

## Defining Pop Culture

-- Nazrul Islam\*

The theme of the conference, as you all know, is "American Popular Culture." I wish to talk on this now. But since I am a sociologist and a man of theory, I cannot talk without formally defining the subject matter. I have defined the word "American" in my last speech, so I shall not go into it again. Those of you who have not seen it, please look up 'my valuable contribution', published by etc. etc. etc.

Now "culture." For a sociologist nothing could be closer to his subject matter. Culture is what we study in the morning and evening and even the day after. We study culture of societies. Yet anthropologists claim that it is their field and, indeed, claim it as their monopoly. That's one reason I don't like anthropologists. The other reason is that anthropologists soon tend to resemble the people they study. No, come on, I don't mean it seriously. Some of them are quite handsome.

However, I don't like their definitions. Ask anyone on the street what is culture, and he or she will tell you that it is those nice things they do on Dhaka TV to put you to sleep. The more educated ones will tell you that it is Tagore songs. No, no, I don't mean that Tagore songs put you to sleep. It is just that when on Dhaka TV, well, you know what I mean.

Culture, thus, is defined as those nice things like songs and dances, a beautiful poem, drama, literature, art and so on. That is culture. Ask a sociologist - after all, it's his field, so ask him - and suddenly his facial expression will change. With a solemn face he will start, "Culture is that complex whole, which includes blah, blah, blah." Why, for God's sake, does culture have to be complex and why the serious face? And, if you think that is bad, ask an anthropologist. He will tell you that, "Culture is every thing that man does." What? Come again. How can everything? Wait, wait. If the anthropologist is a liberated woman she might define it as "Everything that man and woman do." No, of course not, she will not define it that way. Even if culture is everything that man does, how can one accept it. Do you know what the word "everything" includes, particularly if man and woman do them? Many such things cannot be uttered in a sophisticated gathering like this one. Yet, anthropologists have become very, very famous by studying those things of culture. Now, do you see why I do not like to associate myself with anthropologists?

So, how do we define culture? The word "popular" might help. Culture and popular culture are two different things. Culture is "Hello, how do you do?" Popular culture is "Hi!" Culture is opera and ballet, popular culture is rock and roll. Culture is sitar, popular culture is Spanish guitar. So, if we understand the meaning of the word "popular," we can understand popular culture.

Popular culture includes art, literature, song, music, dance, drama, films, and what not. It is also popular culture to call it pop-culture. So that, we have, pop-music, pop-literature, pop-art, pop-songs, and on Z- TV we have Top-of-the-Pop-Songs, and on EL-TV, Top-of-the-Top- Songs, etc.

The word "pop" is a little easier to translate, although it may seem a bit pop-ish.

Now "pop" in popular language means father, so pop-culture in pop-language should also mean father's culture. But when I was in my teens, I was an avid follower of pop-culture. I wore skin-tight pants-those were then called "teddy pants", read comics, listened to Elvis's songs, and soon asked my pop to buy me a guitar. That's when I found that pop-culture was definitely not my pop's culture.

And now that I am a pop, I often engage my teenage daughter in talks on pop-culture. My pop educated me enough so I do not talk of my teenage pop-culture. Instead, I talk of bell-bottom pants and extra-long side burns. My daughter only laughs and says, "Abbu, that's too old, traditional." So this pop's pop-culture is not pop-culture either.

Well, pop-culture really means culture of the people. So let's look at my experience again. During those days in the 1960s when I wore "teddy pants" and chewed gum, I once went to the New Market. But before I got off the rickshaw, I saw a herd of people pursuing a group of youngsters like me and shouting "Teddy, Teddy." Well, discretion is the better part of valor. This Teddy promptly left the scene. In the next day's newspaper I noted that the pursuers got the better of the pursued. They caught them with their pants down; took the pants off actually, and tore them to pieces. Oh, no, that pop-culture was definitely not pop-culture.

How about trying another meaning of the word "pop?" My Webster defines "pop" as a short, quick explosive sound, used with words like in, out, off or up etc., so that, some thing may pop up, or pop out, etc. Webster also has other uses of the word "pop," for example, popcorn. Now that is pop-culture. You munch on these as you watch a pop-film. Then, we have soda pop. That is the most popular part of pop-culture. See, now we are getting somewhere. Then we have pop-guns - very much a pop-culture on university campuses. We also have pop-py, poppy for short. That is the most pop pop-culture among youths these days. And once you have poppy culture, you are truly liberated. All kinds of colours pop up around you. Soon your eyes pop out, and heavenly ideas pop up in your brains and soon you too pop out. That's real pop-culture!

Come now, you don't like these definitions? Well, go to an anthropologist. See if I care!

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