AS Sociology For AQA
[2nd Edition]

Unit 1:
Culture and Identity

Chris. Livesey and Tony Lawson
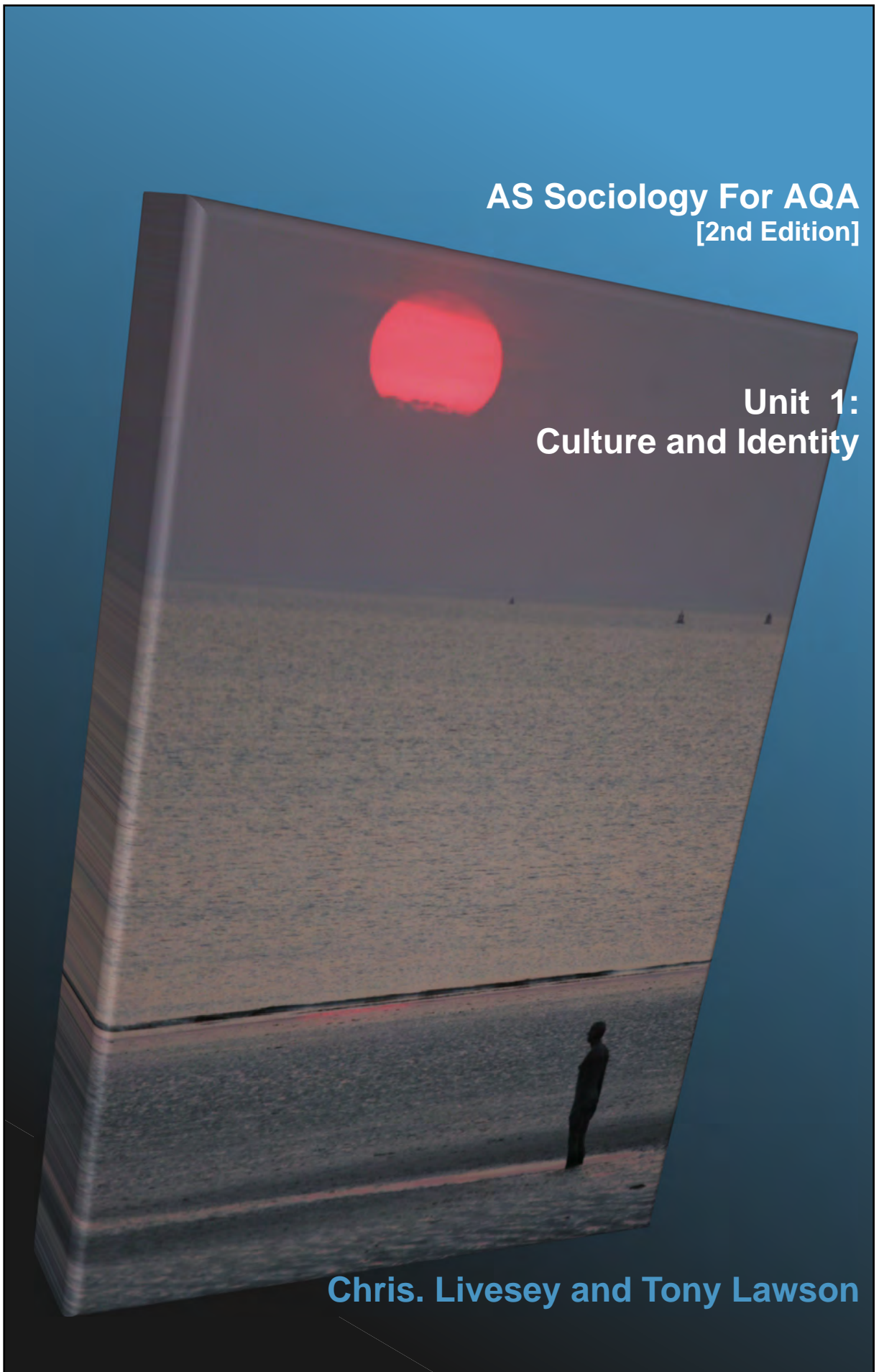
Unit 1:
Culture and Identity

Contents

1. Different conceptions of culture, including subculture, mass culture, high and low culture, popular culture, global culture.

Culture: Introduction

Culture is a significant concept for sociologists because it both identifies a fundamental set of ideas about what sociologists' study and suggests a major reason for the existence of Sociology itself – that human social behaviour can be explained in the context of the social groups into which people are born and within which they live their lives.

In this Chapter we're going to explore a range of ideas relating to both **culture** and its counterpart, **identity** and to do this we need to develop both a working definition of culture and an understanding of its different dimensions.

Concepts of Culture: Observations

Defining Culture

In the **Introductory Chapter** we offered a general definition of culture by representing it as a distinctive "way of life". We also noted that culture involves teaching and learning (a **socialisation** process). However, in this Section we need to think a little more clearly about what we mean by "culture" and we can do this by noting that the concept encompasses a range of ideas and meanings relating to *roles*, *values* and *norms* as well as *institutional structures* (such as types of family, work, educational and political systems), *beliefs* and the variety of "arts and artifacts" produced by different cultures.

In addition, we can add to this mix both **Dahl's** (2001) argument that culture is "a collectively held set of attributes, which is dynamic and changing over time" and the idea that societies develop *mechanisms* for the transmission of cultural *signs*, *symbols* and *meanings* (ideas we'll develop throughout this Chapter) from one generation to the next.

Cultural artifacts (also known as "books").

Secondly, we can note a basic distinction between two *dimensions* of culture:

Material culture consists of the *physical objects* ("artifacts"), such as cars, mobile phones and books, a society produces and which reflect cultural knowledge, skills, interests and preoccupations.

Non-Material culture, on the other hand, consists of the knowledge and beliefs that influence people's behaviour. In our culture, for example, behaviour may be influenced by *religious beliefs* (such as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism) and / or *scientific beliefs* – your view of human evolution, for example, has probably been influenced by **Darwin's** (1859) theories.

This distinction, while necessary, is not hard-and-fast because physical artifacts (such as mobile phones) have cultural *meanings* for the people who produce and use them. A *house*, for example, is not simply somewhere to live (although that, of course, is it's primary or intended purpose). Houses also have cultural meanings – for both those who own them and those who don't. The type of house someone owns, for example, says something about them and this illustrates a significant idea about the *symbolic nature* of both cultures as a whole and the artifacts they produce.

Some types of housing may mean more to people than others...

There is, for example, nothing inherent in "a house" that tells us its *meaning*, as opposed to its purpose (or *function)*. It can mean different things to different individuals and groups within a particular culture, just as it could conceivably mean different things to different cultures.

In this respect **Merton** (1957) argued the purpose of something can always be considered on two levels:

A manifest function that relates to an apparent or obvious purpose (the manifest function of a mobile 'phone, for example, is to communicate with people).

A latent function involving the idea something may have a hidden or obscured purpose (one that may or may not be intended).

One way to illustrate this idea is through the concept of **social status**, in the sense that cultural artifacts such as cars, mobile 'phones or whatever can be:

Status symbols –the idea that owning something people feel is desirable (or, indeed, undesirable) says something about you to others (think, for example, about how you react to seeing someone using a sadly-outdated mobile phone).

Identity

In general terms questions of identity refer to three basic ideas:

1. **Who am I?** – how, for example, do I define myself?

2. **Who are you?** – how do "I" define other people?

3. **How** are my beliefs about *my* identity affected by my beliefs about *your* identity?

These are, of course, complex questions to resolve, but we can simplify them by thinking about how you would respond to the question "Who are you?" – a response that will probably include references to:

Social characteristics involving things like:

- *Family* (name and general background).
- *Age* (whether you are, for example, young or old).
- *Nationality* (such as English or Scottish).
- *Gender* (whether you are male or female).
- *Sexuality* (whether you are heterosexual or homosexual for example).

In other words answers to this question will, by and large, be expressed in explicitly social terms and this illustrates two ideas. Firstly, to describe (or *identify*) ourselves we draw on a range of *sources of identity* (others we will consider in this chapter include *class*, *ethnicity* and *disability*) and secondly, in order to define ourselves as *individuals* we draw upon a wide range of *cultural* ideas and beliefs – something that illustrates the central importance of culture in our lives.

Subculture

Thus far we've looked generally at the concept of culture in terms of a society having certain beliefs, values and norms that apply to the majority, if not all, of its members. While this is initially useful as a way of understanding culture, we can develop these ideas by thinking about groups within a society (or culture) who, while belonging to that culture, also develop quite distinctive roles, values and norms *not* shared by the culture as a whole.

Subculture refers to the idea of smaller groups sharing a particular way of life. As you might expect, in a relatively large society like the UK a multitude of subcultural groups exist, examples of which might include football supporters, train-spotters, Orthodox Jews, Travellers, A-Level students and so forth. We can use the last example to illustrate the relationship between cultural and subcultural groups.

A student is part of a subcultural group with its own particular "way of life"
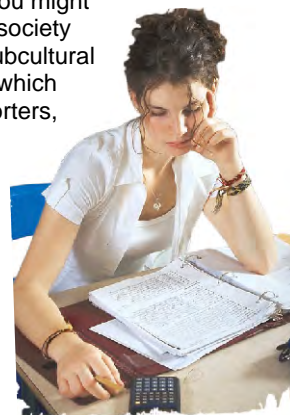
A student doing the sort of things students do (it's not subtle, but it is effective...)

(such as attending classes and doing all the things students are supposed to do.). However, just because someone belongs to a "student subculture" doesn't, of course, mean they can't belong to other subcultural groups or, indeed, the culture of society as a whole.

While some of the *values* of a student subculture (wanting to get an A-level qualification, for example) and the *norms* associated with these values (such as gaining a qualification by passing examinations) may be different to the values and norms of other subcultures, these don't necessarily exclude "students" from membership of the wider culture of society. Indeed, the reason someone might value an educational qualification is precisely because it has a value in wider society. An employer, for example, might offer a job on the basis of educational qualifications.

Tried and Tested

a) Identify **two** ways in which material culture differs from non-material culture apart from those suggested in the text. (4 marks)

(b) Suggest **two** ways that social characteristics shape our sense of identity (4 marks)

Module Link   Crime and Deviance

The above describes one aspect of subculture and an examination of different types and theories of subculture can be found in this Chapter.

Concepts of Culture: Explanations

We can develop the ideas we've just outlined by applying the **Structure** and **Action** approaches outlined in the **Introductory** chapter to an understanding of the nature and significance of cultural ideas and products.

Structuralism

Consensus theories of culture (such as those elaborated by **Functionalist** sociologists) focus on the role played by **cultural institutions** (the *media* and *education* system, for example) in the creation and distribution of "moral and cultural values" throughout a *social system*..

The focus, therefore, is on the teaching and learning (through the *secondary socialisation process*) of the rules that make meaningful social interaction possible. Cultural rules provide a *structure* for people's behaviour, channelling that behaviour in some ways but not others and, as befits a *Structuralist* perspective, the stress is on how our behaviour is *constrained* by the rules of the society in which we live. We can express this idea more clearly in the following way:

1. **Social structures**: Cultural rules structure individual behaviour by specifying broad guidelines for our behaviour, laying down the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in various situations, backed-up by a range of **positive** (*rewards*) and **negative** (*punishments*) **sanctions** to encourage conformity and discourage deviance. This process allows for the development of a broad:

2. **Consensus** in any society about behavioural boundaries and in turn encourages the development of:

3. **Order and stability** in our relationships, because we understand how we're *expected* to behave in given social situations (such as a school, workplace or bus stop). From this general position culture, as **Fisher** (1997) notes, "… is shared behaviour" that "systematises the way people do things, thus avoiding confusion and allowing cooperation so that groups of people can accomplish what no single individual could do alone" – an idea that suggests cultures performs a range of *functions* for both societies and individuals. **Mazrui** (1996) has, in this respect, identified *seven functions of culture*:

Seven Functions of Culture

Communication: Culture provides the context for the development of human communication systems such as *language* (both verbal and non-verbal (gestures, for example).

Perception: **Matsumoto** (2007) argues that culture gives "meaning to social situations, generating social roles and normative behaviours"; in other words it shapes the way we look at and understand the social and natural worlds. **Offe** (2001), for example, argues that Western cultures generally operate under the belief that "the future" is not predetermined, whereas "Some African societies" are characterised by "the notion of a predetermined future not controllable by individuals".

Identity: Culture influences how people see themselves and others (in terms of things like gender, age and ethnicity). **Durkheim** (1912), for example, suggested societies have a *functional requirement* to develop two things:

> **Module Link**   **Health**
>
> **Offe** suggests differences in "concepts of time and future" have contributed to the relative failure of Western-led health policy programs in the treatment of HIV / AIDS in some African countries. If people believe the future is predetermined then health intervention programs are unlikely to be successful.

1. Social solidarity - the belief we are connected into a larger network of people who share certain beliefs, identities and commitments to each other. For such feelings of *solidarity* to develop, however, societies must create mechanisms of:

2. Social integration: A feeling of commitment to others (such as family and friends) is needed to create a sense of individual and cultural purpose and cohesion. In a general sense, *collective ceremonies* (such as royal weddings and funerals in which we can "all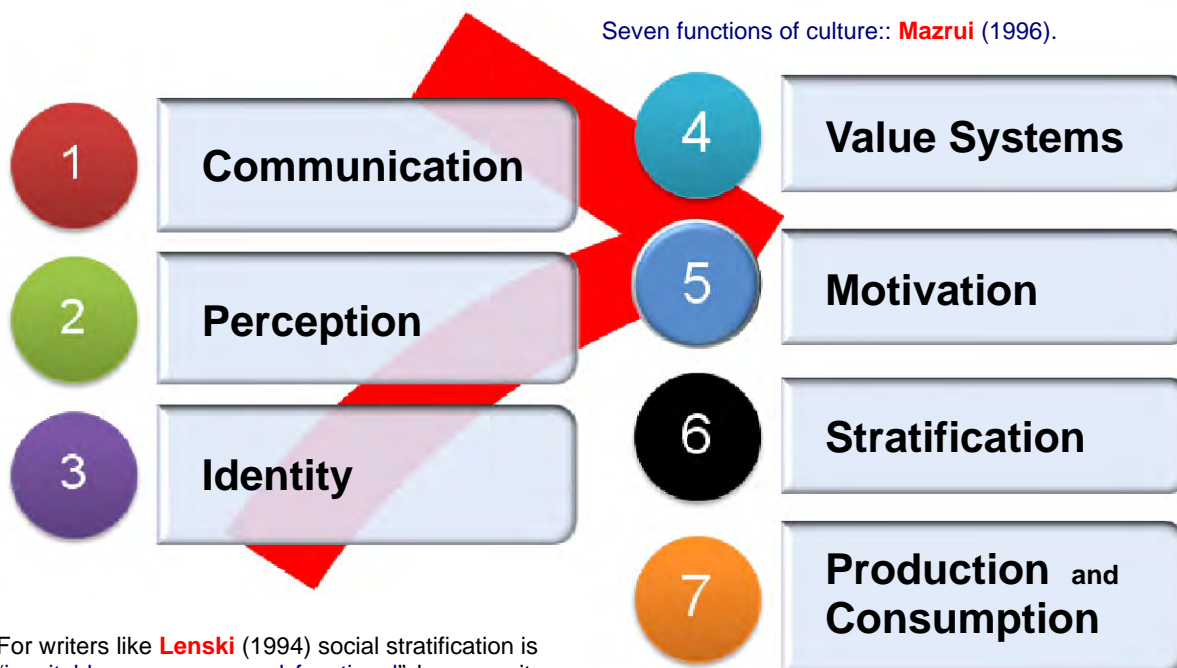 share") and *collective identifications* (notions of Brit Pop and Brit Art, for example) represent integrating mechanisms. More specifically, perhaps, schools try to integrate students through things like uniforms and competitive sports against other schools as a way of promoting solidarity through individual identification with the school. Identities are also shaped through things like an understanding of a society's history, traditions, customs and the like. In **Hostede's** (1991) evocative phrase, culture involves the "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group…from another".

Cool Britannia: When Brit Pop waived the rules?

Value systems: Cultural institutions are a source of values and people's behaviour is, to some extent, conditioned by the cultural values they receive through the *socialisation* process.

Motivation relates to the idea that cultural values and norms involve *sanctions* (*rewards* and *punishments)* for particular behaviours. Cultural values also "set the behavioural boundaries" in terms of maintaining certain standards of behaviour (laws, for example, specify behaviour that is right or wrong, acceptable and unacceptable). A development of this idea relates to Functionalist concepts of:

Stratification: All cultures develop ways of differentiating between social groups on the basis of things like *social class* (economic divisions), *social rank* (political divisions involving ideas like an aristocracy and peasantry), *gender*, *age* and the like.

Seven functions of culture:: **Mazrui** (1996).

1	**Communication**
2	**Perception**
3	**Identity**

4	**Value Systems**
5	**Motivation**
6	**Stratification**
7	**Production and Consumption**

For writers like **Lenski** (1994) social stratification is "inevitable, necessary and functional" because it generates the "incentive systems" required to motivate and reward the "best qualified people" for occupying the "most important positions" within a cultural system – an idea that leads to the final function of:

Production and consumption: Culture defines what people "need, use and value" as part of the overall survival mechanism in any society. People need, for example, to be organised and motivated to work (hence the need for a stratification system that offers rewards to those who occupy social roles that, in the words of **Davis and Moore** (1945), are "more functionally important than others") and encouraged to consume the products of the workplace.

> **Module Link**   **Stratification and Differentiation**
>
> The work of various Functionalist writers (such as **Lenski** and **Davis and Moore**) is analysed and criticised in the section "**Different Theories of Stratification**".

Conflict theories of culture come in different versions but we can look briefly at a couple of these:

Elite Theories

These generally focus on the idea that contemporary societies are characterised by competing cultural groups, each with its own particular affiliations, products and consumption patterns. Within these societies (even those characterised by democratic elections) elite groups emerge to take power because, as **Fisher** (2003) notes the "Masses need leaders to organize them". The idea of cultural leadership (or hegemony) is significant because as **Cooney** (1994) suggests "Elite theories maintain that elites… determine what happens in society". From this we can note that explanations for the role of culture focus on a number of key ideas:

Identity: The cultural identity of competing social groups is not only reflected in the things they produce and consume, it is also bound-up in questions of leadership. Elite theorists, for example, attempt to identify those aspects of a culture that are "the best in thought and deed" and to separate them from the worthless, the mass produced and the artificial.

In his *satirical* take on this type of "cultural division of taste" **Lynes'** (1949) identified three broad categories that help us understand this idea a little more easily:

> 1. **Highbrow:** the *superior* and refined, containing the best qualities of a society. These represent the highest cultural forms to which a society should aspire.
>
> 2. **Middlebrow (upper and lower)**: the *mediocre* that aspires to be highbrow but which lacks originality, subtlety or depth.
>
> 3. **Lowbrow**: the brutal and worthless aspects of a culture that lack any pretence at sophistication, insight or refinement. These lowest cultural forms are characteristic of "the masses".

Elite cultural theories, therefore, are built around the idea that cultural products and tastes are a cornerstone of:

Stratification systems in modern societies because, as **Katz-Gerro et al** (2007) suggest, elite theories see contemporary societies as "culturally stratified" in terms of a basic division between a small, cultured, *elite* and a large, *acultured mass* (literally "without culture" or, in this sense, a culture that is shallow and worthless in terms of the things it values).

High and Low Culture

This idea of social divisions based around the production and consumption of cultural products finds its expression in the distinction made between "high" and "low" culture:

High culture refers to the idea that some artistic and literary products in our society are superior in scope and form to others. An example here might be that classical music is held in higher cultural esteem than "popular music" producers such as David Bowie or the Arctic Monkeys.

Low culture, therefore, refers to cultural products and pursuits characterised by their production for, and consumption by, "the masses". At various times, low cultural forms have included films, comics, television, magazines such as *Heat* and newspapers like *The Sun* and so forth.

In this respect, high cultural products and pursuits correlate with the cultural interests of the rich and powerful whereas low cultural products and pursuits are associated with the relatively poorer and less powerful.

Marxism

This theory is based around the idea that an upper class (or *bourgeoisie*) represents a ruling group in Capitalist societies such as the UK – one whose power and influence is based on their ownership of the means of *economic* production, ability to control and influence *political* and legal processes (the passing and application of laws, for example) and their ability to use cultural institutions to reinforce their overall domination of other social classes.

Cultural institutions, therefore, are seen as *ideological institutions*; they represent the means through which a ruling class impose their view of the world on other groups and, by so doing, influence and shape the behaviour of these groups. In this respect we can look briefly at two ways Marxist sociologists have explained the role of culture in society.

1. **Traditional Marxism** has generally focused on cultural institutions as *instruments* (this type is sometimes called **Instrumental** Marxism) or *tools* used by a ruling class to consolidate their control over the rest of society.

One influential version of this position involves the work of the **Frankfurt School** in the 1930's - a group of Marxists who developed ideas about the nature and role of cultural institutions (such as the media) using the concepts of *mass society* and *mass culture*.

Mass Culture

The concept of *mass culture* is linked to the idea of **mass society**, a type of society, **Ross** (1995) suggests, where "the masses" (as opposed to the ruling elite) are characterised as being:

Social Isolated: People have little or no meaningful daily face-to-face contact and social interaction is largely *instrumental* – we deal with people on the basis of what we can get from them. The strong "cultural and community ties" of "the past" (sometimes called *folk culture* to distinguish it from its modern counterpart *popular culture*) that once bound people together are destroyed by the development of mass cultural ideas and products.

Anonymous: Socially-isolated individuals are bound together by cultural forms *manufactured* by a ruling class that give the *illusion* of a common culture. An example here might be the contemporary (media and public) obsession with the lives and loves of celebrities which creates the impression that we "know" and "care" about such people (when in reality we are never likely to actually meet with or talk to them). Rather than being *active producers* of folk culture - a supposedly vibrant lower class culture (involving music, dance, medicine, oral traditions and so forth) expressed through popular gatherings such as festivals, fairs, carnivals and the like – the masses are *passive consumers* of an artificial, disposable, *junk culture* that has two main characteristics:

Mass Production: **Fiske** (1995), argues: "The cultural commodities of mass culture - films, TV shows, CDs, etc. are produced and distributed by an industrialized system whose aim is to maximize profit for the producers and distributors by appealing to as many consumers as possible" - an idea related to the concept of a:

Lowest Common Denominator (LCD): To appeal to "the masses", cultural products have to be safe, intellectually undemanding and predictable;

The media, religion and schools are all examples of cultural institutions.

in other words, bland, inoffensive and relatively simple to understand. **Davis** (2000), for example, notes that **elite** (or *high*) **culture** is "the preserve of very few in society" that it involves "art, literature, music and intellectual thought which few can create or even appreciate. **Mass culture**, by contrast, is regarded as the mediocre, dull, mundane entertainment to be enjoyed by uneducated and uncritical 'low-brow' hoards".

From this perspective, therefore, mass culture is a way of distracting the working classes from the real causes of their problems in Capitalist society (such as low wages, exploitation, lack of power and status). In simple terms, the development of a mass culture that encourages *passive consumption* of the pre-packaged products of big business not only destroyed vital, communal, aspects of folk culture, it also provides the lower classes with an illusory sense of happiness, togetherness and well-being that prevents them understanding how they are economically exploited by a ruling class.

2. Neo (or **Humanistic) Marxism**: A contemporary version of Marxism, associated with writers such as **Gramsci** (1930). **Poulantzas** (1975) or **Urry et al** (1975), sees cultures as ways of "doing and thinking", in the sense that they are *integrating mechanisms* in society. In other words, cultural beliefs, behaviours and products bind people together by giving them things in common and helps people to establish cultural identities, expressed through a range of *popular cultural* pursuits and products.

> ### Popular Culture

Giddens (2006) defines this concept as "Entertainment created for large audiences, such as popular films, shows, music, videos and TV programmes" and is, as he notes, "often contrasted to 'high' or 'elite' culture" – something that suggests different social classes develop different identities based on their different cultural experiences. Cultures, as a "design for living", therefore, develop to reflect these experiences precisely because they equip people for living and coping in society. For *Neo-Marxists*, popular culture largely defines modern societies – it is the dominant cultural form and, as such, plays a significant role in two areas:

Firstly, it is the "culture of the masses" (as **Meyersohn** (1977) suggests "Popular culture consists of all elements of human activity and life style, including knowledge, belief, art, and customs that are common to a large group").

Secondly it is the means through which a ruling class exercises what **Gramsci** terms:

Cultural hegemony - the right to political leadership in modern democratic societies based on the consent

Who needs a PS3 when you can dance around the Maypole with your mates? Just look at their happy, smiling, little faces!

(willing or manufactured) of those who are led. Unlike in the past when a ruling class could establish its leadership through force, repression or terror, in modern societies leadership has to be *earned.* Members of this class must, in short, convince both themselves and others that they have the "right to rule" – something achieved, for Neo-Marxists, through control of *cultural institutions.*

Rather than a ruling class simply imposing its culture on society, therefore, the process is more complex. This class, for example, must propagate its values throughout society (through the media and education system) since if people can be convinced of certain values this will influence how they behave. The concept of *hegemony* is useful here because it provides a sense of *cultural diversity* and conflict. It can be used to explain, for example, how and why cultural forms (classical music, football, punk rock and so forth) are adopted, used and changed by people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Examples of the *hegemonic role* of cultural institutions can be found in three areas:

Continuous exposure to familiar ideas that reflect ruling class views about the nature of the social world (competitiveness, private ownership, low taxation for the rich and so forth). As **Bocock** (1986) argues, the effectiveness of *hegemonic power* lies in the way people from *all classes* are encouraged to "buy into" ideas ultimately favourable to the interests of a ruling class - a simple, but effective, example being the UK National lottery. Each week millions of people buy a lottery ticket, even though the odds of being struck by lightning (1 in 3 million) are better than their chances of winning the jackpot (1 in 10 million). The point, of course, is that people *want* to be rich (and someone, after all, *will* become rich each week).

Big Brother - Popular culture at its very best or very worst? You Choose! You Decide! (written in dodgy Geordie accent).

Marginalisation and **criticism**: Alternative views are "pushed to the edges" in the sense that world views critical of Capitalism are rarely featured across the education system or mass media.

Reflexivity: Cultural institutions don't simply propagate a single repetitive message along the lines that "Capitalism Is Great"; they are sufficiently *flexible* and *adaptable* to incorporate new ideas and explanations without ever losing sight of the fundamental values of Capitalist society (and, of course, the basic interests of a ruling class).

The Apple iPhone - Isn't Capitalism Great?

Social Action

"**Action perspectives**" cover a wide range of writers and theoretical positions that, for our current purpose and convenience, we can consider in terms of three "sub-perspectives", namely **Pluralism**, **Interactionism** and **Postmodernism**.

Pluralism

Pluralist perspectives, like their (Marxist and Feminist) Structuralist counterparts emphasise the idea of **competition** between different groups in society, something that, in turn, reflects a broad concept of:

Cultural diversity: Pluralists see modern societies (such as contemporary Britain) as consisting of a variety (or *plurality*) of different groups, each with their own particular interests and agendas. These groups develop their own cultural values and norms, some of which they have in common with other cultural groups but others of which they do not. As you might expect from this general characterisation, Pluralists *reject* the idea modern societies are characterised by a:

Mass culture in the form put forward by some Elite theorists. For Pluralists cultural forms can't be understood in simple "good or bad" terms – such as the idea that "lower class folk culture" in pre-industrial society was somehow superior to lower class culture in industrial society. **Trowler** (1996), for example, dismisses this general idea as both a gross over-simplification and the product of a romanticised view of lower class life in the past when he argues: "The reality is that for working men and women in pre-industrial society life was usually nasty, brutish and short. Modern society has made most people literate and this has enabled them to be discerning consumers of an ever-expanding cultural output. This includes not only literature in the conventional sense, but also TV and radio output, films, journalism and so on. People are also far more politically literate and aware of the world around them than was the case in the past. This allows them to appreciate and choose from a wide range of options. Class distinctions have become

less and less important in influencing the choices made by individuals in this respect. Members of the working class are as likely to be watching Panorama as anybody else, while soap operas are now appealing to the middle class as well as the working class.".

One of the main features of Pluralism therefore (something they share, albeit in slightly different ways, with Interactionist and Postmodern positions) is the idea of:

Choice: The general focus here is on the choices people are increasingly able to make from a range of possible cultural forms – something that impacts not just on areas like cultural values and norms but, increasingly on things like lifestyle and identity choices (in areas like sexuality and age, for example). One feature of Pluralism that tends to mark it apart from other forms of social action theory is that such choices are always made in a structural context; that is, against the background of the individual's personal and social circumstances (their cultural socialisation). They reject, however, the idea that cultural activities are simply *passive* forms of *consumption* (in the ay put-forward by mass culture theorists) .Rather, the choices people make reflect a complex, changing world in which cultural activities develop or die-out on the basis of their relevance to peoples' lives.
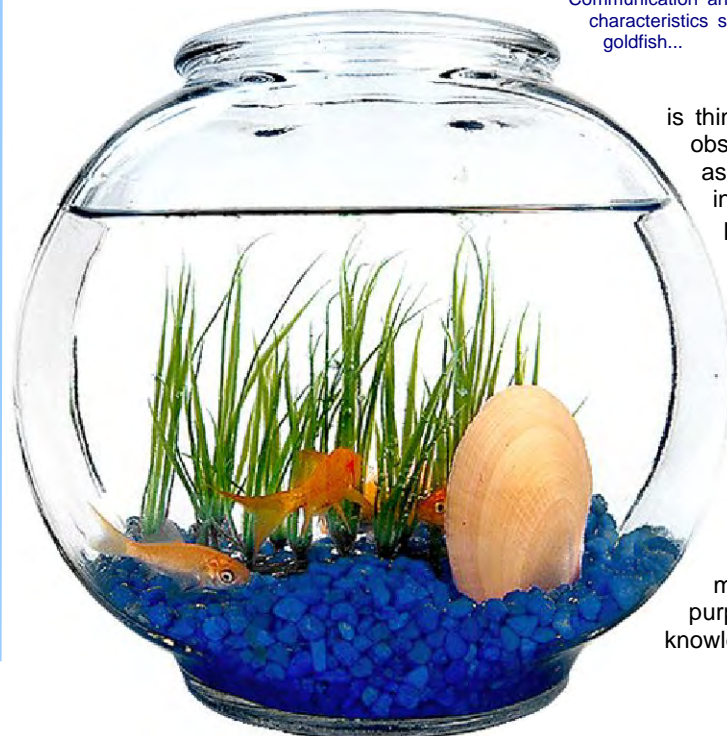
Mass Culture - myth or reality?

Interactionism

Interactionist perspectives generally focus on relatively small-scale levels of social interaction (between individuals, small social groups and so forth) and their theoretical position on culture is informed by the identification of a number of basic characteristics of human cultures.

Interaction: Culture is, first and foremost, a product of social interaction. Broad cultures and specific cultural forms develop out of the way people act towards one another in ways that involves two related ideas:

1. Purpose: A teacher and their students, for example, interact educationally in a way that has some purpose – both social, in the sense that the education system is officially designed to do certain things (teach children literacy and numeracy, for example, or pass examinations and gain qualifications) and individual in the sense that each actor in the educational drama will hold or develop particular reasons for their behaviour. A teacher, for example, may see their main purpose as "changing minds" or "helping children develop their full potential"; alternatively they may see their main purpose as earning the money they need to maintain a certain lifestyle (brown corduroy jackets with leather patches don't come cheap, believe me).

2. Meaning: If interaction always has a purpose, it also has meaning for those involved. At its broadest,

the teacher- student interaction is *probably* interpreted as having some form of educational meaning (as opposed to other forms of meaning that could exist between adults and young people). However, when we dig down to specific individual meanings for the interaction that takes place "in the school" there can, once again, be a wide variety of meanings for those involved. For the teacher, for example, these can range

The education system involves a wide range of different purposes and meanings...

from "education" being a vocation – their mission is to influence and change lives for the better – to the idea that education is "just a job"; something that is to be endured because it pays the bills.

We've used the word "probably" in the above because it illustrates the idea that we can never be certain of the **purpose and meaning** of any form of social interaction. This is because we are unable to know what someone else is thinking. The most we can do, therefore, is observe the behaviour of others and make assumptions (or educated guesses – pun intended) about what they are thinking (their **purpose** and **meaning**) when they do something.

Interactionist theories of culture are built around an understanding of two basic human abilities:

1. **Communication** through language (perhaps the ultimate system of shared meaning). This allows us to develop meaning in our behaviour.

2. **Memory**: The ability to store and recall meanings gives people the ability to act purposefully on the basis of their stored cultural knowledge.

Communication and Memory - two characteristics sadly lacking in goldfish...

These abilities mean we can develop **cultural systems** that can be learnt through a **socialisation process**. Thus, our ability to communicate **symbolically** (through words, gestures, looks and so forth) gives us the ability to develop very rich cultures that may be unlimited in scope. This gives us the ability to control and shape our environment (both social and physical) in ways that are unimaginable for animals. Cultures, in this respect, can be said to represent:

Symbolic universes of meaning – a long-winded way of saying that the ability to communicate symbolically is a hugely-significant feature of human culture. In particular, symbols are significant for two reasons:

Connections: They don't need to have a direct relationship to the thing they symbolise. For example, the symbol "elephant" only means "a large animal with four legs, big ears and a long nose" because that is how we have learnt to interpret the meaning of this word / concept. Logically, therefore, the word "elephant" could equally mean "a small furry animal with two legs" or "a flat surface with four legs on which you serve food".

Complexity: Symbols can be related to one another to create very complex ideas and meanings.

An example of the way we both communicate symbolically and use this ability to create very complex cultural rules and meaning might be to imagine you were standing at traffic lights waiting to cross the road. If you see a car go through a red light you may interpret that behaviour as "wrong" (because it is dangerous) and "illegal" (because it breaks the law). If, however, the car has a flashing blue light and a wailing

An Elephant

(did you honestly expect anything more sophisticated?).

siren you may interpret that behaviour as "understandable", because you assume the police officers in the car have a very good reason for acting both dangerously and illegally.

This also illustrates the idea of symbolic meanings, since there is no absolute relationship between a "red light" and the action "stop"; it is only because we have been **socialised** to make an association between the two things that a red light actually means stop to us. Someone from a society where cars do not exist would not associate red traffic lights with "stop" because that *symbolic association* between the two things would not be a part of their "*symbolic system of meaning*" (or culture as it's probably better known).

The ability to develop shared meanings is the key to understanding human interaction. Our ability to think (our consciousness) is both the problem and the solution, since what we effectively do, according to Interactionists, is to create a sense of society and culture in our minds. We behave "*as if*" these things physically exist. Thus, the world humans inhabit is a:

Social construction, something that involves the idea that society is a product of our ability to think and express our thoughts symbolically. The things that we recognise as being "part of our society" or "part of our culture" are simply products of our mind.

Interestingly (presupposing you find train-spotting interesting) many cultures around the world associate the colour red with "danger".

Except the Chinese who associate it with luck and happiness.

This just goes to prove it's a funny old world.

Or something.

Postmodernism

A starting-point for a discussion of **postmodern** approaches to culture is the idea of:

Cultural globalisation: On a basic level this relates to the free and rapid movement around the globe of different cultural ideas, styles and products that can be picked-up, discarded and, most importantly, adapted to fit the needs of different cultural groups. The variety of cultural products (both material and non-material) available from which to choose are vast and people are no-longer restricted to local or national cultural choices. Cultural products are, in this respect:

Malleable (open to manipulation an change): In situations where people are exposed to a wide range of cultural influences and choices it is possible to develop a "pick and mix" approach to culture; choosing elements of one cultural tradition, for example, and mixing them with elements of another (or several) cultures to create something new, different and unique that postmodernists term:

Cultural hybrids: Examples here might include new forms of music (such as *Bhangra* -Asian (*Punjabi*) music transformed in the UK into dance music that combines traditional rhythms and beats with Western electric guitars and keyboards) and film (*Bollywood* films, for example, combine traditional Asian stories and themes with the western (Hollywood) musical tradition).

These ideas highlight a fundamental difference between Structuralist and Postmodern approaches to understanding the nature and role of culture.

Areas of UK social life like music, food and fashion have probably been most influenced by cultural hybrids.

Structuralist explanations suggest the role and purpose of culture is akin to a warm blanket that covers and protects us, in the sense that we gather "our culture" tightly around us as a form of "protection against the elements" (the influence of other cultures, subcultures and the like).

Postmodern explanations, while they allow that cultures may perform such a role for *some* people, suggest culture is much looser and more fluid in that it involves the fundamental notion of *choice* – and choice implies *diversity* and *difference*. Postmodern ideas suggest is that globalisation has resulted in a change in the way people both see and use cultural ideas and products. **Clothier** (2006), for example, suggests that the significance of cultural hybrids lies in the fact that they represent a rejection of the idea of culture as:

Tradition – ways of thinking and behaving passed down from generation to generation as if they were a "fixed tablet", an idea **Clothier** illustrates by the following example: "If a local school is having an 'ethnic day' those referring to the fixed tablet simply

reference standing authority on the most appropriate dress. In contrast the hybrid must make a choice". In such situations, therefore, "traditions are loosened, and the capacity to make choices allowed. Cultural hybridity therefore, represents a zone of cultural dynamism… found on the borders, in the overlaps, and the in-between places between two or more cultures".

Global Culture

Although the idea of global influences on local and national cultural behaviours is not necessarily new (different cultural practices and products have influenced "British culture" for many hundreds of years) what is new, perhaps, is the scope and speed of cultural diversity and change (a process hastened by technological develops such as cheap air travel and the Internet). While postmodernists are generally agreed that such changes are accelerating, there is not a similar level of agreement about the direction of change – something we can briefly outline in terms of three general views about the nature and extent of global culture.
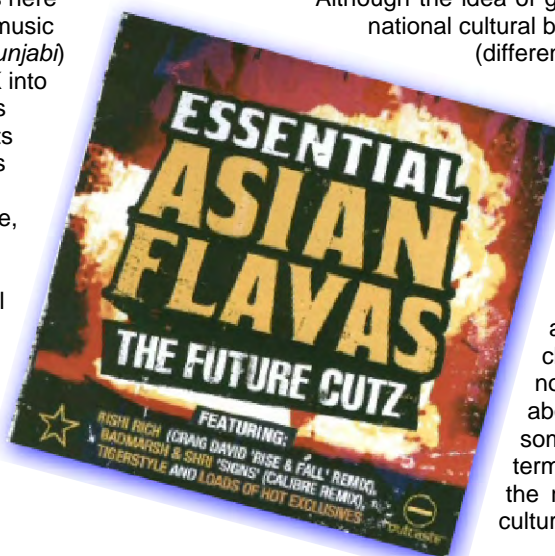
1. **Convergence and Homogenisation**: This strand argues the general trend is for cultural differences to gradually disappear as all societies start to adopt ideas and attitudes that are broadly similar in style and content – the main cause of this being the behaviour and influence of global corporations, media and advertising. **Plumb** (1995), in this respect, suggests that culture has become a:

Commodity where "Knowledge, ideas and other cultural elements are no longer generated to meet broadly shared human interests, but for a multitude of specific purchasers to buy". In terms of the *commodification of culture* **Lechner** (2001) suggests the economic behaviour and power of global companies (like Coca-Cola, Nike and McDonalds) creates a:

Consumer culture where standard commodities are promoted by global marketing campaigns" to "create similar lifestyles" - "**Coca-Colonisation**" as **Lechner** terms it. This idea is related to something like **Ritzer's** (1996) concept of:

McDonaldisation - the idea contemporary corporate cultural products are *standardised*, *homogenised* and *formulaic*; everyone who buys a McDonald's hamburger for example - whether in London or Singapore - gets the same basic product made to the same standard formula. Cultural products are therefore, increasingly predictable, safe and unthreatening. Along similar lines, **Berger** (1997) characterises this strand as:

McWorld Culture, a reference to the idea that global (popular) culture is increasingly Americanised – "Young people throughout the world dance to American music…wearing T-shirts with messages…about American universities and other consumer items. Older people watch American sitcoms on television and go to American movies. Everyone, young and old, grows taller and fatter on American fast foods".

2. Diversity and Heterogeneity: This strand emphasises more or less the opposite ideas about global cultural developments; the ebb-and-flow of different cultural ideas and influences creates hybrid cultural forms that represent "new forms of difference". From this position "culture" is not simply something that's "given" to people (either in the sense of *folk*, *mass* or *consumer* culture) but something that is actively constructed and reconstructed. Globalised culture, therefore, refers to the way local or national cultural developments can spread across the globe – picked-up, shaped and changed to suit the needs of different groups across and within different societies – and to how something like the Internet has changed the nature of cultural movements. A good example to illustrate this idea is:

Social networking: Internet sites such as *YouTube* (youtube.com), *MySpace* (myspace.com) or *flckr* (flickr.com) represent **social spaces** and communities actively constructed and reconstructed by the people who use them (to share videos, pictures or simply information). An interesting aspect of this development is the way the idea of *culture as a commodity* fits with the idea of freeing individuals to both produce and consume cultural ideas and products. While global commercial enterprises may provide the *tools* through which cultural ideas and products can be exchanged, it is the millions of individuals around the world who use these tools to provide the *content* that makes such virtual spaces vibrant and attractive (to both users and advertisers).

3. Homogeneity *and* Diversity: The third stand is one that, in some ways, combines the previous two in that it argues for both convergence and homogeneity *within*

global cultural groups but diversity and heterogeneity *between* such groups. In other words, groups of like-minded individuals share certain cultural similarities across national boundaries, but there groups are potentially many and varied. **Berger** (1997), for example, illustrates this idea by noting two distinct "faces of global culture":

Business cultures in which "Participants…know how to deal with computers, cellular phones, airline schedules, currency exchange, and the like. But they also dress alike, exhibit the same amicable informality, relieve tensions by similar attempts at humor (sic), and of course most of them interact in English"

Academic cultures involving, for example, Western intellectuals, their "values and ideologies". As **Berger** puts it, if business cultures try "to sell computer systems in India", academic cultures try " to promote feminism or environmentalism there".

This strand, therefore, argues for a range of points and spaces where the local and global meet - **Sklair** (1999), for example, suggests understanding global cultures involves thinking about two processes:

The Particularization of Universalism - the idea that some forms of globalised cultural features are adapted and changed by particular (local) cultural behaviours. **Regev** (2003) cites the example of "rock music" – a global product of Anglo-American construction consumed and filtered through many different cultures and cultural influences. As **Rumford** (2003) puts it, rock music "is easily domesticated into 'authentic' local musical forms. Consequently, when we hear rock music produced from within other cultures it can appear both strange and familiar at the same time".

The Universalisation of Particularism - the idea that the features of local cultures (their uniqueness, individuality and so forth) become a feature of globalised cultures; rather than seeing the globalisation of culture as an homogenising process we should see it in reverse - globalisation involves the spread of diverse cultural beliefs and practices across the globe in ways that create new and diverse cultural forms.

However we choose to view the concept of culture, a fundamental sociological principle involves the idea that it is taught and learnt and in the next section we can look at some of the basic building-blocks of this process in addition to the various agencies that attempt to influence it.

Tried and Tested

(c) Suggest two ways that mass culture differs from global culture (4 marks).

(d) Examine sociological explanations of the concept of culture (24 marks).

(e) Asses the view that Action, rather than Structuralist, perspectives provide more convincing accounts of cultural relationships in modern Britain (24 marks).

References

Berger, Peter (1997) "Four faces of global culture": The National Interest, No.49 [nationalinterest.org]

Bocock, Robert (1986) "Hegemony": Tavistock.

Clothier, Ian (2006) "Hybridity and Creativity": Aotearoa Ethnic Network Journal
Vol.1, Issue 2.

Cooney, Patrick (1994) "The Only Non-Racist History of the USA": The Vernon Johns Society.

Dahl, Stephan (2001) "Communications and Culture Transformation: Cultural Diversity, Globalization and Cultural Convergence": <www.stephweb.com/capstone/capstone.pdf>

Darwin, Charles (1998: first published 1859) "The Origin of Species": Gramercy Books.

Davis Caroline, (2000) "The Culture of Publishing Website": Oxford Brookes University:
<www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/apm/publishing/culture/conglom/congint.htm>

Davis, Kingsley and Moore, Wilbert (1967; first published 1945) "Some Principles of Stratification" in Bendix, Reinhard and Lipset, Seymour Martin (eds) "Class, Status and Power" (2nd edition): Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Durkheim, Emile (1995, first published 1912) "Elementary Forms of the Religious Life" (translated by Karen Fields): The Free Press.

Fisher, Glen (1997) "Mindsets: The Role of Culture and Perception in International Relations (2nd edition)": Intercultural Press.

Fisher, Stephen (2003) "Political Sociology: Introduction": University of Oxford
<http://malroy.econ.ox.ac.uk/fisher/polsoc>

Fiske, John (1995) "Popular Culture" in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds) *"Critical Terms for Literary Study"* (2nd ed): University of Chicago.

Giddens, Anthony (2006) "Sociology" (5th edition): Polity Press.

Gramsci, Antonio (1971: first published 1930 - 1934) "Selections from the Prison Notebooks" edited and translated by Hoare, Quintin and Nowell Smith, Geoffrey: Lawrence and Wishart

Hostede, Geert (1991) "Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind": McGraw-Hill.

Katz-Gerro, Tally, Raz, Sharon and Yaish, Meir (2007) "Class, Status, and the Intergenerational Transmission of Musical Tastes in Israel* : University of Haifa
<http://soc.haifa.ac.il/~tkatz/thefiles/final_version_katzrazyaish.doc>

Lechner, Frank (2001) "Globalisation Issues": The Globalisation Website
<www.sociology.emory.edu/globalization/issues.html>

Lenski, Gerhard (1994) "New Light on Old Issues: The Relevance of 'Really Existing Socialist Societies' for Stratification Theory" in Grusky, David (ed.) "Social Stratification: Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective": Westview Press.

Lynes, Russell (1949) "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow*": Harper's Magazine*

Matsumoto, David (2007) "Culture, Emotion, and Expression": New York Academy of Sciences.

Mazrui, Ali (1996) "Perspective: The Muse of Modernity and the Quest for. Development" in Philip Altbach and Salah Hassan (eds) "The Muse of Modernity: Essays on Culture as Development in Africa": Africa World Press Inc

Merton, Robert (1957) "Social Theory and Social Structure": Free Press.

Meyersohn, Rolf (1977) "The Sociology of Popular Culture: Looking Backwards and Forwards": Paper presented to the American Sociological Association.

Offe, Johanna (2001) "Smart guys plan for the future!: Cultural concepts of time and the prevention of AIDS in Africa": Afrika Spectrum Vol. 36, No.1: Institute of African Affairs, German Institute of Global and Area Studies.

Plumb, Donovan (1995) "Declining opportunities: adult education, culture, and postmodernity'" in Welton, M (ed) "In Defense (sic) of the Lifeworld: Critical Perspectives on Adult Learning": State University of New York Press.

Poulantzas, Nicos (1975) "Classes in Contemporary Capitalism": New Left Books.

Regev, Motti (2003) "Rockization: diversity within similarity in world popular music" in Beck, Sznaider and Winter (eds) "Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization": Liverpool University Press

Ritzer, George (1996) "The McDonaldization of Society": Pine Forge Press

Ross, Kristina (1995) "Mass Culture": www.mediahistory.umn.edu/masscult.html

Rumford, Chris (2003): "Dude, where's my country? From global America to global nothingness": Review of Beck, Sznaider and Winter (eds) "Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization": Liverpool University Press <www.chrisrumford.org.uk/from_global_america.html>

Sklair, Leslie (1999) "Competing Conceptions of Globalisation": Journal of World-Systems Research, Vol. 5, No. 2.

Trowler, Paul (1996) "Investigating the Media": HarperCollins

Urry, John. Abercrombie, Nick and Turner, Bryan (1975) "The Dominant Ideology Thesis": Routledge,