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## **The Politics of the Popular**

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## The Politics of the Popular

The immediate context of this paper is a recently started four year research project, funded by the Academy of Finland and titled The Power of Culture in Producing Common Sense (POWCULT). Our interdisciplinary project of eight scholars from three universities and five disciplines examines Finnish power structures by studying the production of common sense in the fields of culture, media and art since early 1990s.

We investigate the battles over representations, agendas, values and meanings that have accompanied the political and economical restructurings of Finnish society since the economic depression and EU membership. By revising the Gramscian notion of common sense, we examine how the power of culture operates in cultural and social imaginary.

Analyzing the representational and rhetorical strategies in popular press and television, literature, theatre, visual culture and popular music, we ask how these various areas of culture produce common sense and articulate value by setting agendas for public debates, by framing them, and by exerting definitional political power (what notions, opinions and understandings count as understandable and sensible). As a part of this, we ask how neo-liberalism, individualization, non-politicization and intimization are articulated in Finnish culture. We scrutinize the power struggles taking place in contemporary culture, media and popular art by analyzing visual culture, Finnish contemporary novels, reality television, improvisation theatre, popular television and journalism.

Our project takes place in a specific context. One of the most eye-catching features of the Finnish context is the erosion of traditional cultural divisions. In 2004, 62.7 percent of the Finnish population had a degree from upper secondary school, vocational school, polytechnic or university. Furthermore, of Finns between 25-29 years old, no less that 86.2 percent had such a degree.

In such a context, where popular education is vigorously promoted, it is, of course, increasingly difficult to maintain any fictions of ‘genuine common people’ or ‘uneducated masses’. At the same time all this also has profound impacts on the relations between ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture as many of the newly educated classes have never assumed a pure ‘high’ cultural identity. Democratization of education has, thus, in its part, eroded cultural hierarchies and hence undermined common notions of the popular and ‘the people’. National-romantic or traditional leftist notions of the ‘people’ as in any sense ‘authentic’ in the sense of ‘intact’ seem especially problematic in societies that have devoted massive human and economic resources into education.

In the light of our research interests and research environment we have tried to demolish the traditional bipolar model of ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture in the Finnish context. Instead, we have developed a model of various arenas of public address that speak with various efficacy to the whole population (see Koivunen and Lehtonen 1995). So far we have sketched a model of five such arenas of public address. These arenas are:

- the address of ordinary people and normality, speaking to the so called common people of the suburbs and countryside and highlighting normality, the “us”, the Finns,
- the informative ‘national’ address, speaking mostly to the elites and highlighting traditional ‘high’ political, economic and cultural matters,
- the hedonistic address of individual pleasures, speaking to the new urban middle-classes and highlighting cosmopolitanism and pleasurable consumption,
- the address of youth and counter-cultures, highlighting alternative and resistant practices and views and, finally
- the populist address of “the forgotten people” in sensational and spam weeklies and television formats, representing itself deliberately as “vox populi”.

All these arenas are multimodal. They traverse the media borders between press, literature, television, radio or internet. No television or radio channel nor a publication, such as a daily or a weekly, necessarily belong to only one of these arenas. We also assume that all Finns are simultaneously, though in varying degrees, addressed by all these arenas.

The main objective of our arena model is to find out the *mechanisms by which subjects are interpellated* in various arenas of public address. Instead of seeing popular publicness either as pure dope or a sheer field of pleasure and empowerment, we ask questions concerning *both* empowering *and* subjugating elements in popular culture. In doing so, we conceptualize the realm of the popular, first and foremost, as a theatre of constant tension, a key site where the late-modern Finnish society reproduces itself by producing common sense and gaining either willing or reluctant consent.

We have, in the Finnish context, come to question the ontological as well as the epistemological status of 'popular' and 'popular culture'. In an article to be published in *Cultural Studies*, composed together with the co-director of the project, Professor Anu Koivunen, we write that in stories we tell about the formation and circulation of cultural studies, the notion of the popular has a key role. For many practitioners of cultural studies, the notion of the popular has signaled the ethical and political rationale of the scholarly and pedagogical work: the desire and commitment, on the one hand, to question and criticize cultural hegemonies and classed, gendered and raced power structures linked to them, and, on the other hand, to 'give voice to' and to 'make visible' groups of people and areas of culture and society previously excluded from the academic inspection. In this way, then, the particular use of the notion of the popular has carried along the ethos (or at least the dream) of its etymological root, the Latin word *popularis*: 'belonging to the people' (Williams 1976, 236).

Considering the central position of the notion of the 'popular', it is, however, surprising that the notion has attracted quite little conceptual scrutiny in itself. While the notion of the 'popular' circulates as a qualifier in numerous book and article titles, its genealogies have remained largely unstudied. Therefore it is justified to ask how the notion of the popular as we know it (in the field of cultural studies) has been produced, where it comes from and what kinds of research questions it enables or disables.

As a result of these dwellings, Anu Koivunen and I argue, in the article mentioned above, that the notion of 'popular culture' has become both so ubiquitous and so fragmented and problematic that we need to rethink its heuristic and critical potential for cultural studies. In the current trans-national cultural landscape, reifying notions of popular culture, where the popular is seen as a thing, as well as fetishized notions of popular culture, where the popular is removed from its specific histories and seen as a more or less autonomous sphere, are of little value both as descriptive terms (answering the question: what is popular culture?) and as analytical devices (illuminating the question: what kind of knowledge the concept produces?).

We do not, however, suggest an abandoning but a rethinking of 'popular' and 'popular culture'. Tracing the definitional legacies of these terms and the concepts in cultural studies we ponder the uses of the notions of 'popular' and 'popular culture' as well as chart problems and blind alleys and map possible alternatives for them. As a crucial part of this, we suggest a rehabilitation and revision of the concept of 'hegemony' as a necessary tool to revitalize the questions propelling notions of the 'popular' and 'popular culture'. We like to think of this *return* to Gramsci not as a nostalgic move but as a theoretical and methodological reflection on our interests of knowledge concerning the 'popular' and various forms of 'publicness'. These questions, we argue, necessitate a rethinking of the notion of the 'political', another term and concept that often circulates as an unproblematic qualifier.

In a situation where 'the popular' is continuously at the centre of culture and cultural studies, it is axiomatic to view 'the popular cultural imaginary' as the key site where socio-

cultural norms are articulated and negotiated, where identity categories of nationality, class, ethnicity, “race”, age as well as gender are constructed and contested. In this perspective, the ‘popular’ is the realm where forms of both agency and ideological consent is produced, negotiated and contested. In much of cultural studies from 1950s to 2007 the ‘popular’ is invested with various utopian wishes and political desires. As cultural studies practitioners, however, we should not think that utopian potential (Dyer 1992) of the ‘popular’ would realize itself automatically or *en masse*. Indeed, we may ask, whether the commitment to “popular as power struggle” is a productive approach in the context of late capitalism, global cultural industries and new nationalisms. Hence we want to ask: Does the emphasis on agency curtail analyses of contemporary forms of subjection and coercion?

Instead of repeating the dichotomy of agency and structure we want to stress the always-already structured nature of agency as well as the idea of structures as structuration and, hence, never independent of agency.

In here, we have found ourselves to be increasingly dissatisfied with un-contextualized notions of “empowerment”. As Wendy Brown writes in her *States of Injury* (1995): “The language of resistance implicitly acknowledges the extent to which protest always transpires inside the regime; “empowerment”, in contrast, registers the possibility of generating one’s capacities, one’s “self-esteem,” one’s life course, without capitulating to constraints by particular regimes of power. But in so doing, contemporary discourses of empowerment too often signal an oddly adaptive and harmonious relationship with domination insofar as they locate the individual feelings, a register implicitly located on something of an otherworldly plane vis-à-vis social and political power. In this regard, despite its apparent locution of resistance to subjection, contemporary discourses of empowerment partake strongly of liberal solipsism – the radical de-contextualization of the subject characteristic of liberal discourse that is key to the fictional sovereign individualism of liberalism.” (22-23)

Wendy Brown is not suggesting here that talk of empowerment is always only illusion or delusion. She rather argues that “while the notion of empowerment articulates that feature of freedom concerned with action, with being more than the consumer subject figured in discourses of rights and economic democracy, contemporary deployments of that notion also draw so heavily on an un-deconstructed subjectivity that they risk establishing a wide chasm between the experience of empowerment and an actual capacity to shape the terms of political, social, or economic life.” “Indeed”, Brown remarks, “the possibility that one can “feel empowered” without being so forms an important element of legitimacy for the antidemocratic dimensions of liberalism.” (23)

Brown’s words remind us of what Raymond Williams wrote in his ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’. Williams emphasized there that “we can only understand an effective and dominant culture if we understand the real social process on which it depends: I mean the process of incorporation.” (38-39) On the basis of this, there are no guarantees for “empowering” practices not becoming incorporated into the dominant culture. “Empowerment” may form a basis of truly alternative or even oppositional practices that effectively go beyond the limits of dominant definitions. This cannot, however, be assumed beforehand but must always be shown in a concrete analysis of empowering practices in their specific historic contexts.

To conclude, then, one of the questions we need to ask of cultural studies is whether it has always distinguished carefully enough between agency and resistance. There can, of course, be no resistance without some agency, but this does not mean that all agency would be synonymous with resistance.

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