

Book Review: From Popular Culture to Everyday Life by John Storey

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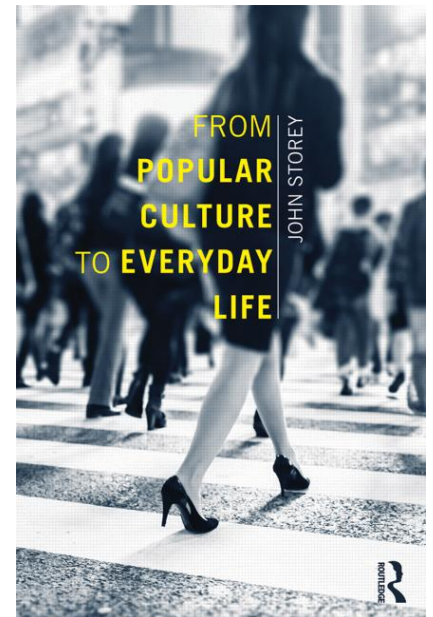
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*This book aims to present a critical exploration of the development of everyday life as an object of study in cultural analysis, wherein John Storey addresses the way in which everyday life is beginning to replace popular culture as a primary concept in cultural studies. As a critical history of multiple strands of thinking, **From Popular Culture to Everyday Life** succeeds brilliantly in signposting readers to the major thinkers associated with different aspects of 'everyday life', writes **William Allen**.*

From Popular Culture to Everyday Life. John Storey. Routledge. April 2014.

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Across the social sciences, the term 'everyday' seems to feature more prominently in research. But what does it actually signal? Does the concept of everydayness denote something meaningful for study, or is it a vacuous placeholder? [John Storey](#), in his new book *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life*, seeks to convince readers that 'everyday life' is indeed a social and cultural concept worthy of study—but one that simultaneously carries multiple histories and theoretical approaches. As an established author in the field of cultural studies, Storey locates his critical history of everyday life alongside the concept of 'popular culture' to argue that, as he sees the 'everyday' replacing 'popularity' in cultural studies, scholars need 'a coherent understanding of what we mean when we use the term' (Preface). In this regard, *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life* succeeds as a breath-taking whistlestop tour of major thinkers' varied contributions to conceptualising 'everyday life'.



His tour begins by demonstrating how understanding of the term 'popular culture' has undergone several shifts. Chapter One traces the roots of 'popular' all the way to 15th century English law where it referred to actions which anyone could do. Then, in the 17th century this sense had evolved to indicate anything widely accepted or observed. Two hundred years later, as Storey documents, 'popular' was used to designate art, music, or other entertainment aimed at masses of 'ordinary' people. These kinds of understandings, which also mapped onto studies of 'folk culture' and 'folklore', began carrying negative connotations of dilution, simplification, or lowliness. Theoretically, there have been varied approaches to studying the significance of popular culture. Storey observes that American cultural studies tended to see the concept as socially constructed—contingent on who is producing and consuming it—for the purpose of maintaining social difference. Meanwhile, British academics used Gramsci's concept of hegemony to examine popular culture as a site of contestation or resistance among dominant and subordinate groups. The point of reviewing this term in such depth is to impress upon readers the fact that 'how we conceptualise popular culture enables and constrains how we study it' (p. 13).

It is this definitional point that informs Storey's choice of structure for the rest of the book: if our choices about the contents of popular culture—and by association, everyday life—influence how we go about studying it, then anyone wanting to use this concept should be able to clearly express the relative merits of different approaches. Therefore, to make good on his opening promise, in the subsequent eight chapters he details no less than 18 thinkers or theoretical stances which have contributed in varying degrees to contemporary understanding of 'everyday life'.

Some of these approaches emphasise the role that labour and profit figure in everyday activities. A Marxist account (Chapter Two), for example, stresses the ways in which capital defines how people relate to one another. An

analysis of everyday life from this perspective might examine how workers are alienated from holders of capital who, by exploiting profit, sell more goods back to workers themselves without ever labouring themselves. Indeed, focusing on conspicuous consumption patterns (Chapter Seven), as the sociologist Thorstein Veblen did in 1899, also reveals that people publicly communicate their aspirations, status, and ideals through what they choose to buy.



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Other chapters argue that human practice within context of structures like capitalism is also an important dimension of the everyday. Sociology provides a rich set of explanations for how people go about making sense of, as well as interacting with, their world (Chapter Six). Whether derived from interpreting shared meanings (symbolic interactionism), making taken-for-granted norms and assumptions visible (ethnomethodology), or examining the conduits through which people share information (actor-network theory), understanding the everyday necessarily involves appreciating the interplay between social structures and individual agency.

One such structure, as Storey documents in Chapter Eight, centres on media as components of how people actually create as well as communicate about different aspects of their lives. Drawing upon interviews with fourteen people aged 19-36 about to what extent they use media to cultivate romantic relationships, Storey observes that technology changes perceptions about what counts as romantic love in the first place. But, as Storey documents in his chapter about phenomenological sociology in Chapter Five, some theorists argue that these practical norms—whether about romance or appropriate conversation topics or what to buy—are actually made real through human activity. To truly understand everyday life, according to this perspective, requires appreciating how people are habituated into thinking their unique situation is actually ‘normal’ and ‘mundane’.

After documenting all of these perspectives, Storey sets to the task in Chapter Ten of outlining precisely what everyday life means for cultural studies. On the one hand, people make and communicate meaning through their agency. ‘Everyday’ in this context might draw attention to documenting precisely how, where, and why these meanings circulate. On the other hand, people inherit previous sets of definitions, norms, or ways of thinking which influence the range of options available to them in the first place: ‘everyday’ in this sense brings historical and social qualities. Meanwhile, all of this is happening in a geographic context: activities happen in places and spaces. Storey synthesises these observations by arguing that ‘everyday life...is like a language that enables and constrains human practice, but like any language without human practice it would quickly die’ (p. 136).

As a critical history of multiple strands of thinking, *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life* succeeds brilliantly in signposting readers to the major thinkers associated with different aspects of ‘everyday life’. But its conceptual contribution beyond a key reference text is unclear, particularly when it concludes that ‘the best we can say [about everyday life] is that it is...an empty category that can be filled in different ways, producing different meanings with different effects of power’ (p. 122). Although the sheer breadth of its material may be initially overwhelming, this

book's strength lies in its comprehensiveness.

William Allen is a Research Officer with the Migration Observatory and the Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society at the University of Oxford. He conducts two streams of research: one focusing on how British media portrayals of migrant groups impact policies and public attitudes towards immigration; and the other examining how data and evidence-based social research are publicly discussed as well as visually communicated. He is currently working on the AHRC-funded project 'Seeing Data: Are Good Big Data Visualisations Possible?'. Follow his work [@williamallen](#). [Read more reviews by William](#).

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