1 Introduction: Approaching Popular Culture in the Ancient World

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Was there such a thing as popular culture in the ancient world? And even if there was, how on earth can we, as scholars, access it? Can we expect to find a single 'popular culture' across the wide chronological and geographical terrain represented by the chapters in this book? The scholars contributing to this volume, a diverse group from across the classical disciplines, and from different scholarly traditions, share a conviction that ancient popular culture is both accessible and worth studying. Moreover, there is a shared conviction that it is *important* to study ancient popular culture, in that it will enrich and broaden our understanding of the ancient world, as well as our conception of the legacy of the ancient world in our own. Although the chapters collected here do not claim to offer a complete picture of ancient popular culture, they represent an important step forward in its study.

Classical scholarship has traditionally been concerned with the elite of the ancient world and their culture. One of the contributors to this book, Jerry Toner, has argued that classicists, tending to derive 'from the upper and upper-middle classes . . . have tended to be content to remain in the more comfortable thought-worlds of the Roman elite'.[1] When popular culture does come their way, classicists have tended to look upon it with a considerable degree of condescension. For instance, while discussing the fascinating Mimes of Herodas W. G. Arnott suggests that it might be 'healthy' for classicists 'occasionally to turn away from the ivory towers of scholarly pursuits towards the seamier corners of real life'.[2] Even more strikingly, B. E. Perry famously described the ancient novel as 'a low and disrespectable level of literature, adapted to the taste and understanding of uncultivated or frivolous-minded people'.[3] This volume will take the reader beyond the 'comfortable thought-worlds of the Roman elite', at times into 'the seamier corners of real life', while demonstrating the

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[1] Toner 1995: 22; this applies most fittingly to British-trained classicists, rather than to ancient historians in general.

[2] Arnott 1971: 132. [3] Perry 1967: 98.

richness of a culture which is far more rounded than the merely 'low and disrespectable'.

The popular culture under examination in this volume will take us from fifth-century BCE Greece to sixth-century CE Gaul. Both unity and diversity[4] will characterize the phenomena we encounter on this journey. Objects and subjects under discussion range from children's toys to theological speculation, from mental arithmetic to dressing up, from nicknames to oracles, from fables to musical instruments. The 'people' are also a diverse bunch. They are the political actors and theatre audiences of classical Athens. They are the urban plebs of the Roman Republic, as well as the subjects of the Roman emperor. They are the oft-chided congregations of late antique preachers. They are children, adults, soldiers, slaves, peasants and urbanites, performers and spectators. In each case, the authors in this book seek to examine this cast of characters in their own terms, to restore their agency. In each case, we show that we can move beyond a 'top-down' view of history, to construct a far more lively picture of the ancient world, making use of a diverse range of historical sources, as well as a variety of methodological approaches, taking inspiration from a rich comparative and theoretical literature.

Nonetheless, this book is not, and does not claim to be, a complete, or indeed a diachronic history of ancient popular culture. As will become clear, the chapters show a notable bias towards the Roman world. While such imbalances are often circumstantial, it is worth pausing to consider whether in fact there is more than sheer chance involved here. Was it ultimately the developments of the Hellenistic period that brought about the conditions for popular culture to flourish? That is, did the smaller, more equal societies of classical Greece allow less space for the development of a specifically popular culture? In any case, it is clear that the evidential basis for the study of ancient popular culture increases massively in the Roman imperial period. Even more so, as we shall see, in Late Antiquity Christianization entailed a new elite interest in the activities of the lower classes, offering both a new ideological approach and a new wealth of evidence for 'popular culture'.

In this introductory chapter I shall lay out the parameters for a study of ancient popular culture. This involves first of all a substantial study of the theoretical and historical literature relating to the investigation of popular culture, ancient and modern. For most of the contributors to this volume, methodological and theoretical discussions are not an optional extra for

[4] Taken from a chapter title of Burke 2009, 'Unity and diversity in popular culture'.

the study of ancient popular culture, but an essential aspect. Only at this point does discussion turn to the ancient world, firstly asking the crucial question 'who were "the people?"', before surveying recent scholarship on ancient popular culture, then finally turning to investigate key aspects that constitute ancient popular culture (such as religion, politics, literature and material culture) and its location (urban, rural, public and private).

Approaching Popular Culture

How can we define popular culture?[5] The classicist Holt Parker suggests, not entirely tongue-in-cheek, that 'we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it'.[6] Parker also provides one of the neatest, breeziest summaries available of the most important theories in current currency:

> Definitions of popular culture as 1) quantitatively superior, 2) qualitatively inferior, 3) mass culture, 4) a product of 'the people', 5) a battlefield for hegemony or 6) a chimera to be deconstructed by Postmodernism, have much to offer, but none is completely satisfying.[7]

Some readers will perhaps prefer to skip this section at this point, but it should already be clear that 'popular culture' (like 'elite culture') is of course a *construct* rather than a self-evident reality, and as such requires methodological and theoretical interrogation, which will take us from Romanticism, through Marxism, to postmodernism, with many permutations in between.

As we shall see, in the definition of *popular* culture the definition of culture itself is at stake, and this turns out to be highly contested. No less a figure than Raymond Williams, founder of the discipline of Cultural Studies, declared that:

> Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language . . . mainly because it has now come to be used of important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.[8]

Indeed we shall see, as this survey progresses, that the definition of 'culture' at play oscillates wildly, from a pluralistic 'way of life' to an elitist 'high'

[5] There are a number of useful readers and introductory books to help readers navigate the large body of theoretical work on popular culture, which is only briefly introduced here. See, in particular, Bigsby 1976; Guins and Zaragoza Cruz 2005; Storey 2006, 2008; Strinati 2004.
[6] Parker 2011: 147. [7] Parker 2011: 169. [8] Williams 1976: 76–7.

culture, which can thus be contrasted with a 'popular', 'mass' or other type of 'low' culture, and back again.[9]

The history of the study of popular culture, or, as Peter Burke puts it, 'the discovery of the people', goes back as far as the late eighteenth century, with the development of what was the first serious investigation of 'folk' culture.[10] As Burke has demonstrated, the academic study of popular culture was born, not coincidentally, at precisely the time when traditional popular culture was starting to disappear. The influential poet and critic Johann Herder was a key figure here, motivated not least by a radically pluralistic notion of *Kultur*, rejecting the existing teleological Eurocentric narrative of cultural superiority.[11] Herder made two important collections of *Volkslieder*, and contrasted the *Kultur des Volkes* with the *Kultur der Gelehrten*: popular culture and learned culture. Equally influential were the collections of folk tales made by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm between 1812 and 1857. Jakob Grimm stressed the idea of communal authorship, of collective creativity, writing 'Das Volk dichtet' ('the people creates'). Elsewhere in Europe folksongs in particular, but also traditional literature, featured in a number of national collections. The key intellectual influences were undoubtedly Romanticism and nationalism, while the impact of industrialization on traditional culture played a crucial role. The popular culture envisaged by its champions was undoubtedly rural, communal rather than individualistic, and largely timeless, or ahistorical. We can see the continuing presence of these characterizations in the scholarship that followed.

If traditional popular culture was discovered 'just in time'[12] by this first generation of scholars, many of their successors strongly believed that this traditional culture had been replaced by a debased and vulgar substitute. While there had been concerns about the threat to traditional culture from mechanized and industrialized civilization, the concern of the 'learned' was now focused on a threat to a much more limited, elitist definition of 'culture'. In the hugely influential *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Matthew Arnold (who popularized the idea of 'Philistines' as the uncultured opponents of enlightened culture) defined 'culture' as knowledge of 'the best that has been said and thought in the world'.[13] In other words, Arnold influentially limited the definition of 'culture' to what would now be

[9] Williams 1976: 77 notes how romantic notions of culture have been 'politically schizoid, swimming between radicals and reaction'.
[10] Burke 2009: 23–48. [11] As discussed by Williams 1976: 25–32. [12] Burke 2009: 40.
[13] Arnold 1960: 6. Furthermore, 'Culture is properly defined as the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection': Arnold 1960: 48.

termed 'high culture'. Popular culture itself is not specifically defined by Arnold, and yet it is clearly implied in the 'anarchy' opposed to his (high) 'culture'.[14]

Mechanization brought about a great transformation in people's experience of and participation in culture, as increasingly noted by critics and scholars in the first half of the twentieth century. In a hugely influential essay, the German critic Walter Benjamin welcomed the democratic and participatory opportunities brought about by the mechanical reproduction of art.[15] However, conservative critics contended, equally influentially, that modern civilization had been overly mechanized and that traditional hierarchies of culture were now under threat from new technologies of reproduction. Meanwhile F. R. Leavis took up the mantel of Arnold, in *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930), arguing that there was a clear division between minority culture and mass civilization: the influence of the former was under threat and the latter was an object of fear and disapproval.[16] Criticism of this new 'mass culture' came from the left, as well as the right, as with the writings of the prolific social critic Dwight MacDonald, who asserted a clear distinction between mass and *popular* culture, asserting of the former: 'its distinctive mark is that it is solely and directly an article for mass consumption, like chewing gum'.[17] MacDonald contrasted this mass culture with 'folk art', which he saw, like Herder and the Grimms before him, as 'a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves' while 'Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying.'[18]

A pessimistic approach to twentieth-century popular culture often has its roots in the Marxist analysis of culture. At the heart of this analysis lies the notion that a society's culture is determined by its economic base, upon

[14] Arnold 1960: 176. Furthermore, he refers to the non-elite in highly derogatory terms, writing of the 'raw and uncultivated . . . masses' and 'those vast miserable unmanageable masses of sunken people': 193.

[15] Benjamin 2008.

[16] Leavis was concerned about the strength of Americanization, particularly as transmitted through films: Leavis 1930: 35. 'They provide now the main form of recreation in the civilized world; and they involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals, appeals the more insidious because they are associated with a compellingly vivid illusion of actual life.'

[17] MacDonald 1957: 59.

[18] MacDonald 1957: 60. Note that MacDonald specifically criticizes conservative attacks on mass culture for making the error of confusing it with folk art: 69.

which was built an ideological 'superstructure'.[19] It should be noted that almost right from the start the heavily reductive determinism of this concept was being modified.[20] Nonetheless the basic theory perdures: that, as a result of the inequality that is built into the relations of production, the leading ideas in capitalist society, even including popular culture, are those of, and those spread by, the ruling classes.

We can see the scholarly approach to popular culture became even more negative, indeed fatalistic, in twentieth-century thought. Prominent members of what is known as the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, coined the notion of the 'culture industry' in 1944.[21] In this analysis, even the concept of mass culture was inadequate, as in fact the masses had no responsibility for this culture at all, which was a homogeneous, uniform product. The culture industry, it was argued, uses culture to promote a dominant ideology, and by this means it incorporates the people into this ideology, and thus mass conformity, far from the 'anarchy' envisaged by Arnold.[22]

The idea that the capitalist mode of production produced a closed system of 'culture' from which there could be no escape was shared by another influential theorist, Louis Althusser. For Althusser, ideology in the capitalist system 'interpellates' the individual as a subject, representing 'the imaginary relationship of the individual to their real conditions of existence',[23] so that we are bound to ignore, or 'misrecognize' reality.[24] Althusser influentially argued that ideology was a system, a *practice*, with 'a material existence', produced by 'ideological state apparatuses' (ISAs: for instance, mass media churches, schools, the family).[25] This idea of

[19] As most classically stated in the famous Preface and Introduction to Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859: Marx 1976: 3. In *The German Ideology* of 1845–6 (1974), Marx and Engels had already argued that the ruling class, having the means of material production, would inevitably have control of the means of *mental* production.

[20] Even by Engels himself in his letter to Joseph Bloch: 'According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Therefore if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the only determining one, he is transforming that proposition into a meaningless, abstract absurd phrase': Marx and Engels 1977: 75.

[21] Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: esp. 120–1.

[22] E.g. Adorno 1991: 104: 'The categorical imperative of the culture industry no longer has anything in common with freedom. It proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to what exists anyway, and that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex to power and omnipotence. The power of the culture industry's ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness.'

[23] Althusser 1971: 153. [24] Althusser 1971: 170.

[25] Althusser 1971. For application in the context of the ancient world, discussing the Roman games as an ISA (alongside other theoretical interpretations) see Gunderson 1996: 116–18.

imposing conformity through cultural means rather than through outright coercion[26] is also key to the work of Antonio Gramsci, whose concept of 'cultural hegemony' has been hugely influential in the study of popular culture.[27] Gramsci argued that dominated or subordinate groups (*classi subalterne*) were unable to produce their own autonomous, genuinely popular culture. Rather than understanding this as a version of the rather crude concept of 'false consciousness', the position of these groups is seen rather by Gramsci as one of 'contradictory consciousness' – 'always divided and ambiguous'.[28]

Gramsci's theories have been hugely influential on the Subaltern Studies movement,[29] while the influence of postcolonial scholarship itself has important implications for our study of popular culture. More accessibly, James C. Scott's idea of 'infrapolitics', especially as laid out in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*[30] has been cited by many scholars of premodern popular culture.[31] Scott's key concept of the '"hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant' is a particularly suggestive idea, tying in nicely with theories of the carnivalesque and its radical potential,[32] as discussed further below. But can popular culture ever seriously challenge dominant, hegemonic culture? The answer surely lies in understanding cultural relations as dynamic, rather than static. Here we can look, most helpfully, to Stuart Hall's seminal essay 'Notes on deconstructing the "popular"' (1981), which clearly stresses the *embeddedness* of popular culture: 'there is *no* whole, authentic, autonomous "popular culture" which lies outside the field of force of the relations of cultural power and domination'.[33] Hall stresses that any proper understanding of popular culture must, by necessity, be political. He argues that the dominant culture will always seek to suppress popular culture, though this is not to say that we need to accept an entirely pessimistic

[26] Althusser clearly distinguished between 'repressive' and 'ideological' state apparatuses.

[27] Insofar as Gramsci ever offers a precise definition of this term, it is described as the '"spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production': Gramsci 1971: 12.

[28] Lears 1985: 569, 570.

[29] Note a useful definition of subaltern studies from Bernstein and Byres 2001: 33: 'the desire to write history from the viewpoint of subalterns (peasants and workers) as autonomous agents who create their own forms of oppositional culture and identity, who are not victims and/or followers, and whose ideas and actions are not to be represented (appropriated) by elite agents and discourses that claim to speak on their behalf'.

[30] Scott 1990, building on his earlier fieldwork-based studies: Scott 1976, 1985.

[31] E.g. Forsdyke 2012; Kurke 2011; Toner 2009, all discussed below.

[32] Scott 1990: xii.

[33] Hall 1981: 232.

reading, whereby popular culture is impossible because it is inevitably defeated by hegemonic forces. Hall stresses that popular culture is both *dynamic* and *dialectical* in nature;[34] therefore its position vis-à-vis the dominant culture and ideology is always Janus-like: 'In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with the double-stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it.'[35] This then gives us a starting point for wrestling an understanding of ancient popular culture from its massively unequal source base. Stuart Hall's contribution thus enables a constructive approach to popular culture, which does not deny Gramscian 'cultural hegemony', but does allow it to be more permeable than a conventionally pessimistic reading of Gramsci would allow.

Hall's insistence on 'the people' as both producers and users of culture can be compared with various poststructuralist approaches which describe popular culture as *bricolage*.[36] The work of Michel de Certeau, who stressed the creativity and powers of invention of ordinary people, examining their '*ré-emploi*' of popular culture, is particularly relevant here.[37] This approach helps break down and through the bald and unhelpful dichotomies which have traditionally beset the subject, as we have already seen: does popular culture come properly up from below (e.g. 'folk culture'), or is it imposed downwards from the top (e.g. 'mass culture')?

Meanwhile Holt Parker has recently suggested that we move our focus away from the 'people' to the objects of the culture itself, to the 'social life of things'.[38] Parker also suggests that while discussions of the subject remain

[34] 'what is essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define "popular culture" in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture. It is a conception of culture which is polarized around this cultural dialectic': Hall 1981: 235.

[35] Hall 1981: 228. Further, Hall refers to a 'continuous and necessarily uneven struggle' by dominant culture to 'enclose and confine' culture: Hall 1981: 233. Cf. Bennett 1986: xv: 'The field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavour. As such, it consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which – in different particular types of popular culture – dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are "mixed" in different permutations.'

[36] The concept of social bricolage is taken from Lévi-Strauss 1966: esp. 16–23; for its application to the study of popular culture see, for example, Hebdige 1979.

[37] An 'art of doing things': Certeau 1984: esp. xi–xxiii and 15–41. Relevant here too is the growing interest in contemporary cultural studies in the seemingly straightforward concept of 'everyday life'; see Highmore 2002; for the material culture aspect of this in particular, focusing on the study of 'things', see Attfield 2000.

[38] See Parker 2011: 159; the term derives from Appadurai 1985: 45, itself building on Baudrillard's essay 'The system of objects': Baudrillard 1988: 16–17.

tied to an essentially Marxist framework, the framework of class is best replaced by that of 'status' (which is indeed more readily applicable to the ancient world). Parker also takes inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu, and his much-cited notion of 'cultural capital'.[39] In this analysis, Parker suggests, we can define popular culture as that which is produced for and/or consumed by those *without* cultural capital.[40] Most distinctively, Parker suggests that popular culture can in fact best be understood as 'unauthorized culture',[41] the advantage of which is that this definition bears no inherent political or aesthetic status, and implies no value judgement.

This discussion of Parker's contribution draws to a close this admittedly partial survey of theoretical material. As will become clear, some of the definitions and issues under discussion explicitly deal with the issue of popular culture under capitalist modernity and can only with difficulty be applied to a study of premodern popular culture. We shall now look to see how historians of this period have approached the subject.

Historicizing Popular Culture in the Premodern World

The study of popular culture in the premodern world has first of all built upon the huge advances in the study of the non-elite made by social historians. This is not the place for a detailed survey of this huge body of work, including the predominantly Anglo-Saxon social-science-led work from the 1960s onwards (part of a strong strain of Marxist historiography),[42] the pioneering work of the French *Annales* school,[43] and the often fascinating insights brought by the study of 'microhistory'.[44] Overall, however, the most important and relevant work from this period is undoubtedly E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. The bringing of the cultural dimension to the work of social and economic history was crucial and the key concept contained in the title is that of

[39] Again, an extended definition is elusive, but see Bourdieu 1977: esp. 159–97; Parker 2011: 160, n. 69.

[40] Although this definition might be thought too limiting: cultural capital is of course at play among all social groups.

[41] Parker 2011: esp. 165. However, see Canevaro below, who critiques this concept in the case of classical Athens.

[42] See here the special issue of the *Journal of Social History* of 1976: 'Social History Today and Tomorrow?', esp. Stearns 1976.

[43] See, for a useful summary, Clark 1985.

[44] See here Muir 1991. The work of Carlo Ginzburg, who coined the term, is discussed by Canevaro below, notably Ginzburg 1980.

making: 'The working class made itself as much as it was made.'[45] That is, Thompson stressed both the agency of the non-elite and the constructedness of culture – key themes for this project.

Thompson's work is foundational for many of the new cultural historians, whose work first came to prominence in the 1970s. We have already seen that 'culture' is a polyvalent term; in the hands of this new wave of cultural historians, it became markedly *symbolic*. According to an oft-favoured definition from the anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhorn:

> Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts.[46]

This concentration on the symbolic has been a marked feature of this new cultural history, as helpfully described by one of its most influential practitioners, Peter Burke:

> cultural historians might usefully define themselves not in terms of a particular area or 'field' such as art, literature and music, but rather by a distinctive concern for values and symbols, wherever these are to be found, in the everyday life of ordinary people as well as in special performances for elites.[47]

This concern for the symbolic is seen in the striking influence of cultural anthropology, particular the work of Clifford Geertz.[48] Geertz' idea, much cited, that 'the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong' has been hugely stimulating for many historians, who recognize, all the same, that their interpretive task is even harder than that of the anthropologist.[49]

This influence has greatly impacted upon cultural historians and the study of popular culture, in a focus on rituals such as religious festivals but also other kinds of culturally stereotyped (or 'ritual') behaviour, including feasting, violence and the activities of groups and organizations.[50] Among

[45] Thompson 1963: 194.

[46] Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 181. The symbolic element in this definition is thus more marked than in, for instance, the more traditional anthropological definition of culture as 'civilization', e.g. Tylor 1871: 1: 'Culture . . . is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'

[47] Burke 2009: 18–19.

[48] Geertz' method of 'thick description' has been particularly influential: see Geertz 1973: esp. 3–30 and 412–53.

[49] Geertz 1973: 452.

[50] See, for instance, the now classic articles by Natalie Zemon Davis on 'charivari', 'abbeys of misrule' and ritual violence, collected together in Davis 1975. Davis in her turn was influenced