

Salvador Giner

# The fate of popular culture today

**Culture is the medium through which we live out our lives, our work and come to terms with our hopes and fears. Whether we realise it or not, culture is the sieve through which every grain of our lives passes. We may be unaware of this because the notion of culture is such a recent one. Before the modern age, people were immersed in their own language, religion, beliefs and customs, which they saw as inseparable aspects of human existence. They did not see them as culture, in the current sense. They did not see themselves as possessing a given culture, though they often sensed that other peoples, tribes or nations were different, and saw life differently.**

The advent of the modern world ushered in gradual changes whereby life became increasingly compartmentalised, with the gulf between each component part becoming ever wider. That is why we can now distinguish at least three spheres: authority and power (politics); work and property (economics); and knowledge, values and beliefs (culture). Further categories emerged as distinctions were made between: religion; science; arts and literature; sport.

This fragmentation continues apace. The old distinction drawn between “high culture” and “popular culture” (the former confined to the ruling classes, the latter the province of humbler folk) has been succeeded by a dizzying plethora of new categories: science, music, humanities, the media. The term “National Culture” or “Folk Culture” was coined when *Romanticism* was in vogue. Ethnologists often studied the culture of tiny tribes and anthropologists and others wrote erudite papers on humankind’s various cultures. Philosophers and sociologists drew up theories by the score and ideologists often exploited their findings for their own nefarious ends. In 1960, André Malraux, a writer who was a confirmed Gaullist, was made France’s Minister of Culture.

The appointment was greeted with surprise and ridicule and was widely seen as yet another symptom of the country's incurable Jacobinism. Some suggested that the term "Minister of Culture" was an oxymoron. Today, a "Minister of Culture" is a commonplace and does not give rise to scathing comments. Furthermore, the popularisation of the scholarly concept of *culture* as a result of the dissemination of sociological and anthropological textbooks has yielded unexpected results. Several decades ago, the media began to chatter about cultures in the context of a given social sphere even though these were often aspects of a broader culture and hence really sub-cultures. They no longer spoke of the popular culture of, say, the Sicilians, the Bavarians or gypsies but of "drug culture", "delinquent culture" and so on. This inflation and proliferation of concepts and terminology hardly helps clarify ideas but there is no sign of the media relenting in their zest for new buzz words and for sowing confusion.

Even so, we can take solace in the fact that things were a great deal more confusing in the wake of the industrial revolution. With the disappearance of the old rural world and the growth of cities to house a burgeoning working class, popular culture seemed doomed. Yet the discovery of working-class culture in all its diverse forms was to redefine popular culture in Europe. Miners' choirs, soldiers' marches and the folklore of the sprawling industrial townships were just part of the remarkable richness of this new culture. The discovery of jazz, surely one of the most extraordinary creations of American culture, broadened the scope of working-class culture even further. Jazz appealed to *the humiliated and offended*, as Dostoyevsky would have put it — negroes, slaves, the illiterate. *Low culture* thus became *another culture*. The old distinction between "high" and "low" culture was thus rendered meaningless at one fell stroke. Even the later distinction between so-called *highbrow* and *lowbrow* cultures, somehow 'improved' by the notion *middlebrow culture* has now fallen into disrepute. On the other hand, during a certain period, the concept of a working class culture and the lives of the downtrodden in industrial society were shamelessly idealised. The other side of the coin was the vilification of middle-class culture by self-proclaimed advocates of "progressive ideas" — who all happened to be drawn from the ranks of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes.

Working-class culture was discovered and then consolidated. Catalonia epitomised this process, with its anarchist trade unionism, naturism, vegetarianism, pacificism, choral societies, Esperanto societies and League of Nations clubs. Works such as Narcís Oller's *Escanyapobres* and Émile Zola's *Germinal* recall the dignity of the victims of industrial capitalism and their ability to create culture and enjoy it with as much (if not more) refinement as their masters. However, theatrical works such as Serafí Pitarra's were aimed at the working class. They showed the wealthy a more authentic world whose cultural richness rivalled their own.

**This late 19<sup>th</sup> century current of modern popular culture was not to last long.** The advent of the media at the end of the Great War heralded a sea change. The propaganda of totalitarian systems with all their contrived symbolism soon destroyed any vestige of popular culture and led to the brutal anti-cultures of Fascism and Stalinism. Until recently, China was the last redoubt of *Social Realism*. This totalitarian propaganda was to prove even more lethal to genuine popular culture than capitalism.

The growth of capitalism, especially in Europe and the United States during the same period, turned culture into a consumer item to the point where some commentators

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warned that the death of popular culture (then seen as “traditional culture”) was nigh. In the decades following the Second World War, there was a flood of literature whose leitmotif was that popular culture was as dead as the Dodo. Left-wing observers saw the cultural industry engendered by capitalism as alienating the masses. Conservatives threw up their hands in horror at the vulgarity of the lower classes and the consummate ease with which they could be manipulated. Ironically, the two extremes amounted to the same thing —condemnation of and contempt for the proles’ culture. Some lamented the death of popular (i. e. working-class) culture and its new-found riches. This was the end of spontaneous, genuine popular culture and the new media had delivered the death blow.

TV flooded the air waves with poor quality entertainment and advertising grew by leaps and bounds, deepening old prejudices. The criticism was less strident than in the past but it still masked contempt for popular culture and a failure to recognise the forms it took.

**Some manifestations of popular culture in Catalonia**, such as the *sardana* (a folk dance) and *castellers* (human towers) have been blown out of all proportion by the media and politicians. Other forms (*Havaneras* [sea-shanties]), bands, theatre groups, and the scouting movement are more genuinely rooted in Catalan society and have successfully resisted media and political manipulation. The so-called theme parks are mere business stratagems to dish up entertainment for the mass-tourism industry. Television’s awful soap operas, its constant plugging of sponsored sport such as Formula 1 races, its appeal to the lowest tribal instincts in its football coverage are highly lucrative strategies but their impact means that popular culture can no longer be thought of in the same terms as in bygone times. Furthermore, anyone seriously wishing to defend popular culture cannot shut his eyes to the appalling vulgarity with which media entertainment companies approach the subject.

Whatever reservations one may have, it is a fallacy to argue that popular culture does not exist or that it cannot be expressed in a fitting fashion. In this context, I should like to make the following observations:

1. Despite all predictions, “high culture” is enjoyed by more people than ever before. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that such enjoyment is not necessarily the same as popular culture (although there are notable





exceptions —for example, the huge popularity of opera in Italy). Mozart's *divertimenti*, which were composed for aristocratic audiences, are now listened with rapt attention by thousands —or even millions if we include mp3 players and the like. The same can be said of outstanding films and plays, while the sales of great works of literature have gone from strength to strength. Even so, one should look further than consumption. The number of people belonging to choirs, youth orchestras, dance groups, poetry appreciation circles, and writers of newspaper and magazine articles, radio and TV scripts has risen steadily. It might be argued that this growth does not affect popular culture but rather extends the reach of high culture. However, as we shall see, this is not the case.

2. This polarised view is based on the erroneous notion that a certain kind of popular culture is both expanding and becoming vulgarised in the process. What can be said is that the cultural diversification of society is evident and shows the simplistic idea of the general massification of human society is false. The proliferation of hiking clubs, amateur theatre, rock groups and associations shows the reverse is true. Among other things, Tarrega's Street Theatre Festival is a celebration of popular culture —at least for the town residents, who justly consider it a prelude to the local fête (which is another feature of Catalan popular culture). No doubt many theatre groups draw their inspiration from Tarrega's festival.

3. One should recognise the alacrity with which companies try to “colonise” popular culture. Firms' desire to advertise their products and event organisers' work hand in hand. The organisers want money and the companies want publicity. It would



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be wrong to write off a popular festival like the one held in Barcelona's Gràcia district just because it draws ever more tourists. Even so, the Gràcia fête and Pamplona's internationally famous San Fermín festival may be threatened by their very success. Another festival endangered for the same reason is Andalusia's Rocío pilgrimage. While some manifestations of popular culture die out, that does not mean popular culture as such is doomed to vanish.

4. New non-traditional forms of popular culture are often worthy of interest. The field is a tricky one, given the faddiness of the contemporary world. Many refrain from criticising them for fear of appearing hopelessly reactionary. This goes for public entities too —local councils, ministries of culture, private foundations, guilds, which all let themselves be hoodwinked by mediocrity passed off as “popular culture”. Many believe this is the case with youth bands. Even so, it better to take the risk than to stifle such activities.

Acknowledging complexities and ambivalences helps one grasp the nature of popular culture in Catalonia and other European countries. Declaring popular culture dead is thus premature to say the least. Neither can one say that such culture is spurious just because it is shaped by commercial and political interests. The use of bread and circuses (Juvenal's *panem et circenses*) to keep the plebs happy is nothing new. The Spanish Inquisition never interfered





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**Continents XII (Continents XII),  
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 Jaume Plensa (2004)  
 Mixed media and  
 collage on paper  
 240 x 110 cm

with the Easter processions in Castile and Andalusia and the Church backed them from the outset. Despite what lofty critics to the left and right of the political spectrum might say, cultural industries and modern capitalism have not invented the problem but rather have merely exacerbated it.

New forms of expression, ranging from graffiti on railway carriages to the design of Internet games, reveal the surprising turns popular culture can take. These new, unconventional forms of culture may surprise and repel burghers brought up on plainer fare. Given enough time and repetitions, anything can become accepted as traditional popular culture. That is why one should not rule out anything. If it is popular, is it art? Does the whole thing need a little more time for the powers that be to consider it respectable? We could always ban graffiti artists on the grounds that their work is counter-cultural, but the pretext is a weak one —especially when town councils commission works from leading artists, some of whom are internationally famous for their daubings. When their works surprise nobody, we are a long way down the road to public acceptance. Many critics argue that graffiti cheers up the concrete jungle of modern cities. They say it is just another form of pop art and causes no offence.

**Plebeian art is just as vulnerable to commercial pressures** as any other.

Pseudo-intellectuals are quick to attribute it with qualities it often does not possess. It is one thing to exalt the artistic merit —if any— of a graffiti-smearred wall. It is quite another thing to compare these daubings to the Paleolithic paintings in the Altamira caves. Some think the childish impulse to hob-nob with the bourgeoisie was a purely Dadaist vice but it seems more prevalent than we care to think.

The fact that any artistic expression with counter-cultural pretensions may fall prey to commercial pressures or be manipulated by the media does not invalidate it as either art or culture. In these shifting sands, it behoves culture policy-makers, critics and

other shapers of public opinion to tread with the greatest care.

Traditional popular culture thrives in Catalonia, with its fêtes, rituals, religious and heathen festivals, pantomime, passion plays. This is all the more remarkable when one considers what it has to contend with: industrialisation; media meddling; mass tourism; political interference; commercial pressures. These have all played a part in redefining and reshaping popular culture but they have not destroyed it either in Catalonia or elsewhere. In this respect, we Catalans are not as singular as we like to think.

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Contrary to a commonly-held belief, one cannot distinguish between more “traditional” and “advanced” nations in this regard. The strength of popular culture is as strong in Sweden, England, Switzerland and Germany as it is in Andalusia or Sicily. Furthermore, the cultural issues facing those lands differ little from those confronting Catalonia. While the multicultural mixing found in the Antilles, Central America, India, London, Berlin and Barcelona no doubt differs from place to place, there are common threads. Perhaps one can even speak of “melting pot” cultures. The new immigrant cultures —Turks in Berlin, North Africans in France, Chicanos in California— are worthy of more attention and less paternalism. The important thing is to let them flower.

The only thing that makes a difference is when the native popular culture lacks proper defences. In this respect, Catalonia's culture and language are special cases. However, this concerns wider issues falling outside the scope of this short article. Suffice it to say that in a global, media-dominated world, the Catalan tongue is often pushed to the fringes in its homeland. The prevailing multicultural ethos often gives rise to a farcical state of affairs whereby the cultural and linguistic rights of immigrant communities are zealously defended but those of Catalan natives conveniently ignored. Universalist principles are all well and good but they should be applied universally. After all, what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

One cannot over-emphasise the importance of this issue. Put bluntly, the belittling of Catalan popular culture in certain circles in pursuit of an elusive, fatally flawed cosmopolitan vision is nothing short of unforgivable. The irony is that those who so blithely ignore Catalan popular culture are swift to proclaim themselves democratic, progressive and privy to truths denied to their fellow-mortals. For them, Catalonia's culture is somehow reactionary, a hangover from a dark and best-forgotten past. They are simply unable to grasp the complexity and ambiguity of life itself and hence the richness and diversity that lies at the heart of any popular culture. That is why Catalans often use satire in defending the country's language, rights and customs against Spain's instinctive loathing for everything beyond its ken.

We trust that every citizen and culture policymaker grasps the bleak future facing Catalonia if we do nothing. Let us recall that Catalonia's identity is grounded on two elements —the Catalan language and the country's splendid popular culture. We cannot afford to lose either or both<sup>1</sup> ■

■ <sup>1</sup> Some of the ideas in this brief essay are to found in greater depth in my books *Comunió, domini, innovació: Per una teoria de la cultura* (Laià, 1985), *La cultura catalana: El sagrat i el profà* (Edicions 62, 1996) and *La societat catalana* (Generalitat de Catalunya, 1998), among other works.

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