

Space for Notes



Popular Culture & Class Struggle

I hate a song that makes you think that you are not any good.
 I hate a song that makes you think that you're just born to lose,
 bound to lose, no good to anybody, no good for nothing,
 because you're either too old or too young or too fat or too thin
 or too ugly or too this or too that . . .
 Songs that run you down or songs that poke fun at you
 on account of your bad luck or your hard travellin'.

I'm out to fight those kinds of songs
 to my very last breath of air and my last drop of blood.

I'm out to sing songs that will prove to you that this is your world,
 and that if it has hit you pretty hard, and knocked you for a dozen loops,
 no matter how hard it's run you down and rolled over you,
 no matter what colour, what size you are, how you are built,
 I'm out to sing the songs that make you take pride in yourself
 and in your work. And the songs that I sing are made up
 for the most part by all sorts of folks just about like you.

Woody Guthrie

What constitutes so-called “popular” or “low brow” culture, i.e., those aspects of culture which occupy the general population, as opposed to “high brow” culture (classical music, avant garde art, theater, opera) which is generally viewed as being produced by and for a “cultural elite,” changes over time but has often been defined to include a wide variety of activities and media, from daily life activities (patterns of family interactions to television and schooling) to special events (carnivals, comic books), film (grade B, drive-in), theater (street) and literature (romance novels, westerns, science fiction). While these two terms: popular culture and high brow culture have not generally been given class specific definitions, there has been a tendency among Marxist critics to understand popular culture in terms of the amusements and life styles of the working class and high brow culture in terms of those of the wealthier leisure classes, e.g., the bourgeoisie in capitalism.

Historically, Marxists have generally distinguished between those aspects of popular culture which have been produced by working people themselves, e.g., folk art, tales or music, and those aspects which have been produced for them, e.g., commercial television, advertising, arcade video games, film and music. This distinction is usually associated with a valorization of the former — as being authentic expressions of mass creativity — and deprecation of the former — as being mechanisms of cultural pacification and domination. Indeed, the Marxist literature dealing with culture has had two distinct strands: one rediscovering and celebrating manifestations of “authentic” grassroots culture, the other elaborating a detailed critique of the mechanisms of cultural domination via consumerism and the society of the spectacle.

Unfortunately, these two strands of work have largely stood outside each other, whereas, what we need is a recognition and analysis of how these two forces interact to produce the cultural world that surrounds us. For while it is true that some working class intelligences and imaginations have been harnessed to the task of crafting manipulative cultural experiences, be they passivity inculcating spectacles or order inducing lessons in consumption, work discipline or allegiance to authority, it is no less true that much of this

work of domination involves desperate attempts to deflect, redirect or otherwise nullify dangerously antagonistic cultural innovations created by rebellious spirits unharnessed by any of the existing capitalist mechanisms. As a result, a great deal of popular culture of all kinds contains conflicting currents of critical revolt against the status quo as well as attempts to neutralize and tame such currents.

One of the spheres of culture in which these conflicts are most clearly played out is popular music. From traditional folk and country music through rhythm & blues to modern jazz and all the permutations of rock & roll, we can find these conflicts shaping the lyrics, musical styles and evolution of popular music. At the one extreme are overt “protest songs”, such as those so popular during the cycle of struggles of the late 1960s in which civil rights and anti-war militants wrote, sang and played music aimed to mobilize social movements against existing institutions and policies. At the other extreme is such commercialized, mechanical music as disco or Muzak designed purely for manipulation and profits. In between, and even to some extent within these extremes, we find an endless variety of mixtures of intentions, roles and effects. Shaping these mixtures are, on the one hand, the creativity of song writers and musicians reacting to, or with, and often against, the world that surrounds them; a creativity that restlessly and repeatedly breaks out of old forms and styles and thought patterns to craft new reactions and interventions. On the other hand are the forces of capitalist commercialization and its tools of ideological warfare.

Educated in a ruling class culture, Marx illustrated and buttressed his arguments in *Capital* with a wide variety of pithy quotes from classical authors, from Aristotle to Goethe — which helped give him a reputation for being extremely erudite as well as extremely radical. Understood within their context, these quotes often not only illuminate Marx’s analysis but also add considerable humor to his presentation. When it comes to reading *Capital*, however, especially when reading it at the beginning of the 21st Century as opposed to situating it in the 19th Century, I find it as amusing to draw on the various moments of critique in contemporary popular culture, especially in music, as to search out modern counterparts to Marx’s classical references. For this reason I have included in this study guide, and may sometimes play in class, a wide variety of more or less contemporary folk and rock songs which provide both an *auditory* illumination of the text and demonstrations of how the relationships that Marx treated are, unfortunately, still with us today.

In the same spirit I have included a variety of graphic art — political cartoons, comic strips, graffiti, advertisements and so on — which also reflect the continuing pertinence of Marx’s analysis in our present. These various moments of popular culture are presented without commentary in this study guide so that you can simply enjoy them in their immediacy. I will provide more or less detailed commentary on various of them in class lectures. Again and again, in many different forms, styles and media, the illustrations included can easily be seen, and understood, as manifestations of a pervasive resentment of and rebellion against the most fundamental social mechanism of capitalist domination: the imposition of work.

The first of these illuminations are out and out protest songs: Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” which protests the deadening effects of school and teachers on students’ creativity and freedom, and two songs from Jimmy Cliff’s film “The Harder They Come” which express the anger and determination of a young Jamaican who has recently moved from the

countryside to the city and discovered the myriad mechanisms both for exploiting people and for hiding that exploitation behind pious ideological veils. Despite the fact that all three of these songs have been commodified (packaged and sold for a profit -- on recordings and at concerts) they have also been vehicles for the international circulation of bottom-up struggle. "Another Brick in the Wall" has been banned in numerous countries around the world because of the chord it strikes in the hearts of school children and students who, again and again, adopted it in their own struggles. One particularly dramatic example of this occurred in the black township of Soweto in South Africa where, during a student strike against apartheid, thousands of black children sang this song while facing off with the South African police across barricades. In the case of "The Harder they Come", by containing some of the most poignant and passionate moments of reggae music along with a story line that retells in allegorical and poetic terms the whole history of primitive accumulation, the film has circulated the struggles of the West Indian poor far beyond the confines of the Caribbean, bringing understanding as well as the spirit of resistance to people all over the world. (For background see the book by Campbell cited below.)

Recommended Further Reading

On the interpretation of everyday popular culture in terms of the underlying social conflicts of capitalist society, take a look at some of the following: Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, London: Harper & Row, 1971; S. Cohen and L. Taylor, *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*, London: Allen Lane, 1976; S. Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the 'The Popular'", in R. Samuel (ed) *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981; B. Waites, T. Bennett, and G. Martin (eds) *Popular Culture: Past and Present*, London: Croom Helm - Open University Press, 1982; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Volumes I & II), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; F. Jameson, "Postmodernism, of the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, *New Left Review*, No. 146, July-August 1984; J. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Feminism and the Representation of Women in Popular Culture*, Chaptel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984; John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989; John Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989; John Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works*, New York: Verso, 1993; Edward P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, New York: The New Press, 1993; John Storey, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993..

On working class popular songs and protest music, see: John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953; Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer (eds) *Songs of Work and Freedom*, Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1960; Alan Lomax, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-hit People*, New York: Oak Publications, 1967 (with notes on the songs by Woody Guthrie); Roy Palmer, *The Painful Plow: a portrait of the agricultural labourer in the 19th Century from folk songs and ballads and contemporary accounts*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1972; Roy Palmer, *Poverty Knock: a picture of industrial life in the 19th Century through songs, ballads and contemporary accounts*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1974; Philip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975; Red Notes, *A Songbook*, London, 1977; Kathy Henderson et al, *My Song is My Own: 100 Women's Songs*, London: Pluto Press, 1979; Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Carry It On! A History in Song and Picture of the Working Men and Women of America*, Poole: Blandford Press, 1986; Peter Blood (ed), *Rise up Singing: The Group Singing Songbook*, Bethlehem: Sing Out, n.d.; Guy and Candie Carawan (ed) *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs*, Bethlehem: Sing Out, n.d.; Hildred Roach, *Black American Music: Past and Present*, Melbourne (Fla.): Krieger, 1992; José Limón, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems: History and Influence in Mexican-American Social Poetry*, Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1992. This list only scratches the surface. There is a vast literature on the subject and a great many collections of recorded music. Perhaps the best place to start to learn about old recordings is with the Folkways Catalogue from the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., and to learn about new ones, spend some time in the library with *Sing Out!* or *Dirty Linen* magazines.

On contemporary popular music, there is also a vast literature, much of which is not very useful. You might, however, look at: David Pichaske, *A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and Culture in the Sixties*, New York: Schirmer Books, 1979; Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock n' Roll*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1981; Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 1987 especially chap. 5: "Rasta, Reggae and Cultural Resistance".