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The Politics of the Romanticization of Popular Culture, or,
Going Ga-Ga Over Pop Culture: A Critical Theory Assessment
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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This paper is a revision of one given at the 2010 meeting of the Popular Culture Association. It remains a work in progress. DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR.

The debate about the value or merit of popular culture has persisted for centuries. One might even see Plato's criticism of poets in his day as an early example of popular culture bashing. More recently, writers like Matthew Arnold (19th century) and Dwight MacDonald (20th century) leveled damaging critiques against the culture of the masses. This paper will take as its starting point Frankfurt School philosophers like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Their critique of mass culture and the culture industry influenced a significant number of cultural critics from the mid-20th century on.

In many ways, a number of contemporary theorists have sought to redeem popular culture by celebrating the "silver lining" of the otherwise "dark cloud" of mediocrity and manipulation that passes as culture in American society. Whereas theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer may have bordered on the hyperbolic in their condemnation of mass culture, developing a too one-sided critique of popular culture, some more contemporary theorists have swung to the other extreme, developing one-sided celebrations of popular culture. The work of John Fiske, beginning in the 1980s, is an example of the swing to that extreme. I will summarize the criticisms of his approach to popular culture that can be and have been made. A more recent champion of popular culture is Henry Jenkins, whose work has focused on developments in computer technology and social media. Yet, his work is subject to many of the same criticisms that can be made in regard to Fiske's work. In this

paper, then, I will argue that contemporary efforts from the 1980s to today to romanticize popular culture threaten to obfuscate the powerful and detrimental effects of the capitalist culture industry—and that we desperately need a more measured critique of popular culture in order to attain a fair assessment of its costs and benefits. I will pay particular attention to costs and benefits as they pertain to the health of our democracy.

While they certainly were not the first or the last theorists to critique mass culture or the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer remain excellent examples of those thinkers who see popular culture as a dangerous and enslaving element in Western societies. In their famous essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the culture industry (that which produces mass or popular culture) is fully within the control of wealthy and powerful people and corporations. Those in power use the culture industry as a way of controlling or pacifying the general population—all the better to then exploit them for economic gain. The key to this control or pacification is the mindless or vapid character of what the culture industry produces. The products of the culture industry do not spur the imagination or creativity of the consumers, and they certainly do not elicit any reflective or critical thought.

Even worse, the very desire for the pablum of the culture industry is produced by the culture industry itself. My use of the word “pablum” is particularly fitting in this case. The root of the word is from the Latin *pabulum*, meaning “foodstuff.” In the 1930s, pablum became a trademark for a processed cereal for infants. Metaphorically it since has been used to refer to entertainment or amusement that is bland, unappealing, or lacks taste. It perfectly describes what Adorno and Horkheimer thought about the products of the culture

industry. Those products are bland and unappealing, in part because they cater to the lowest common denominator of the masses (e.g., crude humor, slapstick comedy, uncomplicated narratives). And like the infants to whom pablum was fed, consumers lack any real freedom or choice in the transactions conducted with the culture industry. “The consumers are the workers and employees, the farmers and lower middle class,” Adorno and Horkheimer write. “Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered to them [by the culture industry].”¹ In this way, the consumers are not subjects able to exercise their freedom but objects that are manipulated by those in control of the culture industry.²

While one might think that the pleasures of mass or popular culture provide consumers with an escape from the drudgery and tedium of the work week, they actually are part of the system that imprisons them. As Adorno and Horkheimer conclude: “Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance.”³ We can reject this product or that form of entertainment, but we increasingly are incapable of critically assessing or resisting the dominant ideology⁴--the ideology of never-ending consumption as a means to personal fulfillment and happiness.

¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (translated by John Cumming, New York: Continuum, 1994), 133.

² Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic*, 142.

³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic*, 144.

⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic*, 166-167.

Adorno extended and perhaps sharpened this critique in his later essay “The Culture Industry Revisited.” He argues that the “dream industry [culture industry] does not so much fabricate the dreams of the customers as introduce the dreams of the suppliers among the people.”⁵ Even worse, nobody seems to care that their dreams (read “wants” or “desires”) are not their own but are the dreams of commodity producers. As Adorno affirms, “The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object.”⁶ It is in this sense that Adorno argues that the culture industry is not a consequence of human desires, it does not conform itself to the wants of the consumer, rather it conforms the consumer to itself. Adorno concludes that “the culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims.”⁷ In such a situation, there is no freedom, no resistance, and no genuine democracy. Little wonder then that Adorno prophesizes:

The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky. They are controlled from earth. It depends upon human beings themselves whether they will extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare which only threatens to become actual as long as men believe in it.⁸

⁵ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 93.

⁶ Adorno, *Culture*, 99.

⁷ Adorno, *Culture*, 185.

⁸ Adorno, *Culture*, 96.

The arguments made by Adorno and Horkheimer about mass or popular culture probably are not fully applicable today. Popular culture today is far from homogenous and repetitive. Popular culture today is more varied and creative than it was in 1950. However, what Adorno and Horkheimer still might have right is the effects of popular culture on its audience. It still may be true that consumers of popular culture generally are victims, that they are robbed of their freedom, and that it is used as a way of facilitating the exploitation of the labor force.

One of the best examples of the romanticization of popular culture can be found in the work of John Fiske. He identifies popular culture as the process by which consumers make their own meanings (a liberating act) out of the products they are given. He argues that popular culture is “made from within and below, not imposed from without or above as mass cultural theorist would have it. There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces.”⁹ From this position, the arguments of Adorno and Horkheimer are wrong or at least overstated.

Fiske contends that popular culture is more about meaning than product. In other words, the culture industry might have control over the products that it makes, but it cannot control (at least not completely) the uses and meanings that people find for those products. As he says, “All commodities are consumed as much for their meanings, identities, and pleasures as they are for their material function.”¹⁰ Blue jeans, for example,

⁹ John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2.

¹⁰ Fiske, *Reading*, 4.

do not simply serve as a garment that protects us from the elements. They *mean* something to us and mean different things to different people.¹¹

This ability to make meaning beyond the control of the producers is why popular culture is a form of resistance. As opposed to Adorno and Horkheimer, Fiske sees the consumer as a person of significant freedom. “The cultural industries . . . have to produce a repertoire of products from which the people choose,” he writes, but “despite all the pressures, it is the people who finally choose which commodities they will use in their culture.”¹² He adds that the “people are unlikely to choose any commodity that serves only the economic and ideological interests of the dominant.”¹³ Blue jeans, again, serve as a good example. Fiske recounts a story of asking a class to describe jeans and what they mean. He writes: “Jeans were seen as informal, classless, unisex, and appropriate to city or country; wearing them was a sign of freedom from the constraints on behavior and identity that social categories impose. *Free* was the single most common adjective used, frequently with the meaning of ‘free to be myself.’”¹⁴ How one uses jeans is an expression of freedom. For example, tearing holes in one’s jeans is not something the manufacturer intended, but an

¹¹ Fiske’s emphasis on meaning is central to his distinction between popular and critical discrimination. Critical discrimination is the purview of the elite, the professional cultural critic. Popular discrimination is the purview of the people. Popular discrimination has to do with “relevance”—the “interconnections between a text and the immediate social situation” of the consumer (reader, viewer, etc.) (“Popular Discrimination,” in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by Raiford Guins & Omayra Zaragoza Cruz (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2005), 216). The consequence of these interconnections is that different people will create different meanings from cultural productions. Thus, cultural productions have a polysemic character at the popular level, for they are open to generating many different kinds of meaning.

¹² Fiske, *Reading*, 5.

¹³ Fiske, *Reading*, 5.

¹⁴ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.

act of freedom by the consumer (supposedly an expression of *personal* style, even though *everyone* is doing it). While popular culture always bears “traces of the forces of domination and subordination,” it also “shows signs of resisting or evading those forces.”¹⁵ For Fiske, wearing torn or ragged jeans is an act of resistance. He concludes:

But more significant than any other possible meaning of ragged jeans is the fact that the raggedness is the production and choice of the user, it is an excorporation of the commodity into a subordinate subculture and a transfer of at least some of the power inherent in the commodification process. It is a refusal of commodification and an assertion of one’s right to make one’s own culture out of the resources provided by the commodity system.¹⁶

As Seth Meyer and Amy Poeller famously have said on SNL’s Weekend Update: *Really?* Do we *really* want to celebrate tearing holes in our jeans as a victory of freedom over corporate control? Do we *really* think that the “commodity system” cares if we tear holes in our jeans or not, as long as we continue to buy its jeans? Indeed, as soon as torn jeans became popular the jean producers started selling pre-torn jeans. While we might look at this sequence of events as a great example of consumers leading producers, we just as well could look at it as producers quickly figuring out how to further exploit consumers. Even Fiske must qualify his own celebratory remarks. He states:

Such political gains in the specificities of everyday life are progressive rather than radical. They enlarge the space of action for the subordinate; they effect

¹⁵ Fiske, *Understanding*, 5.

¹⁶ Fiske, *Understanding*, 15.

shifts, however minute, in social power relations. They are the tactics of the subordinate in making do within and against the system, rather than of opposing it directly; they are concerned with improving the lot of the subordinate rather than with changing the system that subordinates them.¹⁷

This is no small qualification. The claim of critical theory is that popular culture functions to prevent any serious or “radical” critique of the dominant system—a system permeated with contradictions and injustices. If the “freedom” of the consumer never entails the serious or “radical” critique of the system, then that “freedom” becomes just another element in the smooth functioning of the system itself.

It seems odd then that Fiske would write: “Despite nearly two centuries of capitalism, subordinated subcultures exist and intransigently refuse finally to be incorporated—people in these subcultures keep devising new ways of tearing their jeans.”¹⁸ And, I would add, the producers keep devising new (profitable) ways of getting these subcultures to purchase new jeans. Fiske makes the point that change is only going to occur from the bottom up (perhaps, “bell bottom up” we should say).¹⁹ He certainly is correct. But change is not going to occur just because I tear holes in my jeans. Indeed, if I see holes in my jeans as a legitimate source of rebellion, I probably will fail to engage in the kind of genuine political action necessary to address systemic inequities and injustices. In other words, if by tearing holes in my jeans I believe I am part of some kind of movement for social change, will this not simply relieve me of any further responsibility to help in

¹⁷ Fiske, *Reading*, 11.

¹⁸ Fiske, *Understanding*, 19.

¹⁹ Fiske, *Understanding*, 19.

achieving *real* social change? Or, to put it one other way, if I think that tearing a hole in my jeans prevents my “incorporation” into the dominant system does this not simply obfuscate the fact that I always already am incorporated?

Fiske correctly notes that the study of popular culture has tended to go in two main directions—either celebrating popular culture “without situating it in a model of power” or situating it within a model of power but in such a way that the consumer simply is dominated (has no role or freedom in popular culture).²⁰ He proposes a third way. His third way “sees popular culture as a site of struggle, but, while accepting the power of the forces of dominance, it focuses rather upon the popular tactics by which these forces are coped with, are evade or are resisted.”²¹ Despite his rejection of a simple celebration of popular culture, one still is left wondering if Fiske goes too far in his own celebration of the “evading” or “resisting” tactics of otherwise manipulated and exploited consumers. And, if we were to adopt Fiske’s view, would it not divert our attention from the overwhelmingly slavish mentality reflected in the behavior of most consumers of popular culture? One need only read the excellent work of Juliet Schor to fully grasp that mentality and how it is cultivated. In *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need*, she details the ways in which Americans feel compelled to purchase a wide variety of consumer products—even to the point of putting themselves into significant debt.²² And in *Born to Buy*, she shows how from the earliest age we are habituated into the consumer culture—

²⁰ Fiske, *Understanding*, 20.

²¹ Fiske, *Understanding*, 20.

²² Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998).

indeed, how we are, above all else, consumers from birth to death.²³ In light of her research, it is hard to celebrate the kind of resistance that Fiske identifies.

With the development of new technologies—ranging from cell phones to the internet to massive multi-player games, champions of popular culture have sparked a renewal of consideration of the value or merit of popular culture. Like Fiske, Henry Jenkins emphasizes the participatory nature of popular culture, especially as it is reflected in what he calls “convergence culture.” He also emphasizes the ways in which convergence culture is giving rise to new communities and, possibly, political action.

Jenkins describes convergence culture as the place “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.”²⁴ Perhaps the most important characteristic of this new convergence culture is that its new consumers are active participants in it. Thus, convergence culture is participatory culture.²⁵ “If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active,” Jenkins writes. “If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If

²³ Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

²⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

²⁵ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 3.

the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public.”²⁶

Jenkins provides numerous examples of convergence culture. A show as simple as *American Idol* includes consumer participation in the form of a weekly vote. The show *Survivor* has spawned numerous websites where fans can discuss the show and, in some cases, share information that might be relevant to figuring out who the winner is going to be. The *Matrix* trilogy of films is an even better example. The movies were supplemented with a DVD of collected anime that provide background and additional information for the movies. Online games allowed fans to enter the world of the movies and even extend the story beyond the third film.

For Jenkins, the participatory nature of new consumers can give rise to new communities. These new communities have a number of unique characteristics. First, they frequently can be defined as “knowledge communities”—communities in which information is freely and widely shared. *Survivor* fan communities are a great example. Second, these communities avoid the “expert paradigm”—everyone has the capacity to contribute to the generation of knowledge and thus the communities are very democratic.²⁷ Third, these communities are fragile. As Jenkins notes, these communities “are defined through voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members may shift from one group to

²⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 18-19.

²⁷ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 29.

another as their needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time.”²⁸

Jenkins argues that fan participation with popular culture through these new communities is an expression of freedom. But are the fans really free or are they just more captive consumers—no longer bound to a television set but now to their computer or cell phone as well? Does the democratization of knowledge through popular culture result in increased or more effective civic participation? What *are* the larger political implications of convergence culture?

Such political questions are central to Jenkins’ assessment of new technology (particularly web-based technology). He argues that proponents of “digital democracy” “are talking about . . . changing the ways people think about community and power so that they are able to mobilize collective intelligence to transform governance; and what they are talking about is a shift from the individualized conception of the informed citizen toward the collaborative concept of a monitorial citizen.”²⁹ The ideal of the “informed citizen” suggests the type of person who gathers a vast array of information so that he or she can be fully informed about public issues. But who can do that today? The issues are more numerous and complex than ever before, and there is simply too much information for any single individual to master. The “monitorial citizen” is someone plugged into a network in which a vast number of people are tracking a wide range of issues, sharing with one another the most important information. This is “collective intelligence” at work in the

²⁸ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 27.

²⁹ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 219.

political sphere. For example, maybe I know a lot about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the American role in it, but very little about mountaintop removal in Eastern Kentucky coal country. Via the internet, I can share my knowledge about the former and find people who can provide me the most immediate or critical information about the latter.

Monitorial citizens have a variety of ways in which they can share information. For example, Jenkins writes about what he calls “photoshop politics”—the kind of political expression that entails using Photoshop or similar software to create images with political content. While Jenkins seems to recognize the limits of such political expression, he suggests that “crystallizing one’s political perspectives into a photomontage that is intended for broader circulation is no less an act of citizenship than writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper that may or may not actually print it.” He adds that for “a growing number of young Americans, images . . . may represent as important a set of rhetorical resources as texts. Passing such images to a friend is no more and no less a political act than handing them a campaign brochure or a bumper sticker.” He insists that such images “may become the focus for conversation and persuasion.”³⁰

Political parody that might appear on YouTube or similar sites likewise is an important new form of political expression in popular culture. YouTube is an exemplary model for Jenkins because 1) it “represents the meeting ground between a range of different grassroots communities”; 2) it “functions as a media archive where amateur curators scan the media environment, searching for meaningful bits of content, and bringing them to a larger public”; and 3) it “functions in relation to a range of other social

³⁰ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 233.

networks; its content gets spread” via blogs, FaceBook, and more, where “it gets reframed for different publics and becomes the focal point for discussion.”³¹ Through their use of YouTube and social networking sites, Jenkins sees a renewed political and social engagement among young people.³² He concludes:

Young people have come to see YouTube as supporting individual and collective expression; they often feel excluded by the policy-wonk language of traditional politics and the inside-the-beltway focus of much campaign news coverage. Parody offers an alternative language through which policy debates and campaign pitches might be framed, one that . . . models itself on popular culture but responds to different ethical and political imperatives . . . Such a model sees Internet parodies as springboards for larger conversations—whether through blogs and discussion forums online or face-to-face between people gathered around a water cooler.”³³

Despite Jenkins’ arguments, we have good reasons to be skeptical about the merits of “photoshop politics” and online political parody. To equate photoshop images to campaign brochures or even worse bumper stickers (both pretty poor forms of political discourse) is hardly an endorsement for the use of such images. Jenkins argues that such images, as well as political parody, can give rise to broader or more substantive discussions. Is there any evidence to support such a claim? Is not political expression of this sort simply shared among people who already think alike? What is there to talk about if we

³¹ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 274-5.

³² Jenkins, *Convergence*, 288-9.

³³ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 289.

already agree? Even worse, the images and videos that he seems to celebrate (even if only tentatively) are often ill-informed gibberish. Can they really lead to carefully considered conversation? Is a deliberative democracy aided or benefited by such political expression?

Jenkins concludes that for “better or worse, this [“photoshop politics,” political parody on YouTube, etc.] is what democracy looks like in the era of convergence culture.”³⁴ My contention, contrary to Jenkins, is that it might be for worse! Recent research, perhaps summarized nowhere better than in Robert D. Putnam’s seminal work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, shows a steady decline in civic and political engagement by the vast majority of the American public—including the youth upon whom Jenkins pins so much hope. Written in 2000, Putnam concludes that “Americans are playing virtually every aspect of the civic game less frequently today than we did two decades ago.”³⁵ The data indicate that during the first two thirds of the 20th century, Americans were increasingly involved in civic life, and that in the last third they slowly became less and less involved.³⁶ Putnam considers a number of factors that help to explain this phenomenon, but perhaps the most important are the advent of television culture and rampant consumerism—cornerstones of today’s popular culture.

Putnam also is less hopeful in regard to the potential of new technology to stem the tide of civic non-engagement. Early research indicates that internet technology users are no

³⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 293.

³⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 41.

³⁶ Putnam, *Bowling*, 183.

more civically engaged than non-users.³⁷ In addition, online communities can be compared to organizations like Greenpeace or the National Rifle Association. Such groups may have many members, but most members do little more than send in a check for membership dues each year. While the leadership of such groups may exert influence in government, the groups themselves are hardly good examples of participatory democracy. In addition, internet or online communities, as Jenkins also notes, have loose affiliation ties among members. Putnam argues: “The Internet is a powerful tool for the transmission of information among physically distant people. The tougher question is whether that flow of information itself fosters social capital and genuine community.”³⁸ Thus, he concludes that some “of the allegedly greater democracy in cyberspace is based more on hope and hype than on careful research.”³⁹

Putnam identifies a number of challenges for digital democracy, including inequalities of access and the limitations of communication that is not face-to-face. Perhaps the most significant challenge, however, is what he calls “cyberbalkanization.” While real-life communities today often include significant diversity, online communities are very much homogeneous. “Local heterogeneity may give way to more focused virtual homogeneity as communities coalesce across space,” Putnam writes. “Internet technology allows and encourages infrared astronomers, oenophiles, Trekkies, and white supremacists to narrow their circle to like-minded intimates . . . [thus] decreasing social cohesion.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Putnam, *Bowling*, 170.

³⁸ Putnam, *Bowling*, 172.

³⁹ Putnam, *Bowling*, 173.

⁴⁰ Putnam, *Bowling*, 178.

In the end, Putnam asks: “Will the Internet in practice turn out to be a niftier telephone or a niftier television? In other words, will the Internet become predominantly a means of active, social communication or a means of passive, private entertainment? Will computer-mediated communication ‘crowd out’ face-to-face ties?”⁴¹ It may turn out to be something in between the telephone and television, but it probably does not yet deserve the hype that Jenkins and others seem to give it.⁴² Most importantly, it is unclear whether or not effective social capital can be generated and real political action achieved if we increasingly never have face-to-face interaction with neighbors and fellow citizens. Putnam concludes:

A politics without face-to-face socializing and organizing might take the form of a Perot-style electronic town hall, a kind of plebiscitary democracy. Many opinions would be heard, but only as a muddle of disembodied voices, neither engaging with one another nor offering much guidance to decision makers. TV-based politics is to political action as watching *ER* [a popular American television show about a hospital emergency room] is to saving someone in distress. Just as one cannot restart a heart with one’s remote control, one cannot jump-start republican citizenship without direct, face-to-face participation. Citizenship is not a spectator sport.

⁴¹ Putnam, *Bowling*, 179.

⁴² Research on the civic participation of millennials (today’s young adults) is, from my perspective, ambiguous at best.

Politics without social capital is politics at a distance. Conversations among callers to a studio in Dallas or New York are not responsible, since these “participants” need never meaningfully engage with opposing views and hence learn from that engagement. . . . Without face-to-face interaction, without immediate feedback, without being forced to examine our opinions under the light of other citizens’ scrutiny, we find it easier to hawk quick fixes and to demonize anyone who disagrees. Anonymity is fundamentally anathema to deliberation.⁴³

Without social capital from face-to-face organizing and deliberation, our democracy may very well hang in the balance.⁴⁴

Part of the problem with the arguments of today’s champions of popular culture and digital democracy is that they confuse the democratization of popular culture with genuine political freedom. As Jenkins notes in regard to television, democratization in that medium “is being driven by economic calculation and not by some broad mission to empower the public.”⁴⁵ Despite this note, however, he claims that the biggest change in American media “may be the shift from individualized and personalized media consumption toward consumption as a networked practice.”⁴⁶ Such practice is the work of what he calls “consumption communities.” But this begs the question: Are these real communities (at least in Putnam’s sense, as deliberative bodies that create social capital and achieve

⁴³ Putnam, *Bowling*, 341-2.

⁴⁴ Putnam, *Bowling*, 349.

⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 254.

⁴⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 255.

political aims)? Jenkins himself notes the fragility of such communities—so dependent on the whims of consumer desires. Yet, he insists that the “political effects of these fan communities come not simply through the production and circulation of new ideas (the critical reading of favorite texts) but also through access to new social structures (collective intelligence) and new models of cultural production (participatory culture).”⁴⁷ But just as we may question the degree to which we have real communities here, so it is hard to see why these “effects” are very political or effective for that matter.

To Jenkins’ credit, he is a bit more cautious probably than Fiske. He questions himself (“Have I gone too far?”⁴⁸) and seems to recognize the limits of his arguments. In regard to online games like *The Sims Online*, he writes that “people make passionate but often short-term investments in these online communities: they can always move elsewhere if the group reaches conclusions that run counter to their own beliefs or desires. As such, these games represent interesting and sometimes treacherous space to ‘play’ with citizenship and democracy.”⁴⁹ Such communities are different than real ones. We cannot just click a button or hit the off switch to leave real communities. Indeed, Jenkins warns us in the last sentence of the “Afterword”: “We need to be attentive to the ethical dimensions by which we are generating knowledge, producing culture, and engaging in politics together.”⁵⁰ Still, much of *Convergence Culture* walks a dangerous line between

⁴⁷ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 257.

⁴⁸ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 257.

⁴⁹ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 242.

⁵⁰ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 294.

romanticizing popular culture and providing a sober, critical assessment of it. And frequently Jenkins falls on the former side of the line.

Conclusion

I find much that I agree with in Fiske and Jenkins. However, reading or accepting only their work results in an overly-optimistic if not glamorous view of popular culture and recent developments in it. While both authors make an effort at providing a balanced approach, by-and-large I think they fail to do so. A more balanced approach would take more seriously the kind of criticisms made by Adorno and Horkheimer (outdated though they may be).

Towards the end of *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins draws the distinction between the politics of critical utopianism and the politics of victimization. The former is based on the “notion of empowerment,” while the latter is based on a “politics of victimization.” The former focuses on “what we are doing with media,” while the latter focuses on “what media is doing to us.”⁵¹ Jenkins clearly puts himself in the former camp (and, I think Fiske can go there too), while Adorno and Horkheimer fall in the latter camp. The truth in this matter (as with most truths) can be found somewhere in between. While certain elements in popular culture certainly hold out great promise for revitalizing our culture and perhaps even our democracy, much of popular culture remains a means by which consumers are manipulated and increasingly cut off from one another. From my perspective, both the

⁵¹ Jenkins, *Convergence*, 259.

politics of critical utopianism *and* the politics of victimization remain extreme positions, ones that are best avoided if we are to provide a more sober appraisal of popular culture.

When faced with the individualism and isolation of industrialism and urbanization, Putnam notes that Progressive era civic leaders created clubs. This might sound like too easy of an answer, but in many ways it was brilliant. It brought people together for face-to-face conversations, some of which touched on pressing local or regional issues. Out of these conversations, social capital was generated and it became possible for citizens to effectively address many community concerns. This worked, to some degree, for decades. But as Putnam so powerfully shows, Americans slowly abandoned clubs and community organizations (or, more accurately, succeeding generations simply did not join). So where will we develop the social capital in the future—the social capital needed to live and work effectively together? I am not sure. But I do not think popular culture is going to be the answer, for it remains more of a hindrance than a help.