

# Popular Culture between History and Ethnology

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Burke, Peter 1984: *Popular Culture between History and Ethnology*. *Ethnologia Europaea* XIV: 5–13.

After discussing problems inherent in concepts such as “culture”, “popular”, “tradition” and “hegemony” the author attempts to describe and explain the main changes in European popular culture from the fourteenth to the twentieth century. He presents a “model” in the sense of a simplified general picture of European developments as a yardstick against which the characteristics of particular regions may be defined. Four main periods are distinguished: the late Middle Ages, 1350–1500; the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, 1500–1650; the commercialisation of popular culture, 1650–1800; and the industrialisation of popular culture, since 1800.

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## 1. Problems of Conceptualisation

The aim of this paper is a deliberately rash one. It is to attempt a synthesis of the work of both historians and ethnologists on European popular culture, and in particular to describe and to analyse change over the long term, from the fourteenth century to the present. This aim is rash for more than one reason. In the first place, because it is undertaken by a historian – for historians (as distinct from antiquarians) have discovered popular culture only recently, while ethnologists have been studying it for a long time. In the second place, because the concepts employed, notably ‘culture’ and ‘popular’ are themselves culture-bound and time-bound.

In a general book on popular culture (Burke 1978), I defined culture as ‘a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artifacts) in which they are expressed or embodied’. This definition is rather too narrow, not fully emancipated from a ‘high’ conception of culture in terms of art, literature and music, a kind of superstructure erected on a social base. ‘Artifacts’ and ‘Performances’ need to be understood in a wide sense, extending ‘artifact’ to

include such cultural constructs as the categories of sickness, or dirt, or kinship, or politics, and extending ‘performance’ to cover such culturally stereotyped, ritualised forms of behaviour as feasting and violence. It should also be stressed that ‘values’ need not be conscious; the most important values are so much part of what some ethnologists call the ‘deep structure’ of a culture that the actors are unlikely to be aware of them (Frykman and Löfgren 1979). ‘Culture’ is coming to be less and less distinguishable from ‘society’ as ‘society’ is seen more and more as a cultural construct.

Of course, most of what we know about past cultures does derive from artifacts and performances in a more precise and conventional sense. Much of our information about popular culture before the systematic investigations of the nineteenth century is necessarily derived from such performances as songs, stories, plays and rituals. The vivid picture of medieval Montaillo painted by Le Roy Ladurie is essentially based, as one reviewer remarked, on a series of performances by the villagers which happened to be recorded by the Inquisition (Davis 1979). To supplement this information our main resource is the study of physical artifacts, such as houses and furniture, or the descriptions of

such artifacts in inventories; historians and ethnologists have recently converged on this approach (compare Wiegmann 1980, with van der Woude and Schuurman 1980). However, it is worth reminding ourselves that these sources offer us no more than the tip of the iceberg.

Like 'culture', the term 'popular' is problematic. The phrase 'popular culture' was coined in Germany in the late 18th century and it was intended to refer to what was not 'learned' culture. This sense of contrast between two cultures had previously been expressed by the learned in references to popular culture as a collection of 'superstitions' or 'old wives' tales' (*fabulae aniles*), or, to quote a phrase used by the Bollandists in 1757 but almost identical to one coined by the anthropologist Robert Redfield some hundred years later, 'little traditions of the people' (*populares traditiunculae*).

But who are the people? It is a term with a long history in western culture – a history which has not been written, unfortunately, but would reveal that the term has generally been used in different ways by different kinds of speaker. For the clergy, the people are the laity; for the nobility, the commoners; for the rich, the poor; and for those of us who have been to university, it is obvious that the people are those who lack degrees. The people have often been seen, explicitly or implicitly, as Them as opposed to Us, particularly in England, France and other western countries. In this respect there are both national and disciplinary variations. Ethnologists have traditionally been closer to the people than historians, and Central Europeans have been closer than intellectuals further west. We really need a history of the idea of the people, which there is no space to summarise here (cf. Burke 1978, ch. 1).

'We' (historians or ethnologists) can if we wish define the people more precisely, as the 'subordinate classes' or as 'craftsmen and peasants', but these choices do not dissolve the problem, which is the fact that the poor, powerless, 'uneducated' and so on are groups which do not coincide (thought they may well overlap). In any case, we cannot assume that craftsmen and 'peasants' (a notoriously vague

category) formed a culturally homogeneous group. The rural world of nineteenth-century Hungary, for example, seems to have consisted of a number of cultural strata. To make matters still more complex, upperclass women and children often participated in performances which their husbands and fathers rejected as popular. If we can trust Dostoyevsky, nineteenth-century Russian noblewomen still participated in the cult of icons and the devotion to holy fools.

Students of religion have been particularly unhappy with what they sometimes call the 'two-tier model', the division of religion into 'elite' and 'popular'. Among the alternatives recently proposed have been 'practical religion' (Leach 1968), 'unofficial religion' (Yoder 1974), *religione delle classi popolari* (Ginzburg 1979), and 'local religion' (Christian 1981). However, it seems to me that each of these concepts removes some difficulties only at the price of creating others. The problem is that (like the boundary between 'high' and 'low'), the frontiers between 'central' and 'local', between 'clerical' and 'lay', between 'official' and 'unofficial' must be seen not as fixed but as fluid. It may be useful to regard a culture as a system, but only as a loosely bounded or 'open' one.

The least unsatisfactory solution is probably to stay with the two-tier model, while recognising its defects. In saying this I do not mean to suggest that a ternary model (say) would not also have its uses, particularly in some regions and periods. Still less do I want to imply that we should see European culture as neatly divided into two layers. Actually, one of the advantages of the division of culture into 'high' and 'low' is that we can introduce as many intermediate positions as local circumstances dictate. Another advantage is that it provides a language for describing cultural change in terms of 'sinking' and 'rising'. The sinking theory of culture is the classic theory of the German specialists in *Volkskunde* at the end of the last century, who emphasised the downward diffusion of many cultural items, from furniture (e.g. wardrobes) to literature (e.g. romances of chivalry). The opposite, 'rising' theory of cultural change was taken less seriously by scholars until a few years ago – no doubt for

social and political reasons – but it has been stressed in some important studies of individual writers and artists, such as Bakhtin (1965) on Rabelais, and Paulson (1971) on Hogarth.

‘Sinking’ and ‘rising’ are vivid images but they are misleadingly mechanical – they are too hydraulic. They thus give two false impressions. The first is that artifacts and performances move up and down the social scale unchanged, whereas they are usually adapted to suit their new situation. The second false impression is that the movement is automatic, as if people played no part in the process. The traditional metaphor of ‘borrowing’ and the currently fashionable one of ‘appropriation’ are more useful because they remind us of the role of individuals and groups and of their aims and strategies in the process of cultural change. Individuals may imitate higher groups because they want to rise socially; a form of ‘anticipatory socialisation’, as some sociologists call it, which the sumptuary laws of late medieval and early modern Europe were expressly designed to prevent. Groups lower in the social scale may imitate higher groups because they want to reduce the distance between them, or in the hope of increasing the social and cultural distance between themselves and still higher groups – the question of motivation is controversial (cf. Christiansen 1979 and Ek 1980).

Of course these appropriations and consequent adaptations are not the only causes of cultural change. On many occasions in European history the elite, or a group within the elite, have tried to ‘reform’ popular culture; in other words, first to suppress behaviour or ideas which they considered subversive, immoral or simply ‘boorish’ (that suggestive English term assimilating the peasants to the uncivilised), and secondly to replace all this with an alternative culture, a new tradition. Some British historians, led by Eric Hobsbawm, have recently begun to speak of ‘the invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This wilfully paradoxical phrase is a useful reminder that cultural change is not always gradual, or, for that matter, always disinterested. It should not, however, lead us to make too sharp a distinction between ‘inven-

ted’ and ‘genuine’ tradition. Where does ‘adaptation’ end and ‘invention’ begin? Is a genuine tradition any more than one whose invention has been forgotten?

The term ‘invention’ should not lead us to assume that elites have the power to mould the culture of the subordinate classes as they wish. The history of European popular culture shows that it is extremely resilient, that ordinary people have often been able to resist attempts to reform them. In order to reduce such resistance, it has been traditional for missionaries to ‘accommodate’ their ideas to their audience – a process which sometimes leaves one wondering who was converting whom.

An alternative way of describing both the imitation of the elite and that elite’s attempt to reform popular culture is to use Gramsci’s concept of cultural ‘hegemony’. This is a concept which I deliberately refrained from using in my own study of early modern Europe, while, on the other hand, it is central to a study of early modern France which happened to appear at the same time (Muchembled 1978). Muchembled argues that in 17th-century France, the ruling class tightened their control over the people to such an extent that it is possible to speak of the ‘conquest’ of popular culture and of the ‘acculturation’ of the dominated.

I am afraid that in some respects this argument only confirmed my suspicion of the concept ‘hegemony’ as a tool for the analysis of cultural change. Muchembled’s model encourages us to see the ruling class as monolithic, whereas in 17th-century France, the leaders of Church and State were not always in agreement. At times he gives the impression of holding a conspiracy theory of history. The sharp contrast between a culture which came from the people and a culture which the ruling class imposed on the people makes it difficult for him to deal with the many intermediaries between the two groups, such as the professional entertainers (cf. Vovelle 1980). These intermediaries do not fit the model and they are virtually absent from Muchembled’s book.

At the same time, his book, together with some recent work on nineteenth-century English popular culture and the theoretical de-

bates to which it has given rise (notably Hall and Jefferson 1975; Bailey 1978; Yeo and Yeo 1981; Storch 1982), has made me realise that my own study was not political enough, and also that if the notion of cultural hegemony could be made sufficiently subtle and flexible, it might become a valuable addition to the conceptual armoury of ethnologists and historians as well as sociologists. Among the questions which might preoccupy us if we wished to reformulate and operationalise this notion (which Gramsci formulated in a rather different context), I should like to distinguish three.

- i. Is cultural hegemony to be assumed to be a constant factor, or has it only operated at certain places and times? If the latter, what are the conditions and the indicators of its existence?
- ii. Are we talking about the conscious motives of the ruling class (or of groups within it), or about the unconscious rationality of their actions? If the latter, what is the relationship between this rationality and their conscious motives?
- iii. How are we to account for the achievement of this hegemony? Can it be resisted with success? If so, what are the major 'counter-hegemonic strategies' (Sider 1980)? Can hegemony be established without the collusion or collaboration of at least some of the dominated? If they do collaborate, why do they do so? Does the ruling class really impose its values on the subordinate classes, or is there some kind of compromise, with alternative definitions of the situation? (cf. Genovese 1974). The concept of 'negotiation' might well be of value here (cf. Gray 1976, and Burke 1982).

## 2. Problems of Periodisation

Despite the forces making for continuity, whether we think of them in terms of 'inertia' (another misleading mechanical metaphor) 'resilience', 'resistance' or 'cultural reproduction', it is clear that European popular culture has changed a good deal over the last few hundred years. What 19th-century folklorists such as Mannhardt or Frazer saw as immemorial tra-

dition was often an adaptation to quite recent circumstances (cf. Weber-Kellermann 1965). It is hard to think of a century since 1200, if not before, which did not see important modifications to European popular culture.

The second part of this paper therefore attempts to describe and account for some of the major changes between 1350 and 1950. It presents a 'model' in the sense of deliberately simplified picture. There will be little room for regional variation in this picture, but hopefully it will provide a yardstick against which the characteristics of particular regions may be measured. I have divided this period of six hundred years into five major phases. The timing of these phases naturally varies from region to region; in England, at least, and perhaps in north-western Europe, the major turning-points would come about 1350, 1500, 1650, 1800, 1900 and 1950 (the advantage of choosing round numbers is that they are obviously arbitrary and so not too likely to deceive).

It should perhaps be added that this model is developmental but not evolutionary. By this I mean first, that it implies no value-judgements, no progress or regress; second, that there is no logical necessity to the sequence – it simply happened in this way; third, that there is no denial of the possibility of the recurrence of certain trends at different times, cyclical elements within an essentially linear model; and finally, it is not suggested that each region moved at its own pace in exactly the same direction – there may well have been some differences in direction within this rather general framework. The model is essentially an attempt to relate changes in European popular culture to other changes, to see popular culture as part of 'total history'. I am sure that change takes place in a given region only when there is a 'fit' between the general trends and local circumstances, but it is not the job of the model to deal with local circumstances any more than with local timing. Nor can the model deal with continuity. It attempts to describe and explain the direction of change without making assumptions about the scale of change – this too has to be assessed region by region.

In taking the period 1350–1500 as a baseline, there is no assumption that this period



was static, let alone that it was a period of preparation for the next, a 'pre-Reformation', as it has been called by some historians. All the same, it is useful to begin with a period in which most Europeans were at least nominally Catholic (and the Catholics not so far from the Orthodox as they became during the Counter-Reformation). This was a period in which the cultural distance between the parish priests (who were not yet trained in seminaries), and their flocks was not very great. If there was a major division within Catholicism, it was not between the upper classes and the people or even between the clergy and the people, but between the scholastic theologians and everyone else, since the discourse of the theologians was a highly technical one which could only be learned by study at a university. But there is no evidence that Aquinas (say) rejected the lay or popular religion of his day, with its stress on images, relics, local cults and patron saints. He and other theologians participated in popular religion. In a similar way the nobility had a culture of its own, the sub-culture of chivalry, with its own language and its own norms, but also participated in popular culture, from the cult of the saints to the celebration of Carnival. This 'culture of folk humour', as Bakhtin calls it, seems to have involved everyone, with the most active parts played by young adult males organised in festive societies, whether composed of nobles, students, apprentices or peasants.

This traditional culture, however stable it may appear in retrospect, was not static. It is useful to regard it, as Gurevich (1981, 1983) suggests, as a 'dialectical system' in which conflict, dialogue, and other forms of interaction between learned and popular was important. Popular culture was also affected by the history of events, notably the Black Death of 1347–8, which is the real reason for beginning this survey in 1350. This traumatic event lies behind the preoccupation with death and decline which Johan Huizinga identified as characteristic of the later Middle Ages.

Other changes were more gradual; urbanisation is one of them. European cities had been growing steadily from the 11th century on, and this growth encouraged the development of an

urban sub-culture which survived the plague and the urban decline which in some places followed the Black Death. It is easier to define this sub-culture negatively (it was not peasant, noble or clerical), than positively (there are obvious reasons for avoiding the vague label 'middle class'). New cults, whether orthodox or heretical, seem to have sprung up and flourished more easily in the towns. Urban life, literacy, and the new medium of print (which was already in use to produce cheap, simple devotional books from about 1470 on), all encouraged a more private, interior religion. It was in the name of this interior religion that a group of educated clerics (Gerson, Hus, Savonarola, Erasmus, etc.), criticised the traditional popular religion of their day. Hus and Savonarola certainly appealed to ordinary people, and so, in the next century, did Martin Luther.

In the second period, from the Reformation on, we find much more of a deliberate effort by European elites to change the attitudes and values of ordinary people. Luther may have begun with the idea of the priesthood of all believers, but he soon came to support a learned clergy and the 'indoctrination' of the young (Strauss, 1978). A whole apparatus of Lutheran superintendents, Calvinist synods, and so on came to be associated with the project of purifying popular religion. The Catholics learned from the methods of their opponents. The parish clergy were trained in seminaries, thus widening the cultural distance between priest and people, while the young were taught the rudiments of their faith in a more uniform and thorough manner than before. By the early 17th century, catechisms and Sunday schools were features of both Catholic and Protestant Europe.

It would be misleading to suggest that in this long process of reform the elite were always active and the people passive. In the early 16th century, a small minority of zealots were trying to convert everyone, elite and people alike. By the later 16th century, many craftsmen, if not peasants, were studying their bibles and were prepared to suffer, or, on occasion, even to kill, for their reformed faith. However, the new religious ideas spread more quickly among the literate, so that by the early

17th century the image of a reformed elite trying to convert an unreformed people was probably coming to correspond to reality more closely than before.

Change in the second phase is a story of a highly self-conscious movement of reform, even if it had unintended consequences. In the third phase (1650–1800 in north-west Europe), change was more the result of market forces. The resilience of traditional popular culture, which had resisted so many reformers, was undermined by technological and economic change.

One agent of cultural change, particularly effective in northern Europe, was the printing press. By the year 1800, it is likely that about 80% of adults in Scotland and Prussia and as many as 90% in Sweden could read and write, and in the exceptionally well-documented Swedish case we know that the breakthrough to general literacy (more exactly, to the general ability to read) came in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Johansson 1973).

Once they were literate, however, ordinary people did not confine their reading to the Bible. In Western Europe, the period 1650–1800 was the age of the chapbooks (the French *Bibliothèque Bleue*, the Swedish *skillingtrycker*, etc.), small cheap books in paper covers which were sold not only in towns but also in the countryside, to which they were carried by itinerant pedlars. In Russia, there was the *lubok*, in which pictures were more important, and the text less. These texts were intended for ordinary people but they were not produced by ordinary people, as so much of traditional oral culture was. Robert Muchembled sees them as ‘tranquillisers’, produced on the part of the ruling class to keep the subordinate classes in their place.

Personally, I doubt this. The production and distribution of chap-books was not in the hands of the authorities in Church or State, but in those of private enterprise, of small printing firms. The most the authorities did was to censor what was published. The printer was concerned to produce what would sell, and this turned out to be a mixture of the escapist (romances of chivalry or lives of notorious crimi-

nals), the practical (notably almanacs, which were a kind of mini-encyclopaedia, containing information on agriculture, astrology, medicine, markets, weights and measures and even on history), and the devotional. The new medium carried new messages, and it facilitated exchanges between learned and popular culture (cf. Burke 1981).

The rise of the chap-book was part of a wider process: the commercialisation of popular culture. Material culture was commercialised as peasant families in western Europe became more closely involved with the market, acquiring new consumer goods such as wardrobes and grandfather clocks. It may be an exaggeration to speak of ‘mass-production’ at this point, but increasing division of labour and the standardisation of products (Dutch tiles, for example), are already to be discerned. Conspicuous consumption was becoming a means for craftsmen and peasants, as well as the upper classes, to distinguish themselves from other groups, a ‘vehicle of plebeian self-consciousness’ (Medick 1983, with reference to 18th-century London). There was also a trend towards the commercialisation of leisure, at least in large towns such as Paris, London and Madrid. Popular entertainment was beginning to be dissociated from major festivals and organised on a more permanent basis by entrepreneurs who invested considerable sums of money whether in boxing, bull-fights, the display of exotic animals or mechanical devices.

The politicisation of popular culture is another major trend noticeable in this third phase, which from this point of view might be dated 1640–1789 (with special but not exclusive reference to England and France). Popular revolts were nothing new, but they had normally been reactions to local grievances. Now the ‘mob’, as it was coming to be called (with a mixture of scorn and fear) by the elite, was concerned with the day-to-day activities of the government, a change in consciousness in which printed pamphlets and newspapers and political prints played an important part, added to the experience of living in a large capital city such as London, Paris, or Madrid.

Both the politicisation and the commercialisation of popular culture are trends which

seem to have reduced the gap between the elite and the people. It is in some ways tempting to talk of the rise of a third culture in this period, situated somewhere between the other two and associated with the larger towns. If I do not do this, it is for two reasons, one general and one particular. In the first place, because a culture is an open system, so that there were not two cultural blocks, learned and popular, but a spectrum of gradations, so that 'high' and 'low' are not places but directions and almost everyone is in the middle. In the second place, because of another trend in this third phase, the withdrawal of the elites from their former participation in popular culture. I have already suggested that popular culture used to be everyone's culture, to which the various elites added a second culture of their own. However, from the Renaissance onwards, and more especially in the 17th and 18th centuries (so far as Western Europe is concerned), we see the elites deliberately distancing themselves from popular culture, withdrawing from participation in Carnival and other festivals, giving up the use of dialect, and so on. At a time when popular culture was, thanks to the chap-books, borrowing more than usual from learned culture, such a withdrawal was an obvious strategy for the preservation of cultural distance.

However, this withdrawal is unlikely to have been completely conscious. The so-called 'Scientific Revolution' of the 17th century and the consequent 'mechanisation of the world picture' involved changes in the mentality of the elite which made the culture of ordinary people increasingly alien to them. Until the middle of the 17th century, western European elites had understood witchcraft all too well; they had collaborated with ordinary people in the persecution of witches, or even taken the initiative. Now, in the late 17th century, they dismissed witchcraft as irrational and absurd. In Poland, on the other hand, the execution of witches reached a peak in the early 18th century, but here too reaction set in. Meanwhile, ordinary people continued to believe in witches. In this and other ways, elite and popular culture were becoming increasingly differentiated (Frijhoff 1979).

This withdrawal from popular culture had,

in a few generations, a paradoxical consequence. By the end of the 18th century, some educated Europeans (in Eastern as well as Western Europe), were discovering popular culture as something to be nostalgic for, a world they had lost. This was the moment that popular culture was named as such.

The traditional popular culture which Herder, Scott, Chateaubriand and other European intellectuals had discovered with such enthusiasm, and believed to be authentically 'natural' and 'primitive', was in fact changing even more rapidly in the early 19th century than before, for a variety of reasons – technological, economic, social and political. This fourth phase, the age of industrial capitalism, was necessarily the age of the 'making of the English working class' as E.P. Thompson has called it, followed by the making of other working classes in France, Germany and elsewhere. The growth of factories and of industrial towns created a new way of life in which many traditional attitudes and values became irrelevant. Traditional festivals did not fit in well with the new industrial work rhythm and in England at least, these festivals were attacked by the elites in the name of 'rational recreation' (Bailey 1978; cf. Cunningham 1980, and Yeo and Yeo 1981).

Of course the speed of the change must not be exaggerated. Even in Britain, 'the first industrial nation', popular traditions retained enough resilience to modify the new culture, and Irish migrants to London were not simply 'acculturated' by the city (Lees 1979). In France, the workers continued to express themselves in the traditional 'corporate idiom' till 1848 if not beyond (Sewell 1980). In Eastern Europe, it was not industrialisation but the commercialisation of agriculture which created social change, together with the emancipation of the serfs, leading to what might be termed a golden age of peasant culture (Hofer 1973). However, even rural Europe could not escape change in the age of steam – the steam press, which reduced the price of newspapers, as well as the railways. Improved communications eroded the local base of traditional popular culture, which was first supplemented and then replaced by such highly capitalised forms of

entertainment as the railway excursion (Schivelbusch 1980), the music hall, the Sunday newspaper and organised sport. In Britain the *News of the World* (which has become a symbol of working-class leisure), was founded in 1843, while admission charges to football matches, making them a spectator sport, began in 1870.

The state also contributed to the transformation of popular culture, notably by the establishment of universal compulsory elementary education. In England, the 1870 Education Act followed the extension of the vote to artisans in 1867 ('We must educate our masters', as the minister responsible remarked with some cynicism). In France, Germany, Italy and elsewhere, the essential aim of the new educational system was rather to create national loyalty, to turn 'peasants into Frenchmen' (Weber 1976), Germans, and so on. Military service reinforced the political lesson of the schools, as did the whole new apparatus of national flags and anthems. The 19th century may therefore be seen as, among other things, a 'reform of popular culture' unparalleled in intensity and efficiency, a reform which interacted with the industrialisation of popular culture, which was a process pursued by individual entrepreneurs unaware of the general trend towards which they were contributing.

In the fifth and last phase, our own century, the history of popular culture is dominated by the second industrial revolution. The late 19th century inventions of the telephone, the 'phonograph' and the 'kinetoscope' were exploited commercially by the early 20th century, giving us a radio, cinema and gramophone culture which was of increasing importance until its replacement, from the 1950s on, by television (Briggs 1960). Early 20th-century rulers as diverse as Churchill and Hitler, Roosevelt and Mussolini all showed themselves well aware of the political uses of some at least of the new media.

Historians of popular culture in the 20th century will have some very large problems to discuss, and some difficult questions to answer. Has 'mass culture' replaced popular culture? Has television made the 'viewers' passive? Do late 20th-century men, women and children

live in a 'phantom world' of 'pseudo-events'? (Anders 1957, Boorstin 1962). Has a public culture become privatised? A specialist on the 16th and 17th centuries has no excuse for pontificating on this subject, but from his special point of view, three final comments seem appropriate. The first is that in our time the discovery of popular culture has itself become popularised. Even farmers find traditional peasant culture exotic. The second is that subcultures have proliferated – we are all members of some minority, perhaps of several cultural minorities. The third point is that thanks to television, the withdrawal of the elites from popular culture has been reversed, and we have returned to the bicultural situation of the Middle Ages. Intellectuals may have a second culture, but almost everyone shares the common culture of television.

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