Popular Culture, 'Resistance,' 'Cultural Radicalism,' and 'Self-Formation'
Comments on the Development of a Theory

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1. PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

This article follows up on the debate over the resistance potential of popular culture. The first part traces the historical constellation of ideas in which the question arose and remains to this day. The second part attempts to systematize different dimensions of 'resistance.' The third part examines the development and criticism of this approach in the field of Cultural Studies. This leads to the fourth part, which investigates the role "cultural radicalism" (Fluck, "Die Wissenschaft" 115) has played in this discussion. The fifth part introduces the concept of self-formation. The sixth discusses the ways in which the political relevance of popular culture has been evaluated, and how the 'resistance' approach can be further developed.

'Resistance' in a specific sense, namely that established in British Cultural Studies, forms the point of reference, framing the topic of this article in three ways. Firstly, the analysis will take place within the supposed context of a clash of interests between 'the people' and 'the power bloc'; secondly, it will focus on the cultural dimension; and thirdly, it will investigate the cultural exercise of power and oppositional practices from the perspective of 'the people' with the intention of facilitating their empowerment.

The thoughts of political and academic actors as to what exactly constitutes 'resistance' are as varied and contradictory as the concerns articulated by 'the people.' Nonetheless, there is a widespread expectation that research from the perspective of 'the people' has to promote

oppositional feelings, thoughts, and actions. In this situation, it seems appropriate to approach the subject (within the given context) from an inductive rather than a normative perspective. The following investigation therefore refers to texts and sources in which cultural practices are *interpreted* as critical, oppositional, empowering—or as 'resistance.' In this case, self-descriptions from the context of 'the people' and (crucially) from the perspective of Cultural Studies are equally as relevant as sources from the perspective of the 'power bloc' that attribute an oppositional quality to certain cultural practices.

What forms of expression and behavior count as resistant in a society—and thereby have resistant potential—is primarily a result of reciprocal perception, and the object of practical negotiation. No cultural form is resistant or challenges established power structures on its own, independent of any context. On the contrary, the endless cycle of rebellious disruption, alarmed reaction, commercialization, and finally the transformation of the temporarily controversial into one of many aesthetic differentiations on the market (which will be followed by a new disruption in another form) forms the standard model in popular culture research, as in the memory of the actors themselves.

A working definition of popular culture as used in the scope of this essay would comprise the commercial products and commodities that are used and assigned value by members of all social and educational strata for the purposes of entertainment. More specifically, this refers to mass arts such as film and music, computer games, dance, and popular literature. Necessarily, popular culture equally encompasses the *practices* of engaging with cultural goods and their use by the audience;[1] these fundamentally include activities that lead to the interpretation and re-interpretation of cultural goods. Put another way, popular culture is not produced or controlled by 'the people,' but rather by the culture industries;[2] yet the consumers of such culture have considerable room of action in

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1 | Regarding the author's position, cf. Maase "Unscharfe Begriffe" and "Populärkultur."

2 | This term, in plural, is not meant in an evaluative way, as in critical theory (cf. Steinert), but rather in an empirical or analytical way, as in David Hesmondhalgh's *The Cultural Industries*.

their individual and collective appropriation, as in the actual attribution of *cultural* value to such goods.[3]

How they perceive this room of action and (are able to) use it in a practical sense, which interpretations they favor, and which they find inconceivable, depends, however, on the social conditions and subjectivity models that significantly limit the potential of 'the people' for perception, imagination, and action in contemporary capitalist societies. Thus, the following question forms the logical crux of the debate surrounding 'resistance': What is the nature of the room of action that actors can open up through the willful appropriation of popular culture, and what potential is generated here for action that effectively leads to a "society of equals" (Rosanvallon)?

However, it is no longer really possible for a single person to take in the highly differentiated field of popular culture, and the same is true for its corresponding field of academic study, as well as the (now worldwide) field of critical popular culture scholarship. It is only with a great deal of luck that one can avoid the danger of 'bringing owls to Athens,' and one will always deal with individual lines of enquiry disproportionately. In this context, it is understood that the present contribution is merely part of an ongoing and interminable discussion.

2. Art as the Exercise of Freedom and the Traditions of Left-wing Criticism of Mass Culture

The idea of the autonomy of art forms an important context in the debate (cf., e.g., Wolfzettel and Einfalt; Fredel; M. Müller, Bredekamp, Hinz, Verspohl, Fredel, and Apitzsch). From the last third of the 18th century, on the one hand, it addressed the creative class; they should keep their work free from non-artistic interests. On the other hand, it countered a commercial and institutional bias towards art that conformed to religious, moral, political, etc. standards, as well as the tendency to adapt or even subordinate art to the anticipated tastes of buyers. This was a reaction

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3 | This was seminally developed by John Fiske in *Understanding Popular Culture* (esp. 23-47). A current update of this can be found in John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*.

both to the accelerated marketization of the arts and to state pressure with an anti-revolutionary thrust.

The diversity and the contradictory interpretations of the demand for autonomy cannot be fully developed here. However, one can say that at least for the bourgeois public in 19th century Germany, there was an extremely present if not dominant discourse that proclaimed the autonomy of the (inner) freedom of art, and furthermore viewed this as a model, if not the "foundation of political freedom" (Fuchs 196). Of particular relevance here is Schiller's thesis that the "aesthetic disposition of the soul" (510), because of its "rational" distance from the perceived constraints of every-day reality, "gives birth to liberty" (510). His central metaphor of the 'aesthetic game' points to the intention of creating mental and practical distance from the world of bourgeois constraints.

The educated classes were well acquainted with this tradition of thought, and it played an important role after the First World War (and especially after the successes of Italian and German fascism), when the relationship between the labor movement and commercial popular culture became the subject of public criticism, particularly in the context of concepts such as mass culture and mass art (cf. Hertel 119-26). Herbert Marcuse's reckoning with the "affirmative character" of the bourgeois humanistic understanding of culture, which "sets the realm of actual values and ends in themselves against the societal world of use and means" (63), accounts for its continuing fascination. In Walter Benjamin's model of the "scattered" reception of mass culture transmitted via media, which overcomes subjection to the aura of the original (cf. 503-05), one hears the echo of Schiller's 'ludic drive.' Adorno's desperate hope that art could succeed through negation at conveying unreified criticism of suffering under monopoly capitalism also builds upon the autonomy idea. Art would become

social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful,' it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. (Adorno 225-26).

Initial considerations of popular culture and 'resistance' in the inter-war period were still rooted in the tradition of the Western European labor movements, which took a critical view of mass culture. This entailed two perspectives. The first understood the popular culture disseminated

commercially and by the religious and political establishment as an ideological weapon against the development of proletarian class consciousness. The second interpreted these mass products as part of the mechanism of cultural inequality that kept the people away from the fruits of the true, greater culture. Particularly in German-speaking countries, this was underpinned by aesthetic standards that were oriented towards a classic art canon. From this perspective, it was simply unthinkable that pulp magazines, entertainment cinema, and *Schlager* music could have legitimate aesthetic qualities, or like art, afford their users opportunities for distanced reflection, and give free rein to the imagination (cf. Emig; Storim 151-67; Wietschorke 157-75; Maase, *Was macht Populärkultur* 88-91).

Against this background, Walter Benjamin's view of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" presented a revolutionary new approach. He expressed a positive, at least open view of film as the paradigmatic popular art of the present age, and of its mass audience as especially sovereign. It was here that the concept of 'resistance' as a willful activity on the part of working class users first became conceivable. However, given the advance of fascism, Benjamin opted for a rather conventional idea of the "politization of art" (508), which focused on ideological messages and their intellectual producers.

This was also the line that socialist and radical intellectuals followed after the Second World War in the context of the propaganda battles of the Cold War. Their opposition to commercial mass culture united two traditional themes, the political struggle against supposedly dangerous messages and the cultural defense against taste-destroying 'non-art' or 'anti-art.' In Europe, 'national' campaigns against 'American non-culture' united opponents of pop music, jazz, and Hollywood films from across the political spectrum in a conservative anti-Americanism that was tinged with racism (cf., e.g., Poiger; Maase, *BRAVO*). In the 1960s, the left came to interpret 'American' as 'imperialistic mass culture.'

At the same time, however, a transformation that was closely connected to the protest movement in West Germany at that time got underway, changing the view of popular culture. Since the mid-1950s, rock and roll music and critical Hollywood films had already found intense resonance, initially with small groups of secondary school and university students from bourgeois families. In the 1960s, students of literature and cultural studies began to engage critically with the bourgeois understanding of culture. This was highly political, as it undermined the bourgeois claim

to social superiority and leadership that was built upon a foundation of knowledge centered on traditions of high culture.

These young intellectuals took an interest in genres of popular culture that had generally been associated with audiences from social classes that were viewed as subordinate to the bourgeoisie; they did so not only as users, fans, and aficionados, but also from an analytical perspective. In the interest of elevating their own newly adopted tastes, which were conventionally understood to be illegitimate, many committed young academics looked for elements of revolt, subversion, and resistance in films, detective novels, and rock music. Alongside critical studies on popular culture (often labeled 'trivial culture' in the Federal Republic), a line of research gained a foothold in the 1960s that examined relevant material with regards to its political and aesthetic progressiveness, increasingly under the positive label 'pop(culture)' (cf., e.g., Hecken, *Pop*; Hecken, *Avant-Pop*).

3. Art and Opposition: Classifications

This is the point in the present historical overview where British Cultural Studies and its concept of 'resistance' also found reception in West Germany. One can discern four principle lines of argument concerning the ways in which popular arts and practices connect their users to resistant impulses. From the German perspective, and for reasons of classification (known for being a favored preoccupation of German authors), I will add an aspect that, to my knowledge, has only been dealt with in Cultural Studies on the margins: the fictional character of art and the potential of aesthetic experience and imagination that it opens up. Of course the different dimensions are not mutually exclusive; rather, they connect and overlap in diverse ways.

A) Distancing through the Medium of Fiction

In the context of art autonomy, the aesthetic debate has, since the 19th century, repeatedly turned to the question of whether the fictional structure of artworks creates a fundamental distance from what is usually referred to as 'reality' or 'life.' This has in fact related primarily to the *position of the artist*; for our purposes, it should be asked whether the aesthetic *experience of the*

user includes *practices of distancing*. Here, distance refers to a person feeling doubts about previous views that seemed to be granted, and to things losing the state of being self-evident; it refers to the emergence of alternatives in the sense that the given becomes questionable, and that different conditions might be possible and are being imagined. 'Distance' opens up spaces of thought and feeling for that which was previously unknown, for alterity and utopias, at least for the perceptions of dissatisfaction, want, and suffering that are eventually caused by oppressive systems.

Previously, one has rarely asked whether the practices of the *use of mass art* can generate comparable critical perspectives and transgressions of the status quo. However, if one looks at the forms of 'resistance' that are often attributed to the consumption of popular culture, this hypothesis appears to be extremely promising.

B) Contents, Assertions, and Messages

Socialist organizations and radical movements have, from the beginning on, engaged with their surrounding popular culture. They attacked what they perceived as the propaganda of the powerful, attempted to unmask its untruth, and promoted cultural actors from whom they expected ideological support; this was mostly in the form of non-commercial activities from the likes of songwriters, film makers, or alternative theatre groups. The diversification of the culture market led to a situation in which oppositional movements also discovered tendencies in commercial media that sought to strengthen their political goals, to the extent of the development of their own cultural-political strategies.

All political actors develop such practices; these count among the daily business of pressure groups, spreading their perspectives and demands. Such struggles for influence form the solid core of the enormously differentiated interpretation practices and conflicts that currently accompany and virtually envelope cultural production in the public sphere. Advertising texts for bestsellers are included here as much as film and literature reviews, PR campaigns convoying transmedial events (e.g., TV series, new computer games), and last but not least, time and again, attempts to scandalize undesirable messages and cultural formats on a national scale. Today, all of these interventions trigger a bewildering interplay of reactions in Social Media, thus expanding the scope of cultural, interpretive battles enormously.

Cultural research critically examines such practices, discourses, and networks. However, it is well advised to avoid getting involved in conflicts over content, meaning, and supposed effects, for example with judgments regarding what is 'really resistant' and what is not. The tendency towards this is however minimal. Since at least the 1980s, cultural scholars of all disciplines have assumed that texts and practices of popular culture do not convey any distinct and unified assertions or messages. Rather, interpretations and evaluations of popular materials are socially negotiated. In this, influential media and active audiences occupy a central position, and their interpretations accordingly turn out to be diverse, heterogeneous, and unpredictable.

C) Vigorous Self-Empowerment and Willful Appropriations

These 'semiotic wars' are usually waged in public and mostly communicated through media. We have to distinguish them from the everyday practices of interpretation, reinterpretation, parody, or reworking that users engage in; the latter practices constitute a significant part of the enjoyment of popular culture.[4] Research on subcultures at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) illuminated the objects and practices in the fields of consumption and media, which provided material for symbolic diversions and reversals. Referring to the edited volume *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson),[5] Dick Hebdige, Paul Willis, Jim Clarke, and later John Fiske and others regarded such semiotic actions as the core of 'resistance' in popular culture: they grapple with the established practices and readings of *societal hierarchization*. According to Fiske, such activities can be resistant because they arise from the clash of hegemonic opinions, norms, appeals to subjectivization, etc. with the day-to-day experiences of 'the people'; 'the people' comprises constantly shifting alliances of completely heterogeneous groups of people, insofar as they belong to the disadvantaged, marginalized, and powerless with regards to their class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, education, migrant status, etc. (cf. Fiske, *Understanding* ch. 2).[6]

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4 | John Fiske has done extensive work on the connection between 'resistance' and 'pleasure' (cf. 49-70).

5 | For an overview, cf. Winter 98-126.

6 | For differentiated portrayals of Fiske's approach, cf. E. Müller 52-66 and Winter 163-281.

In his works,[7] Fiske referred to a whole series of corresponding appropriations that question, ridicule, attack, and thwart claims of hegemonic subjectivization and legitimation, as well as confront hegemonic with resistant identifications. Youths parody advertising texts by changing the words to make them obscene. TV soaps allow women to celebrate female deviance. Aborigines identify with Indians fighting in American westerns, even though and exactly when they are portrayed as savages. Wrestling shows provide a great deal of material that, in the context of an achievement-oriented society, sets them apart from the myth of sports as a fair competition; they ridicule bourgeois controlled physicality by turning it into a carnivalesque spectacle.

Such production and circulation of meanings classified as anti-hegemonic takes place among individuals, in families, among friends, peer groups, and small social circles. That is why Fiske characterizes such resistance as 'micropolitical.' In the sphere of every-day life, hierarchical order and power relations are delegitimized, playfully reversed, and perhaps changed to the benefit of subordinate parties; in Fiske's view, this produces concrete shifts in power. However, the reach and stability of such power shifts is still subject to debate, and many critics argue that they have not been conclusively proven from an empirical standpoint.

D) Questioning the Authority of High Culture

One focus of popular culture research concerns practices that are understood to challenge the bourgeois cultural order. This hegemonic discourse ascribes a special status to high culture as the most valuable formation of cultural practice, and to those who show a taste for it, a legitimate claim to intellectual and political leadership.[8] In general, this stipulates the adherence to the rules of 'civilized, cultivated' behavior in the cultural sphere, and special respect, if not deference, to the institutions, performances, and agents of recognized art. Audiences should show appreciation for the authority of the serious arts, artists, and knowledge of high culture.

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7 | In addition to *Understanding*, cf. esp. John Fiske's *Power Plays*, *Power Works*.

8 | At least, many theorists of popular culture see it this way, often referring to Pierre Bourdieu's *Die feinen Unterschiede: Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft.*

Against this background, much attention has been paid to a specific kind of practices: actions and performances that, from the perspective of bourgeois audiences, defied the norms of appropriate behavior at cultural events and failed to show adequate respect for the 'institution of art' (cf. Bürger). This included stage performances by rock bands, as well as the audiences and fans of pop music, who appeared to lack any degree of self-control. It was precisely these fans, as Henry Jenkins has demonstrated (cf. *Fans*; *Textual*), that continually transgressed the passive position of the grateful consumer and independently developed more or less heterodox understandings of popular texts. They put these understandings into practice through the publication of fan fiction within their own networks; they disregard copyrights and trademarks, and put pressure on media companies concerning, for example, the progress of ongoing series. Such willful practices demonstrate for Jenkins and others the capacity to circulate unauthorized readings of cultural goods 'from below,' and these have been interpreted as examples of 'resistance' and self-empowerment against the might of the culture industries and against the passiveness-inducing bourgeois art regime.

E) The Reversal of Cultural Hierarchies

The attempts on the part of state and informal actors to suppress and stigmatize popular culture are a major theme in its history. The goal of such campaigns was not only to hinder such works and activities or to drive them underground; according to a long list of popular culture researchers, it was considered equally important to delegitimize or criminalize the amusements, aesthetic values, and knowledge of working people and other groups that would today be categorized as 'educationally deprived' (cf., e.g., Ross; Hausmanninger; Maase, *Was macht Populärkultur*; Maase, *Die Kinder* 244-55 and 312-24). According to this position, the campaigns against popular culture and its audience have lost their emotional fervor and generally departed from the juridical landscape in the course of the 20th century. However, battles over 'taste,' which, in the sense of Bourdieu, serve the distinction and the legitimization of the cultural capital of the 'educated class,' are still being waged with considerable energy.

From this perspective, 'resistance' could take on the form of holding on to illegitimate amusements; users eluded, outwitted, or thwarted repressive measures such as censorship, bans, and punishment in more or

less fanciful ways, either individually or in groups of like-minded persons. Similarly, there were protest tactics and attempts to make cultural 'head teachers' look foolish. As new forms of pop music and their dances (which were often imported to Europe from the USA) were abhorred as a challenge and a threat to European high culture and education, any activity associated with such a genre was suspected of having a political subtext; such activity rejected the hegemonic hierarchy and insisted upon the practical value and recognition of one's own 'subordinate' taste (cf., e.g., Hall and Jefferson; Willis, *Profane*; Krüger; Maase, *BRAVO*; Maase, "Rhythmus" 145-88; Fenemore; Tamagne 99-114). Thus performances by controversial musicians, 'wild' dancing, and euphoria-inducing mass concerts could take on the character of a political demonstration demanding an end to discrimination and contempt, and calling for the equality of popular culture and its adherents with the established canon.

4. RESISTANCE IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: MICROPOLITICS AND ITS CRITICS, CULTURAL SHIFTS, AND CULTURAL RADICALISM

The foundation of the model of popular culture and/as 'resistance' outlined here was developed in the 1970s and 1980s and has since been implemented in a number of empirical studies. In retrospect, some interpretations appear to be excessive, and some hopes for transfers from the every-day sphere into the transformation of social power relations seem rather naive. However, it would be unhistorical and unproductive to completely dismiss the approach. Instead, we should rather briefly recall some of the insights that have emerged in the field of cultural studies over the past five or six decades, and from which, according to this author anyway, there is no turning back.

In a nutshell, you could say that in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, debates on the left and in 'western Marxism' overcame two dogmas. The orthodox faction held that mass culture is produced by a capitalist industry; therefore, its content and effects will never seriously question the capitalist order. The dogma of the Frankfurt School said that the culture industry is part of a "context of total delusion" (Wolin 127; original: "Verblendungszusammenhang"); the entertainment tastes of the masses and the imperatives of monopoly capitalist companies interlock, and

maintain the functioning of an alienated and self-destructive system. A growing academic interest in the *concrete* use of popular culture material nonetheless led inexorably away from such sweeping assumptions; the questions of *how* media texts transferred and communicated meanings and readings and what their *users* actually got from them shifted to the forefront.

Interestingly, there were few studies on production processes; questions of who creates media texts and in what way, and what interests, room for interpretation, contradictions, and inconsistencies are at play were only rarely dealt with empirically. This was certainly connected to the fact that the companies and institutions concerned placed little value on transparency and did not want any critical observation of their practices. The topic was completely absent from programs of academic research, where the primary focus lay on empirical data and theories concerning (collective) reception. In 1981, Stuart Hall provided a classic summary of the paradigm of the left that developed at that time with reference to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Popular culture was understood as a "battlefield," a zone "where this struggle for and against the culture of the powerful is engaged," and as an "arena of consent and resistance" (Hall, "Notes" 237 and 239).

It was on this basis that the concept of 'resistance' in and against popular culture developed. The works of Dick Hebdige, Paul Willis, John Fiske, and Henry Jenkins, for example, were considered to be pioneering in this regard. Building upon the ideas of Michel de Certeau and the understanding of culture as a practice incorporated into every-day life, they combined empirical material and the model of active and experienced users in order to paint a diverse panorama of popular tactics of resistance and defiance. Fiske established that enjoyment is an underlying motive of media consumers and argued that it was often precisely these deviant, oppositional, or simply willful interpretations of popular texts that produced enjoyment for 'the people.' However, that cannot happen with any mass-cultural product, but only with cultural texts that do facilitate and stimulate the generation of unintended meanings due to their ambivalence, inconsistency, contradictions, exaggeration, subtexts, etc.

These works have contributed significantly to the fact that today the question of those practices in which the historian of every-day life Alf

Lüdtke sees 'willfulness'[9] on the part of ordinary users is now a standard element in empirical culture research. It was not long, however, before critics began to question the political quality and the power potential of resistant practices and amusements such as those described by Certeau and Fiske. This criticism of 'cultural populism' (cf. McGuigan; Babe) held that the 'resistance' approach grossly exaggerated the critical-political substance of such uses both qualitatively and quantitatively. In so doing, it was argued, the approach downplayed the real power of the culture industries and the hegemonic ideology they disseminated, as well as the limitations that the day-to-day life of subordinate people imposes on their capacity to critically decode mass media texts with their own interests in mind. In particular, the economic foundation of the ideological apparatus and its influence were omitted.

It is clear that opinions on the concept of 'resistance' and the micropolitical potential of every-day practices are significantly determined by underlying assumptions about the functioning of power and dominance in modern capitalist societies. Does one see the bastions of dominance located fundamentally in the private control of the means of production and in state authority or in the cultural structures of every-day life, lifestyles, and amusement imperceptibly oriented towards active integration into the dominance of the 'power bloc'?[10] In any case, it appears neither prudent to play these two levels against each other politically, nor to simply analyze them separately. Fiske stresses that the analysis of every-day and popular culture only encompasses *micropolitical* relations in the disputed arena between "the people" and "the power bloc," emphasizing the possible "(micro)redistribution of power" in favor of 'the people' (*Understanding* 161). Popular culture in this sense can only be "progressive," and not "revolutionary" or "radical" (Fiske, *Understanding* 161, passim). It is for this reason that "[t]he forging of productive links between the resistant tactics of the everyday and action at the strategic level [is] one of the most important and neglected tasks" (Fiske, *Understanding* 162; cf. 159-94).

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9 | Lüdtke emphases in his findings that willful agency in every-day life decisively has to be "'by oneself' and 'for oneself'" (148), and that significantly complicates the question of the political potential of such practices. On this topic, cf. also Lindenberger.

10 | On the debates over the relationship between micropolitics and macro-politics, cf. Marchart 219-53.

This admonition refers to a weakness in the entire field of radical and post-Marxist theory. As long as there are hardly any empirical studies (and one must ask whether the relationship postulated by Fiske can be applied empirically at all), one can only draw hypothetical and speculative, and at best plausible conclusions about the transformative energy of resistant practices in the field of popular culture. That is something at least, and certainly not superfluous, but still unsatisfactory with regards to the political claims of Cultural Studies.

At this point, Winfried Fluck's considerations concerning 'cultural radicalism' following the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s are well placed to integrate previous work into wider developments in critical theory formation, and to historicize the idea of 'resistance' as well as its criticism. The aforementioned shift from a deterministic understanding of culture as an economically shaped and controlled superstructure to the concept of culture as a battlefield in the course of the 1970s not only followed an intellectual (and generational; cf. Lindner 15-45) dynamic, but also a political one. The '1968er' movement had hoped to effect fundamental change. After the failure of these expectations, the left increasingly came to attribute the unexpected stability of the late capitalist order to its deep rooted mechanisms of cultural domination, which permeated people's innermost identities (cf. Ege, "Birmingham" 168-74). According to Winfried Fluck, this amounted to "a radical paradigm shift in the analysis of societal power structures" ("Die Wissenschaft" 115).

One can also see the remarkable resonance for Cultural Studies in this context. While here the micropolitical space for willful appropriation by subordinate groups took center stage, 'cultural radicalism' became dominant in postmodern cultural theory. A concept of power defined primarily by its economic foundations and its potential for material, physical repression was substituted with "a concept of a structural power [...] which no longer possesses a political actor, and instead manifests itself in discoursive structures and rhetorical forms of cultural consensus formation" (Fluck, "Die Wissenschaft" 116; cf. Fluck, "Resistance").

5. Decentering of the Subject, Self-formation, and the Ambiguity of the Social Sphere

From both a theoretical and an empirical perspective, the strength of these approaches lay in the 'decentering of the subject': in the investigation of the processes by which people in practice make themselves into recognized (capable, competent, cultivated, etc.) subjects by adopting hegemonic subject ideals, behavior norms, routines, etc. in their daily lives. The focus lay on subject forms, subject cultures, and subject formations (cf. Reckwitz, *Subjekt*) that were regulated by hegemonic discourses. This perspective confronted the basic principle of the liberal worldview, the concept of the autonomous subject which is competent and able to make *his or her own* rational decisions. The nearly mythical idea of individual choice was superseded by the apparently ineluctable potency and ultra-stability of discourse systems and cultural structures as the locations and forces of social power. Such a view had to take a critical stance against 'resistance' concepts, because the willful agency of capable and disposed persons was unthinkable within the context of cultural subjectivization theories. From this perspective, the issue could be a simple case of self-deception: it concealed from the actors the fact that they were acting out their deviant pleasures in a subject position that was inherent in the system.

Certainly there were approaches, such as Ernesto Laclau's hegemony and discourse theory (cf. Laclau; Laclau and Mouffe), Judith Butler's performatively conceived subjectivization concept (cf. *Das Unbehagen*; *Psyche*), or Andreas Reckwitz's praxeological subject theory (cf. *Das Hybride*) which explored the possibility of deviation, subversion, and change, pointing to conflicts, gaps, and contradictions within the universe of lived subjectivities. Relevant empirical studies to further solidify these themes remain rare in the field of poststructuralist thought (cf., e.g., Alkemeyer 39-40).[11] And ethnographic works such as those of Hebdige, Willis, and Jenkins that seek to show the transgressive potential of the use

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11 | This deficit may be linked to the fact that Reckwitz and others concentrated on "the *dominant* subject forms of the modern age that have made a successful claim to cultural hegemony" (Reckwitz, *Das Hybride* 28). In subject cultures of a subordinate and precarious character, which fail or fall short according to hegemonic standards, the experience of identity formation requires further

of popular culture were quickly deemed insufficiently complex and not on the level of critical cultural studies by proponents of cultural radicalism.

Meanwhile, there have been increasing warnings that this deterministic reading, which amounts to a closed hegemonic culture system, threatens to squander the analytical potential of the subjectivization perspective.[12] Thomas Alkemeyer, for instance, has remarked: "If individuals are conceived of as determined in a strong, causal sense through conventions, a common rationality, or the structure of language, or considered to be the mere side effects of emergence processes, the question of their subjectivization is ultimately superfluous" (35). In the end, any critical analysis of today's power systems must develop an "anti-deterministic" perspective; otherwise, the study of the cultural practices of decentered subjects will not be able to really challenge exclusion and oppression. In other words: Critical analysis requires the "recognition of the uncertainty of the social sphere" (Alkemeyer 36).

According to this view, praxeological studies, in particular those that deal ethnographically with the "situational emergence of room for action in practical contexts" (Alkemeyer 47), can be extremely illuminating in terms of anti-deterministic perspectives. Situations featuring agency are never totally determined or consistently predetermined through the interplay of subjectivity forms and attempts to achieve recognition. Following Alkemeyer, Budde, and Freist, the intentions of subjectivization will consistently meet unexpected obstacles that evoke irritation and, in the practical context, prompt negotiation and reflection beyond the routines. When multiple parties are involved in collaboration, such situations are interpreted in different ways by the different parties, and these dissentient interpretations are exchanged.[13] More often than not, unforeseen dynamics of action would arise, making it possible to deviate from and even override or transform established subjectivization patterns.

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attention; without investigating this tension, statements on the stability of subject orders can only claim a limited validity.

12 | In addition to Fluck, *Die Wissenschaft*, and Fluck, *Resistance*, also see the contributions in the volume by Alkemeyer, Budde, and Freist, *Selbst-Bildungen*.

13 | While previous subjectivization analyses focus on individuals, the self-formation approach assumes that practices of recognition by others play a crucial role in identity development (cf. Ricken 69-99).

It should be added that, in the view of this author, the formation of identity can 'fail' and lead to subjectivities which are not recognized by the hegemonic institutions; these developments cannot be fully excluded, isolated, and counteracted socially. That is to say that when the concrete practices of every-day life, careers, cooperation, etc. (including popular culture use)[14] represent the social spheres in which subjectivization occurs, then it is here that constellations of new, divergent, and resistant practices will emerge. This is precisely the area that concerns research on resistance.

6. OPEN QUESTIONS

It is now possible to formulate a few open questions in empirical popular culture research with respect to 'resistance.' What do recognized modes of popular culture usage in legitimate subject forms look like? What is their hegemonic effect? In which subjectivization practices are they appropriated? Most importantly, is it possible to make micropolitical power shifts empirically plausible as an impulse for change with regards to governmental subjectivity modules such as heteronormativity, willingness for exertion, self-optimization, health responsibility, etc.?

In general, popular culture is, however, (in the German context more so than in the American) rather unwieldy material for *legitimate* forms of subjectivity. How can masses of 'couch potatoes,' players of 'violent video games,' 'trash TV' viewers, 'internet addicts,' and other negative figures in public cultural discourse argumentatively and practically be transformed into acceptable subjectivities, or at least defused?[15] There is apparently a significant contradiction between widespread every-day practices such as relaxing, disengaging, daydreaming,[16] etc. on the one hand, and the demands of education, cultivation, and creativity on the other. The standards of high culture still serve as a beacon for recognized forms of subjectivity, but are difficult to integrate in the given forms of cultural

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14 | The Germans currently spend almost 10 hours a day with media used largely for entertainment (cf. "Media Perspektiven: Basisdaten 2014" 66).

15 | On the attempt to interpret expertise in mass art as an element in self-entrepreneurial cognitive fitness, cf. Maase, "Radioten" 136-137.

16 | One author seeks to legitimize this cultural practice widely understood to be 'useless' from a utilitarian perspective (cf. Ernst).

practice. To date, theories of subjectivization show significant deficiencies in the empirical analysis of subjectivity forms with regard to those (large!) social groups and practices that count as culturally inferior. Initial insights are provided by recent ethnographies examining the experience of identity from the point of view of affected groups (cf. Wellgraf; Bachmann; Ege, *Ein Proll*; Sutter). Additional research is needed in this area.

There are no studies to date that conclusively link the concept of 'micropolitics' to the concepts of self-formation, nor is there any research that empirically operationalizes transfers into the macropolitical sphere in other theoretical contexts. After 40 years, it is therefore fitting to fundamentally re-examine the question of the 'resistance' potential of popular culture. Even the concept of popular culture as a battlefield has apparently been completely diverted by cultural radicalism. Initially, the modernization of Gramsci's theory of hegemony had nothing to do with popular culture in the sense of this paper, but rather with societal power structures and with the regulation of knowledge. A re-reading of Stuart Hall's[17] pioneering work makes it clear he was interested in the analysis of encoding/decoding and in studying popular culture as a battlefield and not purely as fiction or entertainment; he did not place the use of mass culture at the center of semiotic struggles, but rather those societal discourses that generated hegemony over 'the people' in the field of macropolitics itself.[18]

In retrospect, it must be stated that in the 1970s and 1980s many viewed the homogeneity and power of the culture industries as overwhelming. As a result, the focus was on oppositional *use*; researchers

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17 | "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" appeared in 1973 as CCCS Stencilled Paper no. 7 at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies; a revised edition was printed under the title "Encoding/Decoding" as Chapter 10 in *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis.

18 | In "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular,'" Hall (like Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart) dealt with "popular traditions and practices" (235), the thought and behavior patterns of ordinary people, their understanding of themselves, and their orientation to the world. There was no discussion of commercial entertainment or enjoyment. Hall was chiefly interested in the question by what statements and what discursive articulations a political actor might succeed in the arena of public debate to become accepted as speaking for 'the people.' "That is why 'popular culture' matters. Otherwise [...] I don't give a damn about it" ("Notes" 239).

neither investigated the possibility of changing *information* policy and entertainment *production* nor brought up the question of mass arts that openly ran counter to the hegemony of the power bloc. However, David Hesmondhalgh came to a different conclusion in his comprehensive study of the culture industries. Many companies are politically conservative and seek to control the circulation (i.e., mass reception) of their products accordingly; the creative class nonetheless enjoy considerable autonomy, and their texts form a diverse, contradictory, and ambiguous range of materials for reception. "These modes of thought and feeling are hardly ever directly subversive of oppressive economic and political power [... yet] they reflect and reinforce the fact that the naturalization of existing power relations is never complete" (Hesmondhalgh 384). However, according to Hesmondhalgh we have to ask whether the media pursue an equally liberal strategy concerning "the provision of information that provides an analysis of overall power relations" (384).

Hesmondhalgh addresses an important difference here, which has previously garnered little attention in the field of cultural studies: that between (simplified) information and arguments identified as political, on the one hand, and as fictional or staged entertainment on the other. In fact the whole 'resistance' debate concerned the latter. How 'the people' decode news reports and political documentaries remained a marginal theme of communication studies.

Critical popular culture research will remain fruitful for the foreseeable future, with new conceptual approaches on the horizon. From the perspective of European ethnology, one reversal of previous approaches appears to be very promising. Previously, the focus lay on the examination of rather haphazardly chosen users who dealt with popular culture in a willful manner. One possibility for the future is to apply the method of theoretical sampling and to focus on subjects who are characterized by special relevance to the issue of 'resistance': Activists who engage in movements and projects that take a critical stance towards the 'power bloc.'[19] As a research hypothesis, we might presume that such activists struggle against hegemonic interpretations of popular culture. Questions such as what amusements and mass arts they use, which of these provoke their opposition, and how they try to turn this practical conflict into a part of their continual self-formation would offer very promising insights (not

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19 | If such studies already exist, they are not known to the present author.

least in comparison to the finding of previous research, for example on fans).

Finally, let us return to the thesis we touched upon at the beginning, that art enables its users to distance themselves from their lived reality and—in aesthetic experience and sensual perception—to challenge their lives' givenness and apparent lack of alternatives. However, art theory has previously only attributed this quality to works from the artistic canon and supposedly serious, challenging art perched at the highest level of modern aesthetic reflection; popular culture did not meet these criteria.[20] There are, by all means, serious arguments for this perspective, and they have been taken up by researchers who discussed whether popular art has a specific aesthetic structure and whether it requires special modes of reception (cf. Maase, *Die Schönheiten*; Maase, "Geschmack" 50-65). In reality, entertainment analyses for example show little interest in art's potential to challenge the status quo or in the experience of alterity. These researchers see distance, playfulness, and a lack of seriousness *in relation to aesthetic texts*, but they do not look for an altered relationship to social reality (cf., e.g., Hügel 13-32; Frizzoni and Tomkowiak; Maase, "Selbstfeier" 219-42). With regard to popular culture, the type of experience which the autonomy aesthetic presumes for their model of distancing is at best classified as a borderline case (cf., e.g., Fuhr).

However, the empirical basis for such generalizations is weak. Other studies on popular culture reception indicate that in the process of appropriation, distance and alternatives to one's own lifestyle play a significant role, and qualitative changes in subjectivization are possible (cf., e.g., Willis, *Jugend-Stile*; Geimer; Mikos). This is at least an indication that the empirical analysis of *aesthetic experiences* of mass art might reveal potential for anti-hegemonic self-formation.

In conclusion, there is, according to this author at least, cause to examine the previous debates on 'resistance,' popular culture, and the decentering of the subject with a certain soberness. The instrumentality of the micropolitical potential for change of forms of action that are meant to limit the force and hegemony of the 'power bloc' is still decidedly unclear. It appears that research approaches that focus directly on the

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20 | Fluck concludes from the poststructuralist debate that "aesthetic experience [...] becomes the only remaining hope left for cultural transformation" ("Resistance" 22), yet popular culture is not discussed.

"analyses of macropolitical hegemonic constellations" (Marchart 244) have advantages.

Previous research on 'resistance' has certainly not led down false paths or to dead ends; on the contrary, it has established the foundations of the further development of empirical studies on micropolitics and popular culture. Issues and questions in this field are in a state of flux. Analyses of the use of mass arts by activists might open up new avenues of enquiry into every-day practices that tend towards self-formation in a predominantly hegemonically encoded popular culture landscape. In pursuing an egalitarian 'aesthetic regime' (cf. Ranciere 37-90, esp. 40-43), is its worth asking whether the potential for distancing and alterity in mass art can be discerned, and in which practices of aesthetic experience it can be appropriated for self-formation.

Translation, including quotations for which there is no official English version:
Michael Larsen

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