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Between Pepe and Beyoncé: The Role of Popular Culture in Political Research

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There has been an increasing interest in popular culture among students of international politics. Still, due to political science's conservative concern with issues of formal, 'high politics' (Gift and Miner, 2017: 136), popular culture is rarely explored as a topic in academic journals (Dorzweiler, 2016: 139). I espouse Foucault's approach to popular culture as 'the broad stock of social knowledge, forms, analogies, symbols, and techniques through which actors are able to communicate and otherwise influence their environment' (Nexon and Neumann, 2006: 8). I argue that popular culture deserves a focus in academic research, broadly drawing upon Nexon and Neumann's four ways of explaining the role popular culture should play in academic political research: 'popular culture as constitutive', 'popular culture as mirror', 'politics and popular culture', and 'popular culture as data' (2006: 11-17). To this end, I discuss popular culture's ability to express the voice of groups excluded from the political arena, consolidate identity politics and correspond with critical theory. Its ability to act as an analogous tool, and conversely illustrate public attitudes, defines its place in academic research. It also contributes to political knowledge by shaping social reality. The scope of the essay is limited mainly to political academic research, in order to distinguish the distinct characteristics of political studies, such as the division between the personal and the political. While film and art will be drawn upon, the focus will be on other forms of popular culture not traditionally discussed, like memes and sports, to reflect the dynamism of the relationship in question.

Popular Culture, Vocalization and Identity

Popular culture may bridge the gap between the personal and the political, if there is one (Shifman, 2014: 129). One may examine this through the example of memes, defined by Dawkins (1976) as 'unit[s] of cultural transmission' (cited in Jeffries, 2018: 56). In the context of contemporary popular culture, they may refer to satirically-captioned images passed around in internet and social media—that is their limited scope. It is argued that memes' 'fun and engaging' (Shifman, 2014: 136) nature, stemming from their use of humor and the accessibility of the internet, allows marginalized groups to educate themselves and by extension to join public discourse (Milner, 2012: 52). Such groups are normally excluded from political discussion which scholars analyze; especially positivist scholars who tend to focus on the observable political arena. Memes and popular culture serve as 'vocalizations of members of the public sphere', independent of 'dominant discourses' (ibid.: 55) expressed in the government or mainstream media. Popular culture thereby contributes to the study of politics by allowing political scientists to examine attitudes and identities of those excluded from political discourse.

Indeed, memes operationalize popular culture's function as 'constitutive' (Nexon and Neumann, 2006: 14) in political science by inducing a process of negotiation of public norms through 'productive engagement with public life' (Milner, 2012: 53). This is because memes' polyvocal nature makes them 'performative acts' (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf, 2016: 1700, henceforth Gal et al.), where individual attitude is preserved but simultaneously there is a valence issue of reaching agreed social frameworks (Shifman, 2014: 129). Memes are ultimately the reproduction of a corpus, 'either as an exact copy or with the next user's new caption or twist' (Jeffries, 2018: 57). Memes store an awareness of previous memes, and those who participate in memetic discussion remain aware of the original corpus while revising it to convey a new message. Thus, such discussion resembles negotiation processes in traditional polity (Gal et al., 2016: 1701), serving as tools to constitute new norms, identities and values (ibid.: 1700). That is the essence

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of 'popular culture as constitutive' (Nexon and Neumann, 2006: 14).

Plevriti (2014: 39) devotes particular attention to emotion, which is overlooked in the reason-dominant government, but plays an important role in popular culture, including memes. Memes may shed light on the attitudes of oppressed groups, rather than objectifying them as is often done in the government, providing a gateway to identity politics for political scientists. Gal, Shifman and Kampf utilize the example of memes in the LGBTQ community. Such internet narratives, or 'alternative public spheres' (2016: 1700) they claim, are crucial for minorities like the LGBTQ, as they crystallize identities of groups whose members are unlikely to engage with each other in traditional political forums and may otherwise be alienated. This is especially true in societies where hegemonic discourse disregards LGBTQ identities. Shifting focus from nation to identity, such a mobilization of political discourse online complements a growing focus in political science on identity politics and collective identities. The humoristic context amplifies memes' usefulness in political research: it 'reveal[s] deep insights into identity politics' by allowing people to express more freely how they define themselves and their experiences in traditional political discourse (Tay, 2012: 28).

On the other hand, the satire in memes provides a legitimized framework for further oppression of other groups in disguise of 'joking' (Gal et al., 2016: 1701). Furthermore, Jeffries (2018: 56) denotes that such online discourse has been especially popular for white supremacists and the 'alt-right', for example with the character of Pepe the Frog (Segal, 2016). More broadly, memes may stratify different populations due to their online nature, which is inaccessible to those without digital literacy like the elderly (Gal et al., 2016: 1707), 'immigrants and the severely impoverished' (Haynes, 2016: 45). This homogenizes the online community and limits the research opportunities for the political scholar. It makes the internet less accessible to the study of identity politics, or the study of the views of supposedly marginalized groups, by 'hiding minority perspectives' (Jenkins, 2009: 124, cited in Milner, 2012: 56). Returning to the instance of Pepe the Frog, the meme's popularity stemmed from its insubstantial nature, where virtually any revision could be made to it (Segal, 2016). Memes may thus lose their original value over time and may cease to directly represent the voice of the people, while their messages may cease to act as means to express ideas and communities (Milner, 2012: 58). Therefore, the political scientist must examine the meme in relation to its original meaning, to its creators, and to its cultural context. Ultimately, memes are anecdotal narratives and must not be treated as empirical evidence or direct representation of peoples.

Popular culture may, by extension, provide a framework for the construction of critical theory. Art and literature are concrete tools of expressing reified 'resistance to the dominant modes of representing the world' (Shapiro, 2009: 5, cited in Dorzweiler, 2016: 152), their state-centrism and masculinism (Bleiker, 2001: 510). An example of this is postcolonialism, in which 'many of the theories around representation [...] have emerged from a focus on novels and other literary texts' (Shome, 2016: 259). By focusing on the emancipation of the marginalized, literature bridges the chasm between the personal and the political, just like critical theory does. Popular culture can therefore contribute to political knowledge not only by revealing the attitudes of the marginalized, but also by serving as a means of protest against hegemonic attitudes and assisting the development of critical theory.

However, such an equation between literature and political critical theory is overly romantic to Marxists and elite-theorists. While there is a traditional division between popular culture and high culture (Beik, 1980: 98), Francesco Alberoni (1972) described that popular cultural 'stars' are increasingly involved in formal politics and are crystallizing as the modern societal elite (cited in Barron, 2015: 68). The argument of popular culture allowing the incorporation of the public sphere into political discussion and vocalizing them to the political researcher is now challenged. Instead, music, film and art serve as a capitalist distraction from socioeconomic inequalities, and to a greater extent enslave the masses (Adorno, cited in Hulatt, 2018). For example, Beyoncé's commercially-successful song, 'Girls Run the World', is often regarded as a feminist anthem calling for female empowerment. But as Lazarus-Frankel (2011) pessimistically claims, the goal of those stars who construct culture is ultimately commercial. Beyoncé's emancipatory anthem does not reflect the reality of a persisting gender wage gap, sexual violence and lack of female representation in government (Lazarus-Frankel, 2011). Two main points emerge. Firstly, political scientists should be cautious in using popular culture because it may represent the elite, rather than the reality of marginalized communities. Furthermore, the purpose of popular culture may be different than it seems in first glance. It is overly pessimistic to assume purely capitalist goals, as celebrities have often used their influence to advance social goals, for example Leonardo DiCaprio's environmental activism. Overall, however, it appears that popular culture, while

Between Pepe and Beyoncé: The Role of Popular Culture in Political Research

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complementing traditional political analysis, should be analyzed in context of its purpose prudently. It is only then that the political scholar can evaluate how a given example of popular culture has influenced political discourse or revealed new attitudes.

Popular Culture: Analogous and Reality-Shaping

The issue of representation of reality in popular culture has now been questioned in the context of celebrity culture. However, it also typifies one of Nexon and Neumann's (2006: 12) four approaches, which they name 'popular culture as mirror'. The essence of this perspective is that processes and discussions in popular culture serve as an analogy of political concepts. Even more importantly, popular culture, especially fictional works, exaggerates social-reality, providing a framework that transcends the empirical realm (Suvin 1979: 9, cited in Stump, 2013: 295). It uses 'ontological displacement' (Nexon and Neumann, 2006: 12) to call upon students of politics to reflect more objectively on assumptions and to understand a socially-constructed reality. Nexon and Neumann's (2006) work can be applied to the study of sports as a popular culture second-order representation of reality. Nevertheless, sports are rarely studied in 'flagship' political journals (Gift and Miner, 2017: 129), due to paucity of quantitative data (ibid.: 137).

It is not surprising that sports is often seen as an analogy of political phenomena, and a famous dictum has it that 'sports is human life in microcosm' (Bloom, 2010: 30, cited in Gift and Miner, 2017: 153). The complexity of their structure, comprising of agents, institutions and structures, allows for comparison with social-reality. Their structure allows political scholars to adopt such analogies regardless of their ontological approach, to reflect on social-reality. For instance, sports have been said to represent issues of freedom of speech (Gift and Miner, 2017: 140), voting behavior (Balnaves, 2016), 'social capital, political empowerment, and corruption' (Gift and Miner, 2017: 130) which all reflect an agent-based ontology. Equally, they are seen as analogous to structure-based phenomena, with Noam Chomsky claiming they reflect American aggressive foreign policy and hyper-nationalism (Chomsky and Barsamian, 1994: 269, cited in Gift and Miner, 2017: 144) and how they interact with war (Jenkins, 2013: 255). A similar ontological displacement takes place in political analysis of religion, and Hoffman (1992: 49, cited in Williams, 2014: VI) points to the similarity between religion and sport rituals. Issues like voting behavior, or religion, in particular, are considered sensitive, and examining them through the lens of popular culture makes them more accessible to political scientists. They can qualitatively explore phenomena in sports as a second-order representation, and then deduce from their findings and bring them back to the realm of social-reality political research.

However, there are limitations to this kind of methodology or approach to popular culture. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes (1955) provides a critique of metaphors, reducing them to 'ignes fatui' which should not constitute the basis for reasoning in the real realm (29-30, cited in Miller, 1979: 155). It is, in fact, dangerous to assign 'attributes of analogy for the attributes of reality' (Nisbet 1969: 6-7, cited in Rosenthal, 1982: 292), but inevitably modern social science methodology is dependent upon analogies and metaphors (Miller, 1979: 155). The political scientist, in discussing political issues, is likely to resort to comparisons and analogies to simplify complex political issues. For example, amalgamating sports-betting and voting behavior, an analogy that has been made before, carries the assumption that voting is ultimately a material, self-interested decision. While seemingly sensible, this reflects an overly-simplified view of rational choice, thereby disregarding the role of ideas, structures or the growing importance of valence issues in voting. Relying on analogies of popular culture can reveal insights into social-reality, but also distort it. Yet, they do have a place in political science due to their pragmatic value and their ease of accessibility.

Adopting a poststructuralist perspective, one could even suggest that we derive much of our knowledge or imagined reality, which is rooted in generalizations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, cited in Nexon and Neumann, 2006: 6), from second-hand representations of reality presented in popular culture. Therefore, this distinction between first-order and second-order representation may be partially dismissed, as popular culture provides a framework to directly analyze reality. With such a view, a science-fiction movie is as important and representative as exit polls or a speech by a state's president. Rather than treating popular culture as a secondary source of knowledge about reality, the political scientist may pay attention to its role in creating reality. Sports, for example, may potentially influence 'political alliances, governmental decision-making, [...] stability' (Gift and Miner, 2017: 131), and create or limit conflicts (Zirin, 2013, cited in Gift and Miner, 2017: 133). The 1988 Seoul Olympics can even be cited as one of the

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causes of the democratization that led to the downfall of Chun Doo Hwan's regime (Gift and Miner, 2017: 145). Popular culture 'constructs the world in which we act' (Edelman, 1995: 2-3, cited in Dorzweiler, 2016: 152) and shapes social-reality—which is the subject of political scientists' study. Popular culture necessarily contributes to political knowledge, then, because of its ability to influence states and actors. Political scholars must confront popular culture even in their analysis of the political arena, exemplifying Nexon and Neumann's (2006) approach 'Politics and Popular Culture' (2006: 11).

Popular Culture's Reception and Hegemonic Attitudes

Heretofore the focus has been on producers of popular culture—participants in memetic discourse, sports teams, or Beyoncé. But a final possible function of popular culture in the study of politics is rooted in the perspective of the audience. Nexon and Neumann (2006: 13) call this 'popular culture as Data'. Reception to works of popular culture may enlighten the political scholars of predominant attitudes of a certain society or groups within it. Towns and Rumelili (2006) describe how *Harry Potter*, distributed internationally, can serve as a tool for comparative analysis in the context of its reception by the public in Sweden and Turkey. However, they use newspaper reviews, so their argument is limited by the cultural elitism of journalists authoring these reviews. Swedish criticism of the conservatism and commercialism rampant in the elitist Hogwarts highlights the prominence of economic egalitarianism and sexual progressivism in Sweden. Similarly, reception in Turkey seemed to be identifying with and simultaneously critical of the practices of the West as they are presented in the franchise. This depicts the Turkish identity struggle and 'Us and Them' mentality in relation to the West (Towns and Rumelili, 2006: 64). So, the reception of products of popular culture in a society may in fact reveal more about the societal attitudes than the producer, especially for products that are adapted in different cultures. A focus on the audience can teach the political researcher about the public sphere without the ambiguity of the motive or purpose of the producer.

Nonetheless, in adopting this endogenous methodology one must not lose sight of the producer. For example, Nazi propaganda films—undoubtedly popular at the time of their release—reflected chiefly the values of the regime and were screened to its supporters while marginalized groups were violently oppressed. Such films are useful in the historical analysis of Nazi ideology, but not of the public's attitudes; and eventually, popular culture appeals to the masses. Cultural context, as well as a balanced judgement of production and reception, is necessary in the incorporation of a popular culture framework into the study of politics.

Conclusion

Popular culture can allow the political researcher to examine reality from multiple perspectives; that of the domestic life within the reality the scholar is exploring, and also an objective view on this reality if it is treated as mirror. It can contribute to critical theory, identity politics, and equally comparative politics, only if one remains aware of both its producer and receiver, of its original purpose, cultural context, and limitations to its depiction of reality. A conclusion to this essay would require a synthesis of the various roles popular culture may play in political academic research. This, to an extent, would also require a homogenized approach to political science. However, the postcolonial thinker who constructs critical theory cannot be fairly compared to the scholar of comparative politics who compares attitudes through film. This implies that popular culture should be seen as a metamorphic, pragmatic framework to draw upon to complement arguments across the field of politics. It is a useful tool, but not a distinct approach to political science.

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Between Pepe and Beyoncé: The Role of Popular Culture in Political Research

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Between Pepe and Beyoncé: The Role of Popular Culture in Political Research

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