

# Popular Culture Matters: Defining 'Politics' in Popular Culture & World Politics

Written by William Clapton

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WILLIAM CLAPTON, JUL 26 2018

'Trivial'. This is the word that I most frequently encounter when I engage with colleagues who are skeptical about the analysis of popular culture in IR and what such analyses may yield. A recent Twitter exchange between skeptics and supporters of the study of popular culture in IR produced some interesting claims. One person commented that the study of popular culture was 'off-putting' and akin to an 'infantilisation' of the discipline. Another suggested that those conducting research on popular culture and global politics ought to 'do hobbies in their own time'. One person even questioned why they should bother travelling around the world to undertake fieldwork if they could just sit at home and watch a movie.

None of this is necessarily new to the student of popular culture and world politics (PCWP). We are constantly arguing for the relevance and significance of the cultural within the realm of world politics. We are constantly combating what at times seem to be unfair and uncharitable claims and accusations that our research isn't 'serious' or 'real work', that we are indulging our hobbies in our professional lives when they should be strictly confined to our personal lives. We are engaged in constant battles over disciplinary boundaries and the hierarchies and regimes of value (to borrow a phrase from Ciuta) that govern knowledge production in the discipline - what counts as good/relevant/legitimate knowledge, who can find it, and where it can be found.

Much creativity and energy has been expended in advancing the claim that popular culture *matters* to world politics. Those involved in exploring PCWP have repeatedly demonstrated that popular culture matters to the things that we traditionally take as core objects of study in the discipline, such as violence and political economy. Popular culture has been conceived as a constellation of sites of representation and representational practice through which identities are constituted, meaning is constructed, power is produced and exercised, and where world politics, what we can know about it, and how we can know it, are constituted. In this way, popular culture is imbricated in both the 'real-world' practices of world politics and their disciplinary study.

Yet in advancing these claims there has been a considerable focus on a narrow range of issues, actors, and things of which world politics is ostensibly comprised. As Grayson notes, 'IR operates with a very constricted notion of what politics is and where it takes place'. The PCWP literature has certainly challenged the restrictive nature of the latter, the sites of legitimate inquiry where one can purposefully glean relevant information and knowledge about world politics and IR. However, comparatively little has been done to challenge the former, the constricted understandings of what world politics actually is and who it involves.

Much of the contemporary PCWP literature simultaneously challenges IR's regimes of value while also reinforcing them, at least in part. The 'Politics' in PCWP remains limited and narrowly understood, even as the sites at which it is located expand. Recent work has acknowledged these limitations. For example, Kirby and Ciuta have both argued that the current work on popular culture tends to be focused on, and related to, a narrow range of issues and objects that are taken to be part of the 'serious business' of the discipline. I myself have certainly done this, seeking to defend the the study of popular culture in IR by relating it directly to the real-world things that IR takes as its primary areas of study, IR theories and concepts, knowledge production, and pedagogy.

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To be clear, this is a useful and legitimate exercise that has produced some wonderful work. My claim here is only that we haven't yet realized the full potential of the study of PCWP. As I began to think about the ways in which we might do so, how we could forget not only IR theory, but IR and its orthodoxies (thanks to Laura Shepherd for this phrase), it occurred to me that one possible pathway lay in the 'other P' in PCWP. This is the popular, or how I came to believe that we should focus more on audiences. This is primarily an issue of methodology. Methodological approaches in the PCWP literature have tended to focus predominantly on artefacts (for example, Nexon and Neumann's famous typology of approaches to understanding PCWP). Alongside these, we should explore different methodological approaches that allow for a greater focus on audiences and the ways in which they interpret and contest representations in popular cultural artefacts.

Carpenter and Milkoreit advance similar claims regarding the importance of audiences. Both have drawn attention to the relative lack of focus on audiences that they argue characterizes much of the existing PCWP literature. For both, exploring how audiences use popular culture as a tool for political mobilization or to build or undermine support for particular initiatives or events is critical to understanding more fully how popular culture affects real-world politics. This is important, but it is still limited. It continues to conceptualize popular culture as distinct from the sorts of politics that IR seeks to explore and understand, a tool for affecting and shaping world politics, but as something which ultimately sits beyond it. It reinforces the distinction between first and second order representations, between what Kiersey and Neumann term 'in show' and 'in world international relations'.

The point here is that we ought to collapse such distinctions, to conceive of popular culture not as something that reflects, intersects, or affects narrowly defined understandings of (international) politics, but rather as something that is an integral aspect of a much broader array of political contests and engagements that to date have remained largely uncaptured.

By more fully capturing the everyday politics of audiences' engagements with popular culture, we can begin to identify the sorts of ways in which ordinary people perceive, understand, and most importantly *contest* popular cultural artefacts. This can help those interested in PCWP to more fully understand popular culture's constitutive effects. The constitutive impacts of popular culture are considerably messier and more contested by audiences than what has been acknowledged. What has received relatively less attention is that popular cultural representations and representational practices do not simply constitute audiences' worldviews, identities and opinions in a linear or straightforward manner.

Rather, audiences exercise considerable agency and bring pre-existing ideas, positions and *politics* to bear on how they engage with a specific artefact and its representations; indeed, whether they will bother to engage with a given artefact in the first place. To truly push PCWP forward, to understand more fully how popular culture matters and why, we need methodological approaches that allow us to focus on everyday people as political actors who do not just form identities, ideas and opinions through their engagements with popular culture; they actively *do* politics through and about popular culture. They contest representations and meanings offered in popular cultural artefacts and they position these artefacts as objects of political contestation and debate.

In concluding this piece, I am reminded of something the Joker said to Batman in *The Dark Knight* during the interrogation scene: 'Don't talk like one of them, you're not. Even if you'd like to be. To them you're just a freak, like me'. Instead of talking the language of disciplinary gatekeepers by relating popular culture to the things that mainstream IR regards as 'relevant' politics, or trying to convince the doubters, the haters, the people who decry our research as 'trivial' and lament its effects on the discipline, we could instead simply forget IR and seek new possibilities, new horizons in world politics through our explorations of popular culture. To do so, we need only look to the everyday politics that is all around us, and yet which is rendered invisible to so much of the discipline.

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**William Clapton** is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at UNSW Sydney. His research interests include risk and hierarchy in international relations; the foreign and defence policies of Australia, India and the United States; and the intersections between popular culture and world politics. He is the author of *Risk and Hierarchy in International Society: Liberal Interventionism in the Post-Cold War Era*, recently published with Palgrave Macmillan, and has published articles on risk and hierarchy in *International Politics*, *International Relations* and *Australian Journal of International Affairs*.