Chapter 1: What Cultural Studies Studies

Culture is one of those words that seems familiar until we try to define it carefully. We use it in many ways. Someone may speak of “Indonesian culture,” “youth culture,” “workplace culture,” “pop culture,” “high culture,” “digital culture,” or “a culture of silence.” These phrases do not all mean the same thing. Sometimes culture means art and literature. Sometimes it means customs and traditions. Sometimes it means habits, values, identities, and ways of behaving. Sometimes it means the shared meanings that make a group feel like a group.

Cultural studies begins by taking this complexity seriously. It does not reduce culture to museums, books, films, songs, rituals, or social media posts, although it studies all of these. It asks a deeper question: how do people make meaning together, and how are those meanings connected to power?

This chapter introduces the central object of cultural studies. We will define culture in three connected ways:

1. Culture as lived meaning: the meanings through which people understand everyday life.
2. Culture as symbolic practice: the signs, images, words, gestures, rituals, and objects through which meaning is made.
3. Culture as contested power: the struggle over which meanings become dominant, normal, respectable, dangerous, or possible.

These three ideas will guide the whole book.

Culture Is Not Only “High Culture”

A common older use of the word culture refers to “high culture”: literature, classical music, fine art, philosophy, theater, and other forms associated with formal education and elite institutions. In this view, a person is “cultured” if they know opera, poetry, painting, and refined manners.

Cultural studies does not reject the study of art, literature, or philosophy. But it refuses to treat them as the only serious forms of culture. It asks why some cultural forms are called “high,” while others are called “popular,” “low,” “mass,” “folk,” “primitive,” or “ordinary.” These labels are not innocent. They often reflect class, colonial, racial, gendered, and institutional hierarchies.

Raymond Williams, one of the major figures behind the development of cultural studies, argued that culture should not be limited to elite art. He described culture as a whole way of life, including ordinary practices, shared meanings, institutions, and forms of expression (Williams, 1976; Williams, 1989). This shift is crucial. It means that a wedding ceremony, a football chant, a street market, a school uniform, a viral video, a religious procession, a protest song, and a family meal can all be studied as culture.

Consider a simple example: a school uniform.

At first, it looks like clothing. But culturally, it carries meanings. It can symbolize discipline, equality, institutional belonging, respectability, or national identity. At the same time, students may modify it: rolling sleeves, changing shoes, adding accessories, wearing it loosely or strictly. These small changes can communicate personality, resistance, class position, gender expression, or peer-group membership. The uniform is not just fabric. It is a cultural object inside a field of rules, meanings, and power.

This is how cultural studies thinks. It begins with ordinary things and asks: what meanings are attached to them, who attaches those meanings, and what social effects do they have?

Culture as Lived Meaning

To say that culture is lived meaning means that people do not simply exist in the world like objects. Human beings interpret the world. We give things names. We classify actions as polite or rude, sacred or profane, normal or strange, beautiful or ugly, masculine or feminine, modern or backward, local or foreign.

A sound becomes a national anthem. A color becomes associated with mourning, purity, danger, royalty, political parties, or sports teams. A person’s accent may be heard as educated, rural, foreign, threatening, elegant, funny, or inferior depending on the society and listener. These meanings are not naturally inside the sound, color, or accent. They are produced socially.

This does not mean meanings are fake or unimportant. Social meanings can have very real effects. If an accent is treated as “uneducated,” the speaker may face discrimination in school, employment, or media representation. If a neighborhood is represented as “dangerous,” residents may experience policing, stigma, lower investment, or exclusion. If a body type is represented as “normal” and another as “deviant,” people may experience shame, medical neglect, bullying, or pressure to change themselves.

Culture, then, is not decoration added to “real life.” Culture is part of real life because meaning shapes how people are treated, how institutions act, and how people understand themselves.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously described culture as “webs of significance” that human beings themselves have spun, emphasizing that cultural analysis is interpretive: it studies meaning rather than searching only for mechanical laws of behavior (Geertz, 1973). Cultural studies shares this concern with meaning, but it adds a strong focus on power, inequality, media, institutions, and social struggle.

For example, imagine a public statue in a city square. One group may see it as heritage. Another may see it as a symbol of colonial violence. A government may describe it as national history. Activists may describe it as public glorification of oppression. The statue is physically the same object, but socially it is not one fixed thing. It is a site where meanings are remembered, defended, challenged, and transformed.

That is lived meaning.

Culture as Symbolic Practice

A symbol is something that stands for, suggests, or communicates something beyond itself. A red traffic light symbolizes “stop.” A wedding ring may symbolize commitment. A flag may symbolize a nation. A raised fist may symbolize resistance. A brand logo may symbolize lifestyle, status, quality, or belonging.

A practice is something people do repeatedly within social life: greeting, dressing, eating, speaking, celebrating, mourning, shopping, scrolling, voting, praying, posting, joking, studying, working, protesting.

So, when we say culture is symbolic practice, we mean that people make and share meaning through repeated actions, objects, images, sounds, words, and gestures.

This idea helps us avoid a narrow view of culture as only “beliefs in the mind.” Culture is not only what people think. It is also what people do, wear, watch, build, share, perform, and institutionalize.

For example, think about taking a selfie.

A selfie is not only a photograph. It is a symbolic practice. It may communicate friendship, beauty, confidence, travel, success, humor, grief, activism, or self-branding. The meaning changes depending on context. A selfie at graduation, a selfie at a protest, a selfie in a hospital, and a selfie in front of a luxury hotel do different cultural work. The same technical act—pointing a camera at oneself—can participate in different systems of meaning.

Cultural studies uses the word text in a broad way. A text is any meaningful object, event, or practice that can be interpreted. A novel is a text, but so is a film, advertisement, song, meme, fashion style, building, video game, festival, classroom layout, or news broadcast. Calling something a text does not mean it is made only of words. It means it can be “read” for meaning.

This broad use of text is important because modern power often works through images, narratives, styles, classifications, and repeated media forms. Stuart Hall’s work on representation showed that meaning is not simply reflected by language and images; it is produced through systems of representation that classify and organize the world for us (Hall, 1997).

For example, a news report about migration does not merely “show facts.” It chooses words, images, sources, statistics, emotional tones, and categories. Are migrants described as “workers,” “families,” “refugees,” “illegals,” “invaders,” “victims,” or “neighbors”? Each term positions people differently. Each makes some responses feel reasonable and others unreasonable. Cultural analysis asks how these representational choices create social meaning.

Culture as Contested Power

The word power often makes people think only of government, police, armies, or laws. Those are important forms of power. But cultural studies also studies power in everyday meaning.

Power operates when some meanings become widely accepted as “common sense.” It operates when some identities are respected and others are mocked. It operates when some histories are taught and others are forgotten. It operates when some bodies are treated as normal and others as problems. It operates when some languages are seen as intelligent and others as broken.

To say culture is contested power means that culture is a field of struggle. Different groups compete to define reality. They struggle over names, images, memories, identities, values, pleasures, and futures.

For example, the meaning of the word “family” is culturally contested. Some define family only through heterosexual marriage and biological reproduction. Others include single-parent families, queer families, adoptive families, extended kin, chosen families, and community care networks. This is not just a dictionary debate. The definition affects law, welfare, inheritance, housing, education, religion, media representation, and emotional recognition.

Another example is the meaning of “work.” Paid employment is often treated as the central form of work. But feminist scholars and activists have long argued that unpaid care work—cooking, cleaning, child care, elder care, emotional support—is also labor, even when it is not counted in wages or national economic statistics. Cultural meaning matters here because if care is imagined as “natural love” rather than labor, the people who do it, often women, may be undervalued and exploited.

Cultural studies therefore asks not only, “What does this mean?” but also:

Who benefits if it means this? Who is harmed? Who gets to decide? Who is silenced? What alternative meanings are possible?

This is why cultural studies is closely connected to emancipatory thought. It studies culture not only to describe the world, but also to understand how domination is made and how freedom can be imagined.

Production: How Culture Is Made

The first major question of cultural studies is: how is culture produced?

To produce culture means to create cultural forms: films, songs, books, advertisements, rituals, news stories, fashion, slogans, platforms, monuments, festivals, and everyday styles. But cultural production is not only individual creativity. It usually involves institutions, money, technology, labor, laws, audiences, and histories.

A pop song, for example, may seem to come from one singer. But its production may involve songwriters, producers, sound engineers, record labels, streaming platforms, marketing teams, choreographers, stylists, photographers, copyright law, fan communities, and recommendation algorithms. The final song is both an artistic expression and an industrial product.

The same is true for news. A news story is produced through reporters, editors, owners, deadlines, sources, professional routines, political pressures, advertising models, and assumptions about what counts as “newsworthy.” Cultural studies does not assume that media simply tell people what to think. But it does ask how media institutions shape the range of meanings that become visible.

Paul du Gay and his co-authors proposed a useful model called the “circuit of culture,” which studies cultural objects through linked processes of representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (du Gay et al., 1997). The point is that a cultural object is never only one thing. To understand it, we must examine how it is made, how it is represented, how people use it, how it shapes identity, and how it is regulated by rules, markets, or institutions.

Take the smartphone.

It is produced through global supply chains, design teams, software systems, mining, factory labor, branding, patents, and advertising. It is represented as modern, creative, necessary, personal, stylish, or productive. It is consumed through everyday use: messaging, gaming, learning, working, dating, banking, and filming. It shapes identity: people may identify as Android users, iPhone users, gamers, influencers, professionals, or digitally excluded. It is regulated through privacy law, platform rules, app stores, school policies, parental controls, and state surveillance.

A cultural studies approach does not ask only, “What is a smartphone?” It asks, “What social world makes the smartphone meaningful, necessary, desirable, unequal, and powerful?”

Circulation: How Culture Moves

The second major question is: how does culture circulate?

To circulate means to move through social space. Culture moves through families, schools, markets, television, radio, books, religious institutions, workplaces, migration, tourism, social media, music platforms, festivals, and political movements.

Circulation is never neutral. Some cultural forms travel easily because they are backed by money, technology, state power, colonial history, language dominance, or platform visibility. Others remain marginal, local, censored, or misunderstood.

For example, a dance may begin in a specific local community. A video of it may then spread through TikTok, be copied by influencers, used in advertising, performed by celebrities, and detached from its original context. Some people may gain fame and money from it, while the community that created it receives little recognition. Cultural circulation can produce joy, connection, and creativity, but it can also produce appropriation, exploitation, and erasure.

Appropriation means taking a cultural form from a group, often a less powerful group, and using it in a way that removes context, denies credit, or turns it into profit for others. Not every cultural exchange is appropriation. Cultures have always borrowed, mixed, translated, and transformed. The key question is power: who can take, who is credited, who is mocked, who profits, and who loses control over meaning?

Circulation also changes meaning. A political slogan used in a street protest may carry urgency and danger. The same slogan printed on a T-shirt by a fashion brand may become a style. A religious symbol worn in worship may mean devotion. The same symbol used in a music video may mean identity, rebellion, exoticism, or controversy depending on context.

Cultural studies follows these movements carefully. It asks how meanings travel, who controls their movement, and how meanings change when they enter new settings.

Interpretation: How People Make Sense of Culture

The third major question is: how is culture interpreted?

Interpretation means making sense of something. It is the process by which people understand a message, image, practice, or event. Cultural studies rejects the idea that audiences are passive containers into which media simply pour meaning. People interpret actively. They bring their experiences, languages, class positions, religious backgrounds, gender identities, political beliefs, memories, pleasures, and frustrations.

Stuart Hall’s influential model of encoding and decoding helps explain this. Encoding is the process by which producers create a message within certain meanings and assumptions. Decoding is the process by which audiences interpret that message. Hall argued that audiences may decode messages in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional ways (Hall, 1980).

A dominant reading accepts the preferred meaning. For example, an advertisement for a luxury car may invite viewers to see the car as a symbol of success, freedom, and achievement. A dominant reading accepts that message.

A negotiated reading partly accepts and partly modifies the message. A viewer may think, “Yes, the car looks beautiful and represents success, but it is too expensive and environmentally harmful.”

An oppositional reading rejects the preferred meaning and interprets the message against its intended frame. A viewer may see the advertisement not as freedom, but as manipulation, class fantasy, debt culture, or ecological irresponsibility.

This model is important because it avoids two mistakes. The first mistake is thinking media completely control audiences. The second mistake is thinking audiences are completely free from social influence. Hall’s model shows that interpretation is active but structured. People can resist meanings, but they do so within unequal social conditions.

For example, a film may represent police as heroic protectors. Some viewers may accept that representation because it matches their experience or hopes. Others may negotiate it: they may value public safety but distrust police abuse. Others may reject it because their communities have experienced racial profiling, state violence, or corruption. The film does not have one automatic effect. Its meanings are interpreted through social life.

Resistance: How Meanings Are Challenged

The fourth major question is: how is culture resisted?

Resistance means actions, interpretations, styles, memories, jokes, art, movements, or practices that challenge dominant meanings and power relations. Resistance can be organized and public, like a protest march. It can also be everyday and subtle, like satire, refusal, parody, code-switching, mutual aid, or preserving a forbidden language.

Cultural resistance does not always overthrow institutions immediately. But it can change what people can imagine, say, desire, and demand. Before a political change becomes possible, cultural meanings often have to shift.

For example, feminist movements challenged the idea that domestic violence was a private family matter. By naming it as a public and political issue, activists changed its cultural meaning. This shift helped create new laws, shelters, research, educational campaigns, and forms of public accountability.

Anti-racist movements challenge the cultural meanings attached to race, nation, crime, beauty, intelligence, and belonging. Queer movements challenge dominant meanings of family, gender, desire, respectability, and normality. Disability justice movements challenge the idea that disability is only an individual medical problem, emphasizing instead how social environments, institutions, and attitudes create exclusion.

Resistance also appears in popular culture. A song can become an anthem. A meme can expose hypocrisy. A film can make hidden histories visible. A hairstyle can become a sign of pride. A language can be reclaimed. A public monument can be contested. A hashtag can gather testimony and build collective recognition.

But cultural studies must be careful. Not every act that looks rebellious is emancipatory. A fashion brand may sell “rebel” style while exploiting workers. A platform may profit from activist content while collecting user data. A celebrity may perform political language without changing harmful practices. Cultural resistance is often contradictory. It may challenge one form of power while reproducing another.

This is why cultural studies studies resistance critically, not romantically.

Transformation: How Culture Changes Social Life

The fifth major question is: how is culture transformed?

Transformation means more than change in style. It means a shift in meanings, practices, institutions, and possibilities. Culture changes when people reinterpret traditions, invent new forms, contest official histories, build alternative media, create new identities, change laws, alter institutions, and imagine different futures.

For example, the meaning of “marriage” has changed in many societies through feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles. It has been contested as a religious sacrament, civil contract, romantic partnership, property relation, patriarchal institution, legal right, and form of recognition. These meanings have shifted through activism, court cases, media representation, family conflict, religious debate, and everyday life.

Another example is language. Words that were once used as insults may be reclaimed by communities. Other words may become unacceptable because people recognize their violent histories. Pronoun practices may change as societies develop new understandings of gender. These changes are not superficial. They affect recognition, dignity, law, education, and self-understanding.

Cultural transformation is rarely smooth. It produces backlash. When dominant meanings are challenged, some groups experience the challenge as loss, threat, or disorder. This is why cultural conflict can become politically intense. Debates over school curricula, monuments, religious symbols, gender identity, migration, or national history are often debates over who has the authority to define reality.

Cultural studies helps us analyze these conflicts without reducing them to "mere opinions." It shows that struggles over meaning are also struggles over resources, rights, memory, belonging, and life chances.

Culture Is Material, Not Merely Mental

A frequent misunderstanding is that culture is only about ideas, while economics and politics are about "real" material conditions. Cultural studies rejects this separation.

Culture is not merely mental because meanings are built into material arrangements. A border is a physical and legal structure, but it is also cultural: it depends on meanings of nation, citizenship, legality, race, danger, and belonging. A workplace is economic, but it is also cultural: it contains meanings of professionalism, discipline, gender, productivity, respect, and hierarchy. A shopping mall is commercial, but it is also cultural: it organizes desire, leisure, class distinction, security, youth behavior, and public space.

This does not mean culture explains everything by itself. Cultural studies does not need to deny economics, law, technology, or state violence. Instead, it asks how these forces become meaningful and how meanings help organize them.

For example, capitalism is not only a system of production, wages, markets, and profit. It also requires cultural meanings: ideas of success, consumption, competition, individual responsibility, luxury, poverty, aspiration, and failure. A person may be economically exploited and still culturally encouraged to interpret exhaustion as ambition, debt as lifestyle, or insecurity as personal weakness.

This is one reason cultural studies often works between disciplines. It draws from sociology, anthropology, literary studies, media studies, history, philosophy, political theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, and communication studies. Richard Johnson argued that cultural studies is not defined by one fixed object or method; it is better understood as a field concerned with the relations between cultural forms, social practices, and power (Johnson, 1986/1987).

The "Popular" Matters

Cultural studies gives special attention to popular culture. Popular culture includes widely circulated and widely used cultural forms: music, television, film, sport, fashion, social media, gaming, celebrity, advertising, comics, memes, and everyday entertainment.

Some critics dismiss popular culture as shallow or manipulative. Cultural studies takes a different approach. It asks why popular culture matters so much in people's lives. People do not only receive ideology from popular culture. They also find pleasure, identity, friendship, memory, fantasy, humor, escape, and sometimes resistance.

A football match, for example, can be commercial entertainment. It can also be local belonging, masculine ritual, national identity, working-class memory, corporate spectacle, racial conflict, bodily discipline, and collective joy. A love song can reproduce gender stereotypes, but it can also help people survive heartbreak, imagine intimacy, or express feelings that everyday language cannot carry.

The politics of popular culture is often contradictory. A television series may challenge racism while reproducing sexism. A music genre may express working-class anger while becoming profitable for corporations. A meme may criticize political hypocrisy while spreading harmful stereotypes. Cultural studies does not ask us to choose between "good" and "bad" too quickly. It teaches us to analyze contradiction.

Contradiction is important because cultural forms often do several things at once. They can dominate and liberate, include and exclude, sell and inspire, stereotype and empower. A rigorous cultural studies analysis holds these tensions together.

Culture and Common Sense

One of the most important objects of cultural studies is common sense.

Common sense means ideas that feel obvious, natural, and beyond debate. Statements such as "boys will be boys," "hard work always leads to success," "some people are just not civilized," "beauty is natural," "the market rewards talent," or "politics has nothing to do with entertainment" may appear simple. But cultural studies asks where such ideas come from, whose interests they serve, and what they hide.

Common sense is powerful because it often does not feel like ideology. It feels like reality itself.

For example, if a society treats poverty as the result of laziness, then structural questions about wages, housing, education, racism, disability, land, debt, and labor rights may disappear from public discussion. The cultural meaning of poverty shapes political possibility. If poverty is interpreted as personal failure, welfare may seem undeserved. If poverty is interpreted as structural injustice, collective responsibility becomes more imaginable.

This is why cultural studies is suspicious of the phrase “that’s just the way things are.” Often, what appears natural has a history. What appears obvious has been taught. What appears neutral may protect power.

The task is not to reject all common sense automatically. Some common-sense knowledge comes from lived experience and practical wisdom. The task is to examine it critically: what does this idea make visible, and what does it make invisible?

Culture, Identity, and Belonging

Culture is deeply connected to identity. Identity means how people understand who they are and how they are recognized by others. Identity can involve gender, race, class, nationality, religion, language, sexuality, disability, age, region, profession, subculture, and more.

Identity is not simply chosen by individuals, nor is it simply imposed by society. It is formed through a relationship between self-understanding and social recognition. A person may identify strongly with a language, but that language may be stigmatized by schools. A person may identify with a nation, but the nation may treat them as foreign because of race, religion, or migration history. A person may identify outside binary gender categories, while institutions force them into male/female classifications.

Culture gives people resources for identity: stories, names, images, rituals, ancestors, songs, clothing, memories, heroes, jokes, and symbols. But culture also limits identity by defining what is normal, respectable, shameful, or impossible.

For example, media representation matters not because people simply imitate what they see, but because representation affects the available images of who one can be. If leaders are always represented as male, leadership may become culturally masculine. If beauty is represented through narrow racial or body standards, many people may experience themselves as lacking. If migrants are represented mainly as threats, migrant identity becomes burdened by suspicion.

Identity is therefore both personal and political. Cultural studies asks how identities are produced, how they are lived, how they are represented, and how they are contested.

Culture Is Historical

Culture is not timeless. Every cultural meaning has a history.

A food that is now called “traditional” may have been shaped by colonial trade, migration, religious reform, agricultural change, industrial production, or tourism. A national costume may have been standardized by schools, museums, festivals, or state ceremonies. A language may become “official” not because it is naturally superior, but because of political decisions, education systems, printing, administration, and nation-building.

This historical view protects us from romantic thinking. It is easy to imagine culture as pure inheritance from the past. But cultures are always made, remade, mixed, translated, and fought over. Tradition is not simply repetition. It is selective memory. Societies choose which parts of the past to preserve, celebrate, ignore, or condemn.

For example, a country may celebrate anti-colonial heroes while forgetting minority groups who also resisted colonial power. A family may preserve a ritual but change its language, clothing, music, or gender roles. A religious practice may look ancient but include modern media, microphones, livestreaming, printed manuals, or state regulation.

To study culture historically is to ask: when did this meaning emerge, under what conditions, and how has it changed?

Culture Is Unequal

Because societies are unequal, cultural life is unequal too.

Some groups have more power to represent themselves publicly. They own media companies, write school textbooks, fund museums, control archives, define official language, shape law, and decide what counts as knowledge. Other groups may be represented by outsiders, stereotyped, erased, exoticized, criminalized, or forced to speak in dominant languages.

This does not mean less powerful groups have no culture or no agency. On the contrary, cultural studies pays close attention to creativity under constraint: survival practices, hidden transcripts, oral histories, community media, music, humor, religious life, mutual aid, and alternative education. But it refuses to pretend that all cultural voices have equal reach.

For example, two people may post political opinions online, but one may have institutional backing, verified visibility, professional media access, legal protection, and algorithmic amplification, while the other may face harassment, censorship, job loss, or state surveillance. Both “speak,” but they do not speak under equal conditions.

Cultural studies therefore combines interpretation with social analysis. It asks not only what a text means, but also what conditions allow that meaning to appear, circulate, and matter.

What Makes Cultural Studies Distinctive?

Cultural studies is not the only field that studies culture. Anthropology, sociology, literary studies, history, media studies, communication, art history, and philosophy also study culture. What makes cultural studies distinctive is its combination of several commitments.

First, cultural studies studies ordinary life as seriously as elite culture. It treats popular media, everyday habits, and informal practices as worthy of rigorous analysis.

Second, it connects meaning with power. It does not interpret symbols as if they float above society. It asks how meaning relates to class, race, gender, sexuality, nation, coloniality, disability, religion, age, labor, and institutions.

Third, it is interdisciplinary. It uses whatever tools are needed for the problem: textual analysis, history, ethnography, political economy, discourse analysis, interviews, archival research, visual analysis, and digital methods.

Fourth, it is interested in struggle and transformation. It studies domination, but also resistance, pleasure, creativity, and alternative futures.

Fifth, it is often self-reflexive. Self-reflexive means aware of its own position. Cultural studies asks researchers to consider how their own class, race, nationality, gender, language, education, politics, and institutional location affect what they see and how they interpret.

Lawrence Grossberg emphasizes that cultural studies is best understood not as a fixed theory to apply everywhere, but as a contextual practice: it studies specific relations of culture and power in particular historical situations (Grossberg, 2010). This matters because cultural studies should not become a machine that gives the same answer to every question. It must listen to context.

A First Model for Cultural Analysis

We can now summarize the basic movement of cultural studies analysis.

Imagine you want to study a viral advertisement. A weak analysis might say only, “This advertisement is sexist,” or “This advertisement is funny,” or “This advertisement is popular.” These may be starting impressions, but they are not yet cultural studies analysis.

A stronger analysis asks layered questions.

What meanings does the advertisement produce? How does it represent gender, race, class, age, beauty, work, family, success, or desire? What images, colors, words, music, jokes, and camera angles create those meanings?

Who produced it? What company, industry, labor process, marketing strategy, and economic interest are involved?

How does it circulate? Is it on television, YouTube, TikTok, billboards, or influencer accounts? Who is likely to see it, share it, remix it, or ignore it?

How do audiences interpret it? Do different groups read it differently? Is it accepted, mocked, criticized, defended, parodied, or turned into a meme?

What power relations does it reproduce or challenge? Does it normalize inequality, sell identity, erase labor, appropriate culture, invite desire, or open a space for critique?

What alternatives are possible? How could the same product, issue, or identity be represented differently?

This kind of analysis is careful. It does not jump too quickly from personal opinion to grand conclusion. It gathers evidence, studies context, attends to contradiction, and asks what is at stake.

Cultural Studies and Emancipatory Thought

The learner’s description for this book says: “Study of culture that give spirit of emancipatories.” We can now give that phrase a precise meaning.

Cultural studies can support emancipatory thought because it teaches us to recognize that domination is not maintained only by force. It is also maintained through meanings: who is seen as fully human, whose pain is believed, whose knowledge counts, whose labor is valued, whose history is remembered, whose language is respected, whose future is imaginable.

But cultural studies also teaches that meanings can be changed. People can rename themselves. Communities can preserve memory. Audiences can read against dominant messages. Artists can create new images. Movements can transform shame into pride, silence into testimony, isolation into solidarity, and suffering into political demand.

This does not make culture magical. A song alone does not abolish exploitation. A film alone does not end racism. A hashtag alone does not create justice. But culture helps shape the conditions under which people recognize injustice, form collective identities, imagine alternatives, and act together.

That is why cultural studies matters.

It studies culture not as decoration, but as a terrain of life. It studies meaning not as private opinion, but as social force. It studies power not as something outside culture, but as something that works through culture. And it studies resistance not as fantasy, but as practice—uneven, contested, creative, and necessary.

Chapter Summary

Cultural studies studies the making of meaning in social life. It understands culture as lived meaning, symbolic practice, and contested power. It expands the idea of culture beyond elite art to include everyday life, popular culture, media, identity, institutions, and ordinary practices.

The field asks how culture is produced, circulated, interpreted, resisted, and transformed. It studies how meanings become common sense, how identities are formed, how inequalities are represented, and how people challenge dominant meanings.

Most importantly for this book, cultural studies helps us see that emancipation requires cultural struggle. To transform society, people must also transform the meanings through which society understands itself.

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