What Is Cultural History?
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What is Cultural History?

Geoffrey Eley

First, some quotations:

> Culture is ordinary: this is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes, and meanings, so that work, observations, and communication are possible. Then, second, but equal in importance, is the testing of these in experience, the making of new observations, comparisons, and meanings. A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life — the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning — the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.
>
> — Raymond Williams[1]

1. Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," *Resources of Hope. Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989) 4.

After all most of the work I was doing was in an area which people called "culture," even in the narrower sense, so that the term had a certain obviousness. But you know the number of times I've wished that I had never heard of the damned word. I have become more aware of its difficulties, not less, as I have gone on.

— Raymond Williams[2]

The institutionally or informally organized social production and reproduction of sense, meaning, and consciousness.

— Tim O'Sullivan et al.[3]

["Popular culture"] may suggest, in one anthropological inflexion which has been influential with social historians, an over-consensual view of this culture as "a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artifacts) in which they are embodied." But a culture is also a pool of diverse resources, in which traffic passes between the literate and the oral, the superordinate and the subordinate, the village and the metropolis; it is an arena of conflictual elements, which requires some compelling pressure — as, for example, nationalism or prevalent religious orthodoxy or class consciousness — to take form as "system." And, indeed, the very term "culture," with its cozy invocation of consensus, may serve to distract attention from social and cultural contradictions, from the fractures and oppositions within the whole.

— Edward P. Thompson[4]

We are thinking of the extraordinary symbolic creativity of the multitude of ways in which young people use, humanize, decorate and invest with meanings their common and immediate life spaces and social practices — personal styles and choices of clothes; selective and active use of music, TV, magazines; decoration of bedrooms; the rituals of romance and subcultural styles; the style, banter and drama of friendship groups; music-making and dance. Nor are these pursuits and activities trivial or inconsequential. In conditions of late modernization and the widespread crisis of cultural values they can be crucial to creation and sustenance of individual and group identities, even to cultural survival of identity itself. There is work, even desperate work, in their play.

— Paul Willis[5]

2. Williams, *Politics and Letters. Interviews with* New Left Review (London: New Left, 1979) 154.

3. Tim O'Sullivan, John Hartley, Danny Saunders, and John Fiske, *Key Concepts in Communication* (London: Routledge, 1983) 57.

4. Edward P. Thompson, *Customs in Common. Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New P, 1993) 6.

5. Paul Willis, *Common Culture. Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Boulder: Open UP, 1990) 2.

I don't treat these cultural representations as the forcible imposition of false and limiting stereotypes. Instead I explore the desire presumed by these representations, the desire which touches feminist and non-feminist women alike. But nor do I treat female desire as something universal, unchangeable, arising from the female condition. I see the representations of female pleasure and desire as *producing* and sustaining feminine positions. These positions are neither distant roles imposed on us from outside which it would be easy to kick off, nor are they the essential attributes of femininity. Feminine positions are produced as responses to the pleasures offered to us; our subjectivity and identity are formed in the definitions of desire which encircle us. These are the experiences which make change such a difficult and daunting task, for female desire is constantly lured by discourses which sustain male privilege.

— Rosalind Coward[6]

. . . [T]here are agreed limits to what is and is not acceptable, and although these are constantly shifting, they must always be seen as fixed, since they form the ground-plan of social stability. The shapes of an era are more easily found in its fashions, its furniture, its buildings — whose lines do seem to trace the 'moods' of social change — than in the equally significant outlines of its thoughts and habits, its conceptual categories, which are harder to see because they are precisely what we take for granted. How then *can* we "see" them? If it is in shapes and forms that passions live — as lightning lives in a conductor — it is likely to be in images — in films, photographs, television — that such conduits are most clearly visible. Our emotions are wound into these forms, only to spring back at us with an apparent life of their own. Movies seem to *contain* feelings, two-dimensional photographs seem to *contain* truths. The world itself seems filled with obviousness, full of natural meanings which these media merely reflect. But *we* invest the world with its significance. It doesn't have to be the way it is, or to mean what it does.

— Judith Williamson[7]

The conscious, chosen meaning in most people's lives comes much more from what they consume than what they produce.

— Judith Williamson[8]

[This position] . . . sees popular culture as a site of struggle, but, while accepting the power of the forces of dominance, it focuses

6. Rosalind Coward, *Female Desires. How They Are Sought, Bought and Packaged* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985) 16.

7. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London: M. Boyars, 1986) 15.

8. Williamson 230.

rather upon the popular tactics by which these forces are coped with, are evaded or are resisted. Instead of tracing exclusively the processes of incorporation, it investigates rather that popular vitality and creativity that makes incorporation such a constant necessity. Instead of concentrating on the omnipotent, insidious practices of the dominant ideology, it attempts to understand the everyday resistances and evasions that make that ideology work so hard and insistently to maintain itself and its values. This approach sees popular culture as potentially, and often actually, progressive (though not radical), and it is essentially optimistic, for it finds in the vigor and vitality of the people evidence both of the possibility of social change and of the motivation to drive it.

— John Fiske[9]

That ordinary people use the symbolic resources available to them under present conditions for meaningful activity is both manifest and endlessly elaborated upon by new revisionism. Thus emancipatory projects to liberate people from their alleged entrapment, whether they know they are entrapped or not, are called into question by this fundamental insight. Economic exploitations, racism, gender and sexual oppression, to name but a few, exist, but the exploited, estranged and oppressed cope, and, furthermore, if such writers as John Fiske and Paul Willis are to be believed, they cope very well indeed, making valid sense of the world and obtaining grateful pleasure from what they receive. Apparently, there is so much action in the micro-politics of everyday life that the Utopian promises of a better future, which were once so enticing for critics of popular culture, have lost all credibility.

— Jim McGuigan[10]

By culture is understood the common sense or way of life of a particular class, group, or social category, the complex of ideologies that are actually *adopted* as moral preferences or principles of life. To insist on this usage is to insist on the complex recreation of ideological *effects* as a moment of the analysis of consciousness. The effects of a particular ideological work or aspect of hegemony can only be understood in relation to attitudes and beliefs that are already lived. Ideologies never address ("interpellate") a "naked" subject. Concrete social individuals are always already constructed as culturally classed and sexed agents, already have a complexly formed subjectivity. Outside some structuralist texts, the "lonely hour" of the unitary, primary, primordial and cultureless interpellation "never comes." Ideologies always work

9. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 2
10. Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992)

upon a *ground*: that ground is *culture*. To insist on this is also to insist on "history" . . .

— Richard Johnson[11]

Here . . . is the outline of one significant line of thinking in Cultural Studies . . . . It stands opposed to the residual and merely reflective role assigned to "the cultural." In its different ways, it conceptualizes culture as interwoven with all social practices; and those practices, in turn, as a common form of human activity: sensuous human praxis, the activity through which men and women make history. It is opposed to the base-superstructure way of formulating the relationship between ideal and material forces, especially where the "base" is defined as the determination by "the economic" in any simple sense. It defines "culture" as *both* the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they "handle" and respond to the conditions of existence; *and* as the lived traditions and practices through which these "understandings" are expressed and in which they are embodied.

— Stuart Hall[12]

In cultural studies traditions, then, culture is understood *both* as a way of life — encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power — and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities, and so on.

— Cary Nelson et al.[13]

This collage of quotations is meant to hold a place for the extended definitional reflection a short paper of this kind can't hope to perform; given the notorious difficulty of organizing the disorderly profusion of intradisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and varying national-intellectual meanings and understandings of the "culture concept" into anything resembling consensual form, it may be that this approach would in any case be the most sensible. As Thompson says, "'culture' is a clumpish

11. Richard Johnson, "Three Problematics: Elements of a Theory of Working-Class Culture," *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, eds. John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson (London: St.Martin's, 1979) 234.

12. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," *Culture/Power/History. A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 527.

13. Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Larry Grossberg, "Cultural Studies: An Introduction," *Cultural Studies*, eds. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler (New York: Routlegde, 1992) 5.

term, which by gathering up so many activities and attributes into one common bundle may actually confuse or disguise discriminations that should be made between them."[14] Its usage can extend from the arts, letters, and aesthetics, through some more generalized notion of the life of the mind, to a more institutional perspective on such themes via the public sphere of artistic and intellectual activity, the educational system, other institutions of higher learning, and so on (broadly speaking the "high-cultural" tradition of scholarship); to the realm of symbolic and ritual meaning in a society's forms of cohesion and overall ethos (the anthropological field of approaches); and what Eagleton calls "the whole complex of signifying practices and symbolic processes in a particular society," which has become the domain of cultural studies.[15] Of course, even this gross clumping of approaches is insufficient, and a full survey of current work would have to include current social science theories of action as well, either because they bracket questions of culture altogether (rational choice models), or because they territorialize its relevance into a separable domain of study (as in forms of systems theory, including recent Habermasian conceptions of the lifeworld). One recent symposium on *Culture in History*, for instance, defines its subject almost entirely via a combination of neo-institutional approaches, rational actor models, and ideas of consumer preference. Here "culture" is acknowledged as "a fundamental part of the distribution of resources and the relations of power in a society," but disappears for the bulk of the volume from the forefront of the analysis, except as the "values" which "inform the strategic calculations which people make about their interests" and which support or inhibit particular paths of development.[16]

The bank of quotations heading this essay is thus an incitement to thought. It doesn't pretend completeness, but marks out a space of definition that can be filled, extended, or added to, as we choose. For the purpose of my own contribution to our discussion, I'm going to explore the usefulness of cultural studies — again, not as some sufficient or ready-made solution, or as an approach that can work all by itself, but as a set of proposals with which to think.

A still-emergent cross-disciplinary formation, cultural studies comprises

14. Thompson 13.

15. Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991) 28.

16. Joseph Melling and Jonathan Barry, *Culture in History: Production, Consumption and Values in Historical Perspective*, eds. Melling and Barry (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1992) 18f.

a varying miscellany of influences — sociologists, literary scholars, and social historians in Britain (but interestingly rather few anthropologists); mass communications, film studies, literary theory, and reflexive anthropology in the United States, with institutional supports in Women's Studies and American Culture, to offer only a couple examples. So far the main U. S. initiatives have come from the humanities, whereas the proliferating interdisciplinary programs and institutes in the social sciences have shown much less interest. In Britain the logic has tended perhaps in the other direction, although the greater prevalence of qualitative sociologies on that side of the Atlantic has also blurred the sharpness of the humanities/social science divide. On the other hand, feminist theory has had a big impact in both Britain and the United States, as has the post-Saidian critique of colonial and racist forms of thought in the western cultural tradition. Again, individual influences vary (for instance, Gramsci and psychoanalytic approaches in Britain, or Geertz and subsequent anthropologies in the United States), but the so-called linguistic turn and the fascination with postmodernism have increasingly allowed the two national discussions to converge. Moreover, although most of the concrete research has focused on the "long present" of cultural studies since 1945, this is in itself also a period badly in need of historian's attention, and transference of the interests involved to earlier times is already under way. Simply enumerating some main areas of current activity should be enough to make the point: the growth of serious work on the visual technologies of film, photography, television, and video; on commercial media like advertising, comic books, and magazines; and on the relationship of women in particular to popular reading genres (romances, gothic novels, and family sagas), television (soap operas, detective stories, and situation comedies), and film (film noir, horror, science fiction, and melodrama). One can see also the growth of new consumer economies, especially in the mass entertainment industries, but also affecting food, fashion and dress, domestic labor in households, leisure and play, and all manner of lifestyle concerns; of the use of autobiography and the personal voice; and, lastly, of postcolonial cultural critique and the analysis of "race," to offer only a few examples.

An important aspect of this cultural studies wave has been the reopening of old debates around the opposition of "high" and "low" culture, with a notable commitment to engaging popular culture in non-dismissive and non-patronizing ways. Taking popular culture seriously, as manifesting real needs and aspirations, as something to be decoded imaginatively in that light, however banal and apparently trivial the contents, has become a central tenet of these discussions; and here feminist writing is showing the way. Given the confrontational hostility to popular culture in the heyday of the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this is a noteworthy turn of affairs, for in that earlier moment the power of conventional sex-gender signs in everything from makeup to romantic fiction was taken as evidence of backwardness, oppression, and male exploitation in some transparent and self-evidently indictable way. Against this early confrontationism, we've seen growing efforts to get inside popular culture more sympathetically to explore how cultural production works on needs in appealing and contradictory ways, from soap opera to MTV. The emergence of a discourse during the 1980s around "pleasure" and "desire" as categories of political understanding, beyond their immediate place in the politics of sexuality in the stricter sense, has been a major symptom of this move, and signifies a rethinking of the "popular" in popular culture much larger than the specifically feminist discussion. It implies more positive engagement with popular culture than either the "mass culture" or the "folk culture" oriented traditions of analysis have tended to allow. It conjoins with the post-Foucauldian developments in the theory of power. And it requires a major shift in our understanding of the sites at which political action can begin.

In this sense, "culture" is defining a ground of politics beyond the space conventionally recognized by most political traditions as the appropriate context for policy-making in education and the arts. Indeed, reaching back through the twentieth to the later nineteenth century, it's hard to find a democratic politics (whether of the liberal or socialist left or the conservative, as opposed to the fascist, right) that deliberately and openly validated popular culture in its mass commercialized forms. Historically, the very notion of "high culture" has always been counterposed to something else that's less valued, to culture that is "low." In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the construction of this cultural "other" has taken two main forms, and both have been heavily overdetermined by gendered assumptions of value and capacity. One is the colonialist representation of non-western peoples, which externalizes the distinction between high and low within racialized frameworks of cultural superiority, even (or especially) when the differences concerned have become internal to the Western society via processes of migration. (Parenthetically, we might observe that it is via analysis of this cultural and ideological field of relationships that the discussion of social imperialism, which rather quickly became reified after Wehler's proposal of the concept, might be usefully revived.) But the second construction of "otherness" has been produced inside Western cultures themselves and has generally been identified with the "mass," with an idea of popular culture in which "the popular" has been dissociated from romantic notions of authenticity and the folk, becoming reattached to the commercialized culture of entertainment and leisure in ways which imply corruption rather than preservation, artificiality as opposed to naturalness, vulgarity rather than virtue. This idea of mass culture has been further linked to ideas of the city and a distinctive twentieth-century structure of public communication based on the cheap technologies of film, radio, gramophone, photography, television, motorization, pulp fiction, mass advertising, and magazines.

It is worth remaining with this set of associations. With the idea of the mass has invariably come a narrative of decline, of corruption, and moral danger — a negative imagery of "un-culture" and disorder, of drunkenness, gambling, unregulated sexuality, violence, criminality, and unstable family life, organized around social anxieties about youth in explicitly gendered ways. The political valence of this thinking has always been complex. The opposition of "high" and "low" is neither right nor left in itself. Thus the socialist tradition has drawn just as sharp a line between, on the one hand, the ideal of an educative and uplifting culture of the arts and enlightenment, and, on the other hand, an actually existing popular culture of base gratification, roughness, and disorder, which (in the socialist mind) the commercialized apparatus of mass provision has been only too glad to exploit. Socialist cultural policies, no less than liberal ones, for example, have always stressed the virtues of self-improvement and sobriety over the disorderly realities of much working-class existence. For socialists, places of commercial popular entertainment — music halls, circuses, fairs, all kinds of rough sports in the later nineteenth century; followed by the dance hall and the picture palaces in the early twentieth century; and dance clubs, rock concerts, juke boxes, bingo halls, and commercial television since 1945 — have been a source of frivolity and backwardness in working-class culture. Against this machinery of escapist dissipation, they counterposed the argument that working people should organize their own free time collectively and in morally uplifting ways. More recently, with the late twentieth-century crisis of the inner city, this opposition has been transcribed into the racially constructed image of the immigrant urban poor, itself historically reminiscent of an earlier subset of the dominant high/low binarism, namely, the xenophobic reaction against East European Jewish immigrants in Britain and Germany before the First World War. To this extent, socialists, liberals, and conservatives have inhabited a common discourse. The precise boundaries between the "high" and the "low," the "cultured" and the "not," have varied — the power of the distinction per se has not.

However, if "official" politics failed to respond positively or creatively to the mass culture phenomenon of the early twentieth century, this doesn't mean that mass culture wasn't producing powerful meanings in eminently political ways. Indeed, the new apparatus of the "culture industry" (to use one of the familiar pejorative names), from the razzmatazz of the cinema and the dance hall to the rise of spectator sports, the star system, and the machineries of advertising and fashion, proved remarkably effective in servicing a private economy of desire, beginning in the 1920s, and expanding its hold on the popular imagination ever since. This is where the recent validating of popular culture in cultural studies makes its point. For the emerging popular culture can no longer be so easily dismissed as an empty and depoliticized commercial corruption of traditional working-class culture (the typical left critique), but on the contrary evinced democratic authenticities of its own. Some cultural practitioners of the 1920s could see this. It was precisely the new technologies and media of communication and their mass audiences that excited the German left-modernists like Benjamin, Brecht, Piscator, and Heartfield. No less than the Russian futurists and other avant-garde in the aftermath of 1917, they used popular forms like circus, puppetry, and cabaret; worked through new technical media like posters, photographs, and film; and celebrated the mass reproducibility of their work where more conventional artists continued to sanctify the value and uniqueness of the individual creation. Benjamin's now-classic essay of 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," is a brilliant meditation on the actuality of popular culture in this sense, while by the end of the 1920s the practice of someone like Brecht was suffused with similar recognitions. While cultural conservatives of all stripes (left as well as right) could only counterpose the vulgarities of the cinema and other mass entertainments to the "true" values of art, Brecht found them the source of an artistic breakthrough. The raucousness, cigar smoke, and plebeian tones of the boxing hall were the epitome of all that the "bourgeois" theater abhorred, and sport became the model for how such public performance could be reformed, "with the stage as a brightly lit ring devoid of all mystique, demanding a critical, irreverent attitude on the part of the audience."[17]

How could we respond to these discussions as historians? Most obviously, the discourse of the "mass" (mass society, mass culture, mass public, mass politics, and the rise of the masses) can be historicized confidently within the later nineteenth century, with a distinct set of beginnings in the years between the 1880s and 1914. This discourse not only articulated anxieties about social boundaries and the pressure of democracy on existing constitutional arrangements, it was also organized by misogynist constructions of the urban mass public as dangerously feminine. Whereas "mass" had already acquired its positive inflections in the usages of the left, with its connotations of power in numbers, solidarity, and popular democratic strength, in the language of democracy's critics it implied "lowness" and "vulgarity," the threat of the "rabble" and the "mob," whose instincts were only "low, ignorant, unstable," exposed to demagogues, hucksters, and profiteers, and whose political preferences were "uninstructed," ripe for manipulation by the dominant interests and the defenders of the status quo.[18] Moreover, such discomforts also permeated the sensibility of the left, with its cultural languages of sobriety and uplift, reflecting essentially the fear that left to itself the new mass public would be seduced by the city's pleasures and excitements, prey to unscrupulous agitators of the political right, no less than to the quacks and charlatans of a tawdry commercialism. Finally, the transformation of the public sphere — that reshaping of the political nation initiated so powerfully by the popular mobilizations of the 1890s — is the structural context of this new contentiousness around the appearance and allegiances of the urban mass public. Here the opportunities of cultural analysis are adumbrated by a set of social histories, which are themselves still imperfectly researched and understood: the rise of a national reading public, the massive expansion of the popular press, the establishment of comprehensive postal communications and the later introduction of the telephone, the

17. John Willett, *The New Sobriety, 1917-1933: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) 103.

18. Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983) 192-97.

building of railway branch-lines and minor roads, the spread of libraries, the burgeoning of voluntary association, and the unprecedented availability of cheap reading-matter, soon to be extended by the new technologies of printing, radio, and film.

There are two further reflections I want to lay out on the subject of the mass, each of which bring in one of cultural studies' principal themes. The first concerns gender, and here I want to use a recent essay by Eve Rosenhaft to make my point. Commenting on the existing state of German historiography ("It is still possible to write a general account of German history that excludes women," she regrets), she points to the "impenetrably masculine" character of the history of politics or public affairs in the German field, which the two significant recent gains in connecting women's activity to the formal world of politics ("the feminization of the public sector in the growth of the welfare state," and "the Nazi co-optation of the idea of female *Lebensraum*") have barely touched. As she says, in establishing the political relevance of these stories ("in order to find women in politics"), historians have had to expand the definition of what politics conventionally includes:

> The tendency of empirical research up to now has been to establish the role of women in politics as a positively charged absence; there was a women's politics, but it took place in spheres distinct from the one in which state power was directly assigned and exercised — in occupational and confessional organizations, the women's sections of political parties, the expanding field of public and private social work.[19]

Part of the difficulty, of course, is that contemporary consciousness itself marked these activities as different, as lying beyond the political sphere in the "true" sense, and to get closer to the place of gender in the political process we have to make an additional theoretical move, by considering the relationship to public life of the mutually constitutive understandings of femininity and masculinity operative in any one time and place. That is, we need to re-read the familiar languages of politics in order to recognize women through the mechanisms and structures of their exclusion, whether such silencings were the result of direct discriminatory or exclusionary policies or practice, or whether they eventuated

19. Eve Rosenhaft, "Women, Gender, and the Limits of Political History in the Age of 'Mass' Politics," *Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives*, eds. Larry E. Jones and James N. Retallack, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 151, 149.

through less consciously directed logics of social relations and cultural behavior. Rosenhaft invokes the work of Dorinda Outram on the meanings of the body in the French Revolution to suggest how "modern ideas of the body politic and of the bourgeois individual as citizen came to be realized in social practice and internalized as part of a civic identity that was defined as essentially masculine," and argues that the processes of continuous negotiation through which this gendering of social and political identity became articulated with relations of domination and subordination during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can bring us closer to the circumstances of women, as the group whose access to public virtue and the formal attributes of citizenship was so expressly held at bay.[20] Rosenhaft provides a number of specific examples, including the need to rescrutinize the terms of conservative and acquiescent religiosity through which women's active involvement in the organized culture of Catholicism is usually devalued as "de-mobilizing" or "de-politicizing," rather than being seen as a distinctive form of women's political engagement. As she says, this is a particularly strong instance of "the 'private' politics that is not only implicit in the familiar masculine forms of politics but constitutes its premise."[21]

The most important point she makes concerns the discourse of the "mass" between the 1880s and 1930s, in which certain feminized constructions of the urban mass public "coincided" historically with the pressure of women for political rights, culminating under Weimar in both access to the franchise and large-scale recruitment into the new apparatus of the welfare state. For Rosenhaft, "mass," with its distinctive feminine coding, "appears almost as a deliberate circumlocution" on the part of male 1920s intellectuals for "this significant feminization of the political order."[22] The new public arena of commercially provided mass entertainment then provides a rich field of analysis for a gendered reading of political discourse. But whereas work in cultural studies, focusing on genre criticism and originating primarily in literary theory, has accumulated a large corpus of relevant work for such a project, particularly on film, historians have barely scratched the surface of these possibilities. As Rosenhaft says:

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20. Rosenhaft 159; see also Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1989); as well as Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988).

21. Rosenhaft 158.

22. Rosenhaft 162.

> As a term that simultaneously insists on the femininity of the new public and obscures the presence of women within it, 'the mass' has the advantage of directing us to the operation of gender discourses in the definition of politics (and the political subject) and to the issue of how the development of new media of mass communication affects the ways in which political opinion and participation are shaped.[23]

The final reflection I have concerns Foucault. There is no space here for an elaborate discussion of Foucault's influence, but to explore the challenge of cultural studies we do need to consider briefly the potential uses of a post-Foucauldian perspective on power. On the one hand, the latter has encouraged us to look for power and its operations away from the conventionally recognized sites of public political life, re-directing attention away from institutionally centered conceptions of government and the state, and towards a more dispersed and de-centered notion of power and its "microphysics." This approach takes the analysis of power away from the core institutions of the state in the national-centralized sense, and toward the emergence of new strategies of governance, regulation, and control, focused on both individuals and larger social categories, whose operation rests as much on the very process of defining the subject populations as it does on the more practical mechanics of coercive or regulative control. On the other hand, Foucault's ideas have sensitized us to the subtle and complex interrelations between power and knowledge, particularly in the modalities of disciplinary and administrative organization of knowledge in a society. "Discourse" is a way of theorizing the internal rules and regularities of particular fields of knowledge in this sense (their "regimes of truth"), as well as the more general structures of ideas and assumptions that delimit what can and cannot be thought and said in particular contexts of place and time. Such an approach has challenged the historian's usual assumptions about individual and collective agency and their bases of interest and rationality, helping us to see instead how subjectivities are constructed and produced within and through languages of identification that lie beyond the volition and control of individuals in the classic Enlightenment sense.

In these two senses, Foucault finds power at work in the basic categories of modern social understanding — in the visions and imaginings

23. Rosenhaft 163f. See also Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989); and Linda Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992).

that project the coherence and transparency of society, in the programmatic descriptions and re-descriptions of its desirable forms of organization, in the theories (both practical and esoteric) that seek to order and alter its workings, and in the policies and practices that act on its actually existing forms. Now, we don't have to commit ourselves to the entire Foucauldian package, so to speak, in order to see the usefulness of these perspectives, and I want to consider briefly some of the implications for work in the German field.

At one level, for instance, this discursive move — the refocusing of attention on the histories through which dominant and familiar forms of understanding (such as categories, assumptions, perspectives, but also policies and practices, as well as theories, programs, and philosophies) have been shaped — involves a turning back to questions of ideology, and to understand why such a Foucauldian approach can be attractive, some reflection on treatments of ideology in German historical discussion will help. Basically, the terms and tone of such discussion were set for many years by works such as those of Fritz Stern and George Mosse.[24] Here "ideology" was approached as a set of false and malevolent beliefs, often distortions of older traditions of thought produced by pathologies of German historical context (the *Sonderweg*!), but which could only take widespread hold in conditions of extremity, crisis, and disorientation, and which could be tracked visibly and unambiguously through policies, institutions, and decisions, assigned to individuals, and derived from precursors. An entire genre of works exists on the "ideological origins" of Nazism in this sense. To a great extent, the turning to social history in the 1960s and 1970s was a conscious rejection of this stress on "ideology," on the grounds that the peculiar dynamism of Nazism had an altogether more complicated relationship both to its own internal structures and to the larger social context than such an emphasis had allowed.

For a while this turn encouraged a certain indifference, bordering on outright hostility, to ideological analysis as such, in a dichotomized historiographical outlook privileging social history which in many ways still defines the field. Yet given a different conception of ideology, one discursively founded and socially embedded, there is no reason for this to be so. I'd argue that the recent interest in the racialist, gendered, and bio-medical dimensions of Nazi policies has provided ideal ground for

24. Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1961); and George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

such a differently conceptualized discussion of ideology to begin, even if in most particular works this is happening so far in a mostly practical (as opposed to consciously theorized) way. The larger domain of "biological politics" as a unifying principle of Nazi practice, linking anti-Semitism and the racialist offensive of the war years to a complex of policies before 1939, is the key: population planning, public health, welfare policies directed at women, family policy, euthanasia, sterilization, and eugenics. The best work on the Third Reich has also stressed the origins of this racialized social-policy complex in ideas and innovations going back to the Weimar Republic and beyond. Without diminishing the centrality of the Nazis' anti-Jewish genocidal commitments, this has increasingly shifted attention to the larger racialist ambitions in which the Final Solution's logic was inscribed. Moreover, the latter could only become feasible with the prior diffusion of eugenicist and related ideologies of social engineering, which to a great extent had permeated the thinking of social-policy and health-care professionals long before the Nazis themselves had arrived. It was in this deeper historical sense that the ground for the Final Solution was being discursively laid.

If we take this argument about the Judeocide's conditions of possibility seriously — the preconceptions and embedded social practices the Nazi political project required to work, and the laying of the ground before 1933 — then the importance of ideological analysis surely becomes clear not as a return to the exegetical focus on Hitler's and other Nazi leaders' immediate ideas and their etymology, but as an expanded cultural analysis of the production of meanings and values in pre-Nazi (and non-Nazi) society. In the immediate area of biological politics and racial hygiene, for instance, there is now a general recognition of this need: Nazi excesses only became possible through the "normal" achievements of respectable science, so that the Nazis' appalling schemes become less an eruption of "un-science" and the irrational than the advent of technocratic reason and the ethical unboundedness of science, continuous with the logics of earlier ambitions. This amounts to a decisive shift of perspective, away from Nazism's hard-core cadres to the broader, deeper-lying, and less visible ideological consensus they were able to use — to "the genesis of the 'Final Solution' from the spirit of science," in the words of Detlev Peukert's important essay.[25]

25. Detlev Peukert, "The Genesis of the 'Final Solution' from the Spirit of Science," *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, eds. Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1993) 234-52.

While Foucault is seldom referred to in these discussions, he could easily be the patron saint of this new direction, given the salience of arguments about discipline, knowledge, science, and domination.

There are two key aspects to this reinstatement of the importance of ideology, in the extended understanding of ideology *qua* discourse I've briefly indicated above. One concerns the nature and effectiveness of the Nazis' popular appeal. In keeping with the shift from ideological analysis in the older sense, the tendency for many years was to downplay the originality and power of the NSDAP's own ideological message during the electoral rise of 1928-33, stressing instead the chameleon nature of Nazi propaganda and its ability to capitalize manipulatively on the existing values of the middle classes (or the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie). This approach as such is consistent with the post-Foucauldian notation of ideology (as widely diffused meanings, representations, ordering assumptions, and practices), although its main practitioners tended to see themselves as doing social history in *contradistinction* to studies of ideology. However, so far from revealing the *unimportance* of ideology to the Nazis' success or their character as a political formation, I would argue, both the history of the party's electoral rise and the bases of the regime's stability show the crucial *centrality* of ideological analysis. The NSDAP was a phenomenon without precedent in the history of the right in Germany in that it both discovered the forms of unification among the hopelessly fractured parties and constituencies of the right and simultaneously grounded itself in an unusually broad base of popular support in sociological terms. And it did so precisely by its ability to articulate together a diverse and hitherto contradictory ensemble of ideological appeals. As this was a constructive achievement of remarkable power and baleful implications, we need to work hard at understanding how it came to occur. The question is: What were the connotative principles (the integrative or unifying bases, the principles of articulation) that allowed so many diverse categories of people to recognize themselves in the Nazi celebration of the race/people, that allowed the Nazis to capture the popular imagination so powerfully before and after 1933? And if we formulate the question like this, with its implied contrast with the political fragmentation of earlier right-wing formations, some evident tasks are posed for research on the Wilhelminian and Weimar periods that came before. That is, how exactly were the politics of the right constituted in this earlier time, and what were the conditions of possibility for change?

Secondly, the arguments about the more broadly diffused context of bio-medical discourse in the 1930s need to be grounded in a densely textured history of such ideas in the earlier period after the turn of the century. This will mean much fuller and more imaginatively constructed investigations of the social-policy contexts of the *Kaiserreich*, in which the production of new values, new mores, new social practices, and new ideas about the good and efficient society — new "normativities" — as well as their forms or projected and achieved realization occupy pride of place. It will mean paying careful attention to the gendered meanings of such histories, as well as to the power-producing effects in Foucault's "micro-physical" sense. Strategies of social policing and constructions of criminality, notions of the normal and the deviant, the production and regulation of sexuality, the definition of intelligence, the understanding of the socially valued individual, will all play a part in this analysis, as will the coalescence of racialized thinking about the desirable character of the people-nation and its social and political arrangements, about the character of the body politic. Some forays have been made in these directions, as in Paul Weindling's major synthesis on *Health, Race and German Politics*, which extends across the whole period from 1871 to 1945, or in Derek Linton's work on the youth question before 1914, and Detlev Peukert's work on the general issues affecting *Sozialdisziplinierung*.[26] One implication of such work is also to diminish the importance of the old chronological markers of German history from this point of view (that is, both 1914-18 and 1933), encouraging instead a re-periodizing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to stress the coherence of the years between the 1890s and 1930s as a unitary context, one where definite themes of national efficiency, social hygiene, and racialized nationalism coalesced.

26. Paul Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989); Derek S. Linton, "Who has the Youth, Has the Future," *The Campaign to Save Young Workers in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991); and Detlev Peukert, *Grenzen der Sozialdisziplinierung. Aufstieg und Krise der deutschen Jugendfürsorge 1878 bis 1932* (Cologne: Bund, 1986) and *Jugend Zwischen Krieg und Krise. Lebenswelten von Arbeiterjungen in der Weimarer Republik* (Cologne: Bund, 1987).