in a general sense, but argues that critics need to examine “the social and aesthetic situation – the dilemma of form and of a public – shared and faced by both modernism and mass culture, but ‘solved’ in antithetical ways.”<sup>14</sup> Fundamental to the discussions and debates about the social function of culture today is the “universal commodification of our object world” which has created a circumstance in which “everything in our consumer society has taken on an aesthetic dimension.”<sup>15</sup> For Jameson, both mass culture and high culture (in his case modernism) are reactions to this historically original situation, each offering in its own way imaginary resolutions to the social contradictions they encounter. In his characteristically insightful way, Jameson draws our attention to the way in which contemporary culture participates in reification (draining the cultural objects we encounter of their social origins), but also highlights the manner in which it exhibits longings for genuine collectivities that might exist outside