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Everyday life in cultural theory (review article)

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Couldry, Nick (2003) Everyday life in cultural theory (review article). [European journal of communication](#), 18 (2), pp. 265-270.

DOI: [10.1177/0267323103018002006](https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323103018002006)

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Available in LSE Research Online: September 2013

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Michael Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*.
Routledge: London and New York, 2000. 242 + x pp.
ISBN: 0-415-11314-8 (hbk)
ISBN: 0-415-11315-6 (pbk)

Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*
Routledge: London and New York, 2002. 200 + ix pp + 11 illustrations
ISBN: 0-415-22302-4 (hbk)
ISBN: 0-415-22303-2 (pbk)

David Chaney, *Cultural Change and Everyday Life*.
Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2002. 208 + ix pp.
ISBN: 0-333-76143-X (hbk)
ISBN: 0-333-76144-8 (pbk)

‘To speak . . . of “everyday life” . . . is merely to take a shot in the dark . . . a multitude of frameworks may be involved or none at all.’ (Goffman, 1974: 26)

As Erving Goffman’s words remind us, there is something chimerical about ‘everyday life’ as an object of theory and empirical research. The everyday has flitted in and out of the spotlight of media and cultural studies debates in the past three decades, provoking some of its boldest theoretical gestures (for example, the work of Lawrence Grossberg or Janice Radway) and some of its boldest empirical strategies (the work of David Morley or Roger Silverstone), but hardly any consensus. What these three new books confirm, at least, is that there is much life left in this debate, but also that it is hardly media and cultural studies’ exclusive domain: all three draw on a rich literature across social theory, cultural theory and aesthetic theory and practice. If we wanted a starting-point for assessing what is at stake in media and cultural studies today, we could do worse than choose the concept of everyday life.

It is Michael Gardiner’s book that provides the fundamental intellectual coordinates here. Gardiner has long been known as a social theorist with particular expertise on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, and his impressive book is the fruit of long-term study of critical social theory. By some way the richest in terms of philosophical argument, *Critiques of Everyday Life* provides the framework within which Highmore’s and Chaney’s books can be best be situated, even if they refer to Gardiner only in passing (Gardiner’s book will only have been published in the late stages of completing the other two).

Gardiner writes as a social theorist, not an empirical researcher, and the focus of his work is not surprisingly a paradoxical one: ‘the largely taken-for-granted world that remains clandestine, yet constitutes what Lefebvre calls the “common ground” or “common tissue” of all conceivable human thoughts and activities’ (2). The theoretical stakes could hardly be put higher, nor could Gardiner’s investment in the tensions within the Western Marxist tradition be clearer. Gardiner is concerned, not with ‘everyday life’ as a topic for sociological micro-inquiry, but with ‘everyday life’ as a reference-point in critical debates about what is ‘the social’. As he makes clear, this becomes a burning issue only within a counter-tradition that has already left

'administrative' research behind, yet is dissatisfied with how Marx's own analysis of the everyday closed off various critical, even utopian, possibilities.

Gardiner certainly convinces in arguing that this sustained century-long debate is worthy of renewed attention at a time when (although he doesn't develop the point) the utopian dimension of social and political thought has fallen into deep shadow.¹ Provocatively, Gardiner starts not with sociology but with art: an excellent chapter on the theoretical underpinnings of Dada and Surrealism that brings out its complicated relationship to Marxism and also to Durkheim. The following chapters offer subtle, philosophically engaged accounts of Mikhail Bakhtin (especially impressive in drawing on Bakhtin's less known early philosophical work), Henri Lefebvre, Situationism, Agnes Heller, Michel De Certeau and finally the radical feminist Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith. These chapters weave together many key issues of contemporary sociology: the status of leisure and commodification, the possibility (if any) of some sense of social totality, reification and alienation, the role of the aesthetic and the technological in articulating change. Gardiner's deliberate (209 n3) focus on less well-known thinkers and traditions is to be welcomed.

At the same time, for anyone seeking pointers towards empirical research into the 'everyday' his discussion is abstract: for Lefebvre, everyday life is important not for its details but as a site of utopian possibility, for the Situationists, as a site of subversive practice, for Heller as a 'problematic' (131) which challenges totalising theories of consciousness and historical materialism, for De Certeau (the counter-voice within this counter-tradition) as the limit to theorising about the social and the political, and for Smith as the provocation to methodological reflexivity about the patriarchal legacy of social inquiry. Extremely well-nuanced as all the discussion is, missing is an attempt by Gardiner to shape his narrative towards the detailed possibilities of, and priorities for, empirical research. The lack of an argued concluding chapter means that even the wider theoretical potential of Heller's iconoclastic (within a Marxist context) return to Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom for rethinking contemporary morality is left undeveloped.

At this point, we see both the strength of Gardiner's specialised theoretical focus and its limitation, which downplays detailed empirical research in favour of a looser sense of critical praxis engaged in 'the everyday'. As he says, the book's aim is to 'constitute a useful resource for further investigations into the theory and practical transformation of everyday life' (23, added emphasis). But what about empirical research into how the conditions of 'everyday life' might be changing? For that we must look elsewhere, particularly to Chaney's book, which I discuss later.

First, I want to discuss Ben Highmore's very illuminating and well-organised new textbook on theorisations of the everyday. Like Gardiner's, his writing is obviously the product of sustained reflection over many years, something that in an age of academic hyper-production can only be welcomed! Highmore's passion for the subject and why it matters comes through on every page. The discussions are well-signposted and vivid in their detail while also being consistently scholarly and provocative. All researchers, even those already experts in this difficult terrain, will gain from it. In short, it is a model for that little-achieved ideal of text-book writing, engaging students who approach the topic for the first time, while making a significant contribution to academic debate.

Like Gardiner, Highmore makes clear at the outset that it is a counter-tradition of social and cultural thought with which he is concerned, a series of 'practical, poetic and critical operations' that try 'to make the everyday vivid' (16). Bracketing the specific context of Marxist theory, however, Highmore makes a convincing wider case for why this tradition matters: namely, the sheer difficulty for all social agents in modernity of getting a purchase on general processes of change within a social world that is increasingly mechanised, coordinated and spectacularised. His first chapter is one of the best introductions I have read to these topics, because it steps outside sociological abstraction and brings to life modernity as a question of feeling: not just mechanisation, but the problem of boredom, not just rationalisation but the counter-tendency towards mystification.

Chapter Two attempts a general framework for the book and is less successful; unlike the rest of the book, it is overwritten but, more important, its apparent 'fence-sitting' approach to the ultimate relevance of the topic is unsatisfactory. While to claim that the practice of critique may be premature (27) has some pedigree within cultural studies (for example, Ang, 1985), it cuts across the very point of the tradition Highmore describes which is, surely, that critique, far from being premature, is never sufficiently present within most experiences of the everyday. I will return to the consequences of this evasion for Highmore's wider argument later.

The detailed chapters which follow are largely successful with only the short early chapter on Simmel reading like an addition bolted on for completeness. It is clear that Highmore's theoretical passion lies with French theory, and, most strikingly, its overlap with British critical social thought. If Highmore's attempt to read Simmel from the point of view of aesthetics is unsatisfactory, more interesting is his insistence on the concerns of Surrealist thinkers with the problems of social research. Adding much interesting detail onto the landscape introduced a decade earlier by James Clifford (1990), Highmore shows the significance of surrealism as a methodology within critical social thought and a predecessor of the late 20th century crisis in ethnography. By contrast, Highmore finds Benjamin's fertile speculations on commodification and everyday life rather evasive in terms of workable theoretical concepts.

The book's most striking chapter and its longest is its discussion of the Mass-Observation research of the 1930s. Without in any way minimising its contradictions and its own evasions, Highmore brings out very well Mass-Observation's serious attempt to generate new facts about one complex modern society undergoing social turmoil: 1930s Britain. He explores the tensions between poetical and empirical approaches between its main advocates, Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge, and rightly rejects crude stereotypes of Mass-Observation as elitist, showing that on the contrary this was a courageous tradition of social research and critical cultural practice that tried to address the need for new spaces of expression for those previously excluded from public discourse by reason of class or gender.

The last two substantive chapters (on Lefebvre and De Certeau), however, revive the ambiguity mentioned earlier in Highmore's own relationship to his topic. Writing within cultural studies rather than sociology, he seems unwilling to give precedence to approaches to the everyday that take their ultimate reference point in a scientific

model of empirical research. So, while his admiring and highly informative chapter on Lefebvre ends with an apparent endorsement of Lefebvre's insistence that everyday life is where we should look, as sociologists, for possibilities of resistance to wider social structures, the following chapter throws more weight behind De Certeau's scepticism about any totalising account of the everyday, including those which claim to be politically emancipatory. Instead, Highmore suggests that De Certeau's self-consciously 'poetic' style is more suited to the fleeting nature of the everyday than Lefebvre's, a clear difference from Gardiner's argument. The problem, however, is that Highmore's argument at this point lacks detailed examples, which undermines in turn his concluding claim that the critical tradition he explores can be a starting-point for 'reimagining cultural studies' (178): how exactly this reimagining is to work, with what specific priorities, and with what methodological tools remains unclear.

It is precisely this unanswered question, about the potential for a sustained and empirically rigorous account of historical changes in the everyday, that David Chaney's book *Cultural Change and Everyday Life* promises to address. Chaney has been almost unique among British cultural sociologists for his sustained attention to media's centrality to the construction of social life in modernity: from his early work on mediations of royal ritual, to his 1990s work on shopping malls, media fictions and the media's impacts on everyday self-performance, Chaney has developed a strikingly original agenda. He is, at first sight, well-placed to provide much-needed empirical content to the debates about everyday life illuminated more theoretically by Gardiner and Highmore.

Cultural Change and Everyday Life begins with a striking and original empirical questions: how is the 'fabric of control and order' in contemporary societies changing (vii), particularly societies where the very notion of 'everyday life' is increasingly constructed through 'the development and elaboration of a culture of mass entertainment' (1)? While operating within a broadly social constructionist framework, Chaney's position is original in at least two respects: first, in his insistence not on social construction at the level of general ideas but at the level of lived, embodied cultural performance and, second, in his insistence (far too rare for social theorists) on the centrality of media frameworks for circulating new models of cultural performance. A difference, however, with his earlier work is that Chaney confronts the contemporary fragmentation of the media landscape: the diffusion of media's cultural influences into more individualised distribution streams alongside the shift throughout most of the 20th century towards more informal models of political and social performance. The result of these twin processes of 'radical democratisation' and 'cultural fragmentation' (5), he argues, is that the construction - 'everyday life' - has become increasingly central to wider cultural and social discourse. So far, his argument offers a chance to address why everyday life might be of renewed sociological significance at the start of a new century.

Chaney, however, pushes forward his argument in a very different way from Gardiner and Highmore. For Chaney it is not the critical potential of the term 'everyday life' that matters (that is, its role in disrupting established theoretical positions and social orthodoxies) but rather its role as a marker of wider social contests. Everyday life is, as it were, the blank sheet, on which countless other tensions and social conflicts are projected, rather than having a critical potential of its own; so there is no problem for Chaney in defining everyday life – blandly - as 'that part of our daily activities that is

so widely shared that it becomes unremarkable' (34, my emphasis). It is not that he neglects the politics of knowledge underlying the construction of such an apparently unproblematic object (indeed he brings out well his differences from, for example, ethnomethodological and symbolic interactionist perspectives on the everyday which give too simple a priority to the supposed immediacies of everyday interaction), but rather that for Chaney the possibility has receded of some transcendent critical perspective emerging through rival theoretical constructions of the everyday. So, while Chaney discusses much of the same theoretical terrain as the other two books, it is from a very different direction.

The question, however, is whether the possible gains (for empirical analysis of everyday realities) outweigh the costs of bracketing this critical tradition that has hovered above these realities. It is here that I have considerable doubts. Rather than focus on the gaps in Chaney's theoretical armoury (Bourdieu and Foucault, for example, have only a vestigial presence in his argument), or even its striking additions, such as the concept of 'ecology' which Chaney introduces on page 53, I want to concentrate on the sections of the book which close in more directly on empirical research, for example the interesting chapters on fashion and performance (Chapter Five), changing forms of authority in public life (Chapter Six) and 'the extraordinary' (Chapter Eight). While the question to which Chaney attends – how might media forms over time be changing what counts as everyday life and how people perform for themselves and others within it? – is fundamental and neglected, I am not convinced that Chaney takes much beyond that starting-point.

These chapters raise a number of problems. First, while it is fine to develop an argument, as Chaney does, through a secondary discussion of other empirical research, it is a problem when the speed of discussion becomes detached from all but the most general features of topics discussed. So Chapter 5 moves, apparently without friction, from consumption in general to fashion to food to sport to bodily training to health and experiences of risk to the 'informalisation' of contemporary culture. Whatever apparent plausibility Chaney's account has comes at the price of leaving behind some concrete questions: what exactly is it that binds together these superficially diverse topics? If it is a concept as vague as 'informalisation', how can we apply this in a way that is not redundantly true of every contemporary society (and therefore substantively informative about none)? And, most important, where is the scope for alternative empirical accounts here: can we assume away in advance the possibility that, as some things become more informal, others are more intensely formalised? The latter might be an obvious challenge to a focussed empirical account but remains unexplored in the general sweep of Chaney's review.

Second, while Chaney is surely right to raise, particularly in Chapter Six, questions about the changing nature of authority in mass mediated culture, he does little to give substance or depth to his argument: this is not only because he says very little about the specific dynamics of media institutions and media products themselves (political economy debates hardly get a look in here, although Chaney is no doubt well aware of them) but also because, when he comes to a topic that cries out for some attention to questions of power – celebrity – he largely repeats conventional arguments that celebrities offer 'spaces' within which more complex and differentiated personal narratives can develop. The same weakness occurs when Chaney – again interestingly – raises the question of how the 'extraordinary' is now being reworked alongside the

ordinary in contemporary media cultures. Having raised this point, Chaney's own account of mediated versions of the extraordinary has little concrete to say (nothing for example about fan practices and their power dynamics) and soon moves onto the distant topic of drug use.

Third, and finally, there is no sense in Chaney's account that narrative and everyday life might be a source of tension and difficulty in contemporary life: no sense that people's ability to tell effective narratives of their everyday lives at work, for example, might be under threat (but see Sennett, 1999); no sense of the contradictions within people's uses of commercial culture for self-performance ((but see Skeggs, 1997; Young, 1999). The great debate in 20th century social and cultural thought about the status of everyday life here ends, I regret to say, with a whimper. It is because they insist otherwise, that, for this reader at least, Highmore's, and especially Gardiner's, books are of lasting importance, not least as a provocation to new and critical empirical work on the everyday conditions under which experience and power are being produced and reproduced.

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¹ For an important recent discussion, see Giroux (2001).