The "Backstage" Route to Modernity: Popular Culture as Hegemony in Eighteenth-Century England[1]

Alexandru Dragoş Ivana
(University of Bucharest)

Abstract

Modernus, *modo* („recent", „now"), *modernitas* („modern times") and *moderns* („men of today") are terms used since the 10th century to define a new *Weltanschauung* opposed to the *other* (i.e. bourgeois) sense of Modernity which, Matei Călinescu contends, lost any metaphysical or rigorous ethics after the decline of religion.

The great disenchantment generated by the awareness of the subjective time and self in eighteenth-century England highlighted, if not strengthened, the idea of relativism, of fluid boundaries between the bourgeoisie and the vulgar. Always seen from the perspective of the „Quality", the other dark side of *modernitas*, or „us", as Richard Hoggart argues, manifested itself as a counterpoised producer and consumer of cultural goods and public events.

The unsacred time witnessed by the capitalist civilization was made up for by an underground tradition at war with the cultural and social prerequisites of the high class. The strong and rapid industrialisation, the urbanisation of England at the beginning of the eighteenth century developed the idea of luxury and hypocrisy among the elected and the division of labour and mundane pleasures among the *vulgus*. Thus capitalism gave birth, now more than ever, to a strong movement against the mainstream, which is the advent of the culture of the people. Tautologically speaking, the plebeians were the *moderns* of the present day who contributed to changing and challenging public authority and resisting to it by means of popular discursive practices.

The *backstage route to modernity*, the very thesis I aim to consider in this paper, acquires a two-forked meaning, implying, on the one hand, the notion of „compulsion", i.e. the strong, and, on the other, the popular strategies of the weak understood as adaptation (Fiske 1989: 35).

The notion of „backstage" will be related to what I call popular hegemony, namely the circulation of popular symbolic forms, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms like diversion, entertainment and plebeian means of cultural production. Furthermore, I shall endeavour to conjoin this concept with the status of the bourgeoisie who began to acknowledge the pastimes and leisure of the low class in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The result is their mingling or, to put it differently, the circulation of social energy (Greenblatt 1988) between the élite and ordinary people metonymycally labelled as Mr. and Mrs. Average or Stupidity.

In my paper I shall briefly delve into the *modus vivendi* of the „disadvantaged" and talk about a balance between the two social categories or, better say, about the exchange of habits, customs and traditions and their negotiations, despite the sheer criticism and violent attacks against the uncultivated.

The texts I shall consider are all seen from a high-low position. Designed to be satires or pamphlets, genres typical of the Enlightenment literary conventions, they actually prove to be everyday notes or fragments about everyday people recorded by rich *flâneurs* driven by the pleasure of discovering the popular: the city of London with its debauched taverns and amphibious Houses of Entertainment, the delight taken in taking part in the Bartholomew fair,

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auxiliary or non-scientific means of religious faith best illustrated by astrology, heralded and praised by almanacs and blended with the 1752 reform of the calendar that shook up the entire system of holidays and customs and, last but not least, the commodification of the Other as a simulated instance of British colonialism.

Modernity has become an inexhaustible source of observation and analysis, which underlies the contemporary agenda of cultural studies minutely tackled from the point of view of cultural traditions, cultural transgressions, cultural paradigms, and remapping of cultural boundaries. Recent studies have proven that its inexhaustibility derives from its "second typical dimension", that is, the identity between "*time* and *self*" (Călinescu 1995: 17), understood as accumulation in time or what *L'École des Annales* has termed as *la long durée*.

Modernus, *modo* ("recent", "now"), *modernitas* ("modern times") and *moderns* ("today"s people") are terms that have been used since the 10th century onwards to define a new *Weltanschauung*, opposed to the *other* (i.e. aristocratic) sense of *Modernity* which lost "any metaphysical or rigorous ethics after the decline of religion" (Călinescu 1995: 17). The great disenchantment generated by the awareness of subjective time and self in eighteenth-century England highlighted, if not strengthened, the idea of fluid boundaries between the aristocracy and the *vulgus*. Always seen from the perspective of „people of quality" who vehemently discarded or rejected it, the other side of *modernitas*, or "us", as Richard Hoggart contends (Hoggart 1957), functioned as a countervailing producer and consumer of cultural goods and public events.

An underground tradition, at war with the cultural and social prerequisites of the high class, emerged from the fast industrialization process and urbanisation of England at the dawn of the eighteenth century. The luxury and hypocrisy of the „elect" collided with the division of labour and mundane pleasures of the *vulgus*. Thus, capitalism gave birth to a strong movement against the grain, that is, the advent of the „culture of the people". Tautologically speaking, the plebeians were the *moderns* of the present day, who played a major role both in challenging the public sphere (Habermas 1989) and in resisting it by means of demotic discursive practices, subsumed to what I call the „backstage" route to modernity.

The „backstage" of modernity, the issue I want to address in this article, acquires a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it implies the notion of "compulsion", i.e. the strong, and, on the other, the popular strategies of the weak understood as "adaptation" (Fiske 1989: 35). „Backstage" can also be related to popular hegemony perceived as circulation of popular symbolic forms (Bourdieu 1986) of diversion and entertainment. My interest is to conjoin the concept with the status of the bourgeoisie who, in the latter half of the eighteenth century,

began to acknowledge the pastimes and leisure of the low class. The result is their mingling or, to put it differently, the circulation of social energy[2] between the élite and the commoners metonymically labelled as Mr. and Mrs. Average. I shall endeavour, in what follows, to comment briefly on the *modus vivendi* of the „disadvantaged‟ and refer to a balance between the two social categories or, better put, to the exchange of habits, customs and traditions and their negotiations, despite the sheer criticism and violent attacks against the uncultivated.

Eighteenth-century popular culture texts –I am referring particularly to the material culled by John Mullan and Christopher Reid in an anthology entitled *Eighteenth-Century Popular Culture. A Selection* (2002)– are seen as real pieces of cultural archaeology or antiquarianism. When we read them today, we become fully aware of their major contribution to the development of the modern self, conceived from a sociological vantage-point, and also to the rise of the eighteenth-century English novel, whose paternity has long been granted– though not without heated debates on the matter– to Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. Most of these texts are satires or pamphlets –genres in tune with Enlightenment literary conventions– that actually prove to be everyday notes or fragments about everyday people recorded by rich *flâneurs* driven by the pleasure of discovering the *popular*: the City of London with its debauched taverns and amphibious Houses of Entertainment, the delights of the Bartholomew fair and its power to turn private identities into public behaviour, auxiliary means of religious faith best illustrated by astrology, heralded and praised by almanacs, and blended with the 1752 reform of the calendar that shook up the entire system of holidays and customs, satire related to the perception of Britain by the Other and by the British disguised as the Other in a simulated instance of colonialism meant to highlight both the bourgeoisie‟s alleged lack of interest in foreigners and the curiosity of the masses. As pieces of antiquarian evidence written by the erudite not to the purpose of mocking at the uncultivated audience, as allegedly intended, but of transcribing for *everyone*, whether rich or poor, the current state of social affairs, Enlightenment popular culture texts insist on the question of negotiation between patricians and plebeians in the tricky process of constructing a collective identity of the low class. Metaphorically speaking, they clearly echo the voice of the quick, of those who were, or still are, behind the curtain, in a gloomy cultural backstage, eager to be heard, to challenge the present and generate new types of social relations, practices and protocols. Viewed in this light, popular culture stands for the culture of the people and is defined by a homosemantic

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[2] I borrow Stephen Greenblatt‟s phrase analysed in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) to underscore the idea of *energeia* whereby we come to grasp the collective physical and mental experiences, given the capacity of certain verbal and visual *traces* to produce and shape them.

relationship, in that it is *produced for* people under the form of marketable cultural goods. Michael Payne writes that

> the people are not anonymous masses. Popular culture refers to audience size, to the quality of consumers, to their *attitudes* and *use* of cultural goods. Popular culture is a marker of cultural difference. Culture is a discursive practice; the theorist must be able to read the signs –the "homology" between cultural forms and group values.
> (Payne 2000: 414)

In other words, popular culture is, to paraphrase Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, a "cultural industry" of relaxation (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993). It is dynamic and based on industrialisation and urbanisation, two radical changes witnessed by England in the latter half of the eighteenth century. A popular/popularised thing is defined according to formal qualities, aesthetic *strategies* and "organisation of pleasure" (Payne 2000: 416). It is thus conducive to what I call popular hegemony, namely a modern means of disseminating and distributing culturally symbolic goods designed for everyday consumption. The term can also be interpreted as a *subversive* strategy that reveals the same rhetoric of the proper sense of "hegemony", i.e. the condescending view of the high-class on such products which are at loggerheads with the elite‟s polite protocols. Since all leisure activities included in Mullan and Reid‟s anthology unfold in the metropolis and are accurately reported in newspapers, they are undoubtedly regarded as useful information published in order to disseminate the culture of the commoners. In this sense, if one takes the term "mass media" to mean commodified cultural goods, "the eighteenth century in England", argues Lowenthal, "is the first period in history where it can be meaningfully applied" (1961: 52). A walk in the city –perceived by Tom Brown in *Amusements, Serious and Comical* (1700) as a multitude of Londons or by T. Legg as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991) in *Low-Life: or One Half of the World Knows Not How the Other Half Live* (1752?)– can become a matter of entertainment and, after all, can work as a real guide to the whole *polis*.

The spread of newspapers, magazines and almanacs aimed at instructing the public via daily otiose events. Shopkeepers and merchants began to benefit from professional literacy, a crucial aspect to be considered if we want to tackle the notion of popular hegemony. Its basic existing condition was commercial competition. The dispute between George Parker, a Tory with Jacobite sympathies, and John Partridge, an avowed anti-Catholic Whig, stands living proof of the major role of the almanac in shaping society‟s opinion. In *The Covent Garden Journal No. 10*, Fielding praised the virtues of popular entertainment, opining that "in the exercise of the mind, as well as in the exercise of the body, diversion is a secondary

consideration, and designed only to make that agreeable, which is at the same time useful, to such noble purposes as health and wisdom" (Fielding, qtd. in Lowenthal 1961: 70). The growth of pleasure and merry-making promoted by magazines –the newest trends in the field of print media– via gossip, news, fiction and useful advice generated what Dr. Johnson called a growth in the taste for "general and easy reading": "Books after all, should be held readily in the hand and should be easy to carry about; heavy books have a discouraging appearance of erudition and may succeed in frightening the public reader altogether" (A. S. Collins, qtd. in Lowenthal 1961: 53). "Easy reading" is therefore a good commodity whereas "heavy books" labels the nobility as philistine. In fact, the split between *high* and *low* meant the former"s "capacity to reproduce itself by self-sustaining means" and the latter"s *replication* of facts and events "with the help of borrowed tools" (Lowenthal 1961: 5).

As regards theatre performances, the pleasures of the fair and national holidays, popular hegemony is regarded as a form of resistance *qua* popular rituals. These "trivial" attractions were severely critiqued whenever debauchery prevailed. Nevertheless, they did not pass unnoticed by the elite who wrote about them in the newspapers and magazines of the time. Bartholomew Fair is the best illustration of the patricians" and plebeians" mingling in a carnivalesque landscape:

> The first *Objects*, when we were Seated at the Window, that lay within our Observation, were the Quality of the Fair, Strutting round their Balconies in their Tinsy Robes, and Golden Leather Buskins; expressing that Pride in their Buffoonery Stateliness, that I could reasonably believe they were as much Elevated with the Thoughts of their Fortnights Pageantry, as ever Alexander was with the *Glories* of a new *Conquest*; and look"d with as much Contempt from their *Slit-Deal-Thrones* upon the admiring Mobility, who were gazing in the dirt at their Ostentatious Heroes, and their most Superbitical Doxies, who look"d as Awkward and Ungainly in the Gorgeous Accouterments, as an Aldermans Lady in her Stiffen Body"d Gown upon a Festival.
> (Mullan and Reid 2000: 122)

Propaganda and advertising functioned as efficient opinion formers and questioned, concurrently, the public"s potentialities and predispositions. In a nutshell, they questioned the prerequisites for supply and demand. An example of reversed hierarchy was the Bluestocking Club, where upper-class women replaced the talk about letters with card games –a highlife, though not so orthodox, preoccupation at the time. According to Jűrgen Habermas, the authoritative sphere in charge of controlling the masses underwent a radical change, blending with popular fashionable beliefs and ways of reaction and becoming highly depersonalised:

> The public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of cultural consumption. […] To be sure, the individuated satisfaction of

needs might be achieved in a public fashion, namely, in the company of many others; but a public sphere did not emerge from such a situation. When the law of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labour also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode.
(Habermas 1989: 4)

Consequently, the private individuals" task was to contest the authority or at least to inculcate the altered claims of the state policy into the conscience of civic society. The reformation of manners as well as the mores and cultural conventions so much wanted by "them" did not represent a revolutionary thing plotted by modernity. In the words of Matei Călinescu, "they" were neither "more advanced, nor more challenging than their contemporaries" (Călinescu 1995: 37). This speaks volumes about their intolerance and ungratefulness to the active social field of the „impolite". The fusion of culture and entertainment led "not only to a depravation of culture, but also to the intellectualisation of amusement" (Campbell 1999: 308).

The *long durée* of ordinary social energy or what I call „backstage culture" is a "footnote of civilisation" (Roche 1997: 13), whose accumulation in time uncovers collective experiences and traditions which enable us to evaluate the *context* of a specific age. As a *small narrative*, eighteenth-century English daily life was involved in what Umberto Eco described as "a semiotic guerilla warfare" (Eco 1986), which turned out to be the weapon of the weak in their resistance to power. The "semiotic warfare" made the *space* –not the place– of the „backstage" community functional. Thus, space became an alternative to place: "[t]he powerful construct „places" where they can exercise their power: cities, malls, schools, etc. The weak make their own „spaces" *within* those places. A place is where strategy operates; the guerillas who move into it turn it into their space; *space is practised place*" (Fiske 1989: 33).

Mullan and Reid begin their study with a 1754 quotation of George Woodward, rector of East Hendred in Berkshire, who wrote to his uncle about the poverty of new reading-matter in his rural parish. Of course, reading-matter meant high culture: "I believe, if good ST. Charles [Grandison] had not so opportunely come to our Relief, we shd. have degraded our Taste so far, as to have borrow"d Valentine & orson from ye Gentry in ye Kitchen, where he is Conn"d over every Night with wonderful Pleasure" (Mullan and Reid 2000: 1).

His statement, "we shd. have degraded our Taste so far", raises the question of human feebleness, hypocrisy and predisposition to stupidity. Since he is a parishioner, therefore an enlightened figure, the rector must resist any vulgar temptation.

Statements like Woodward‟s, which confidently visualise a culture divided along strictly hierarchical lines, are not uncommon in contemporary sources. They cannot, however, "be accepted uncritically as a reflection of social reality" (Fiske 1989: 33). Peter Burke maintains that "the great tradition" –exclusively the domain of the cultivated élite– was also a preoccupation of the high class, which means that its members were directly involved in it. It was in the eighteenth century, particularly, he says, when "they" abandoned "the little tradition": "[b]y 1800, in most parts of Europe, the clergy, the nobility, the merchants, the professional men –and their wives– had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes, from whom they were now separated, as never before, by profound differences in world view" (qtd. in Mullan and Reid 2000: 2). Burke‟s statement shows that the new dynamic *Weltanschauung* contributed to a(n) (ex)change of social protocols. Burke‟s "bi-polar view" (Mullan and Reid 2000: 2) is rather a matter of opposition –not of negotiation– between the commoners and the élite. Nonetheless, the cultural identity, artefacts and social products promoted by the *vulgus* suggest the impossibility to draw a clear boundary between the two social extremes: "[a]s one leading practitioner has put it, the keywords of the moment in cultural history are „ambiguous, complex, contradictory, divided, dynamic, fluid, fractured, gendered, hybrid, interacting, multiple, multivalent, overlapping, plural, resistant, and shared‟" (Barry Reay, qtd. in Mullan and Reid 2000: 3).

Such terms embedded in today‟s cultural(ist) agenda render popular culture as a fully-fledged concept and discipline. As long as culture can be bought and sold, taste becomes an increasingly *useful social marker* (Mullan and Reid 2000: 4). The "backstage" of modernity foreshadows present-day consumer society, in which the term "popular culture" is perceived both as a *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*. The question of taste, degraded or not, presupposed a capacity for judgement and aesthetic discrimination which had to be inculcated and inscribed by the learned. Popular culture becomes of interest to the educated partly because "*it reminds them* that something *has been lost* in the desirable progress towards civility" (Mullan and Reid 2000: 10). Thus, popular culture appears as an oral trace in a cultural palimpsest from which it has been obliterated. As Mullan and Reid suggest, "much of the written record of popular culture in the period originates not "within" that culture but "outside" it, transcribed by the polite (Mullan and Reid 2000: 15). Eighteenth-century English popular culture reshaped the established hierarchy, in the sense that the polite "processed" and refined popular forms revealed in the novels of the time. When the élite forged its cultural yardsticks, its code of politeness provided shopkeepers and servants with "„a cultural literacy‟ which facilitated their dealings with social superiors" (Mullan and Reid 2000: 15). In Pat

Rogers‟ terms, "high culture in this period pays a *backhanded* tribute to its „lower-class cousin‟ by tapping its energies and borrowing its devices" (Rogers, qtd. in Mullan and Reid 2000: 16; emphasis added).

Discarding the forms of popular culture as "present-minded history", Jonathan Clark strikes a vital point related to the idea of progress. Understood as a way of grasping the past as an anticipation of the present, it misreads the eighteenth century as essentially modern and, consequently, neglects the social and clerical elites, whose "Anglican", "aristocratic", and "monarchical" view of the world dominated and unified Georgian England (Mullan and Reid 2000: 18). The eighteenth century was not "essentially modern" chronologically, but socially and economically. It was essentially modern because it conjoined two social categories that had been permanently at odds with each other. Jonathan Tyres‟ Vauxhall Gardens built in 1732 were a perfect match for conviviality organised in a pleasurable manner:

> The gardens, with a commercial liberation to exploit the unusual, the curious, the exotic were more exciting than the Royal Parks or genteel places like Bath. The frisson of coming into contact with the strange and rare was a great attraction: the „respectable‟ loved to rub shoulders with fortune-tellers, pimps, prostitutes, drug-dealers and pick-pocket The 18th-century pleasure gardens were a safety-valve for the Georgian society and were perhaps one of the reasons there was no British revolution in the French manner.
> (Brown 1999: 41-42)

To conclude, the "backhanded" facet of modernity, the *small narrative*, the anecdotal evidence, the matter of archaeology, the hidden discursive practice stuck in inertia became in eighteenth-century England a source of *metatextual* instance of what had *always and already* been part of history. Popular culture dealt with what lied in-between and disclosed "their" products for "our" purposes and vice-versa. It mediated between compulsion and adaptation, between "their" language and "our" material experience. It was the embodiment of a "micropolitics" (Fiske 1989: 56) able to produce functional meanings and social changes. Its mission was to observe the rhetoric of everyday life, the contradictory meanings that escaped control as well as the "producerly invitations" (Fiske 1989: 105) whereby it offered an insight into the issues of the essentially modern eighteenth century.

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