Chapter 2: Culture, Society, and Everyday Life

In Chapter 1, we learned to see culture as lived meaning, symbolic practice, and contested power. This chapter brings that idea closer to the ground. We move from the broad question “What is culture?” to the more intimate question “Where does culture happen?”

A first answer is simple: culture happens in everyday life.

Everyday life means the ordinary world of repeated activities: waking up, greeting people, eating, dressing, traveling, studying, working, praying, scrolling, joking, cleaning, shopping, waiting, celebrating, and resting. These activities may look too familiar to study. Because they are repeated so often, they can feel natural, automatic, or “just the way things are.” But cultural studies asks us to slow down. It asks: What meanings are carried by these ordinary practices? Who is included by them? Who is excluded? What forms of power do they reproduce? What possibilities for creativity and resistance do they contain?

Raymond Williams’s statement that “culture is ordinary” remains one of the most important starting points for this way of thinking. Williams did not mean that culture is unimportant. He meant the opposite: culture matters because it is woven into the common practices and meanings of daily life, not only into elite art or formal institutions (Williams, 1958). Henri Lefebvre also made everyday life a serious object of critical study, arguing that modern social life must be examined through the routines, repetitions, spaces, and rhythms in which people actually live (Lefebvre, 1991). Cultural studies inherits this attention to the ordinary and adds a political question: how does everyday culture shape freedom, domination, belonging, and social change?

Everyday Life Is Not “Outside” Society

It is tempting to imagine society as something large and distant: the state, the economy, the law, the education system, the media industry, or the family structure. Everyday life may then seem small and personal. But this separation is misleading.

Society is not only “above” us. It is also reproduced through everyday actions. A school timetable, a workplace dress code, a wedding ceremony, a family meal, a public bus queue, a religious holiday, a national anthem, and a social media trend are all places where society becomes practical. Society is not only written in laws; it is lived in habits.

A habit is a repeated way of acting that becomes familiar and often feels automatic. For example, a student may lower their voice when entering a library without consciously thinking, “I am obeying a cultural rule about silence in this space.” A person may shake hands, bow, kiss cheeks, or avoid physical contact depending on the learned customs of their community. These habits carry meanings about respect, hierarchy, intimacy, gender, religion, class, age, and belonging.

Habits are not simply individual choices. They are learned within families, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, religious communities, media environments, and peer groups. A child learns not only how to eat, but what counts as “proper” eating. They learn not only how to speak, but when to speak, to whom, with what tone, and in which language or accent. In this way, everyday life becomes a training ground for social meanings.

This does not mean people are robots. People can misunderstand, joke, improvise, refuse, adapt, and transform habits. But even resistance usually begins from a world of existing meanings. To break a rule, one must first live in a world where that rule is recognizable.

Practice: Culture as Something People Do

A useful word here is practice. A practice is a meaningful activity that people repeat, learn, and recognize socially. Brushing one’s teeth is an activity. Brushing one’s teeth every morning because cleanliness, health, beauty, and self-discipline are valued in one’s society is a cultural practice. Eating is biological, but eating with chopsticks, hands, forks, spoons, or shared plates is cultural. Clothing protects the body, but clothing also communicates gender, profession, wealth, modesty, rebellion, mourning, celebration, or group membership.

Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life is important because it studies ordinary people not only as passive consumers of systems, but as creative users of them. De Certeau distinguishes between strategies used by institutions and tactics used by ordinary people who must live within spaces they do not fully control (de Certeau, 1984). A strategy belongs to a powerful organization that can plan from a stable position: a government designs a city, a company designs a platform, a school designs rules. A tactic is a smaller act of adaptation or use: pedestrians create shortcuts, students share notes in unofficial ways, users turn a platform feature toward a purpose the company did not expect.

For example, a shopping mall may be designed to encourage consumption: bright displays, controlled temperature, background music, security guards, and attractive signs invite people to buy. That is part of the mall's strategy. But teenagers may use the mall as a place to meet friends without buying much. Elderly people may use it as a safe walking space. Workers may use a quiet corner for rest. These uses do not abolish the commercial structure of the mall, but they show that everyday people interpret and use spaces actively.

This is an important lesson for emancipatory thought. Power shapes daily life, but daily life is also where people make openings, meanings, and solidarities.

Meaning Is Made in Ordinary Objects

Cultural studies pays attention to objects because objects are not only material things. They become meaningful within social life.

Consider a pair of shoes. At the physical level, shoes protect feet. But socially, shoes can mean many things. Expensive shoes may signal class status. School shoes may signal discipline and uniformity. Work boots may signal labor, masculinity, safety, or working-class identity. High heels may be connected to femininity, professionalism, fashion, discomfort, sexuality, or pressure to perform gender in a particular way. Sneakers may be read as sport, youth, street style, celebrity culture, or consumer desire.

The object does not contain one fixed meaning by itself. Meaning depends on context. The same shoes worn in a factory, mosque, wedding, classroom, protest, or fashion show may be interpreted differently. Cultural studies therefore asks not only "What is this object?" but "How is this object made meaningful here, by whom, and with what consequences?"

This also explains why conflicts over objects can become politically intense. A hairstyle, a headscarf, a school uniform, a tattoo, a flag, a monument, or a language choice may become the center of public debate because such objects and signs carry struggles over identity, authority, memory, religion, race, gender, nation, and class.

Taste: Personal Preference and Social Pattern

One of the most ordinary cultural experiences is taste. We say, "I like this music," "I hate that food," "That outfit is stylish," "This film is boring," or "That accent sounds educated." Taste often feels personal, as if it comes only from inside the individual. Cultural studies does not deny personal feeling. Pleasure is real. Dislike is real. But it asks how preferences are socially formed.

Taste means a pattern of preference and judgment: what people find beautiful, ugly, refined, vulgar, exciting, embarrassing, comfortable, or strange. Pierre Bourdieu's study Distinction argued that taste is connected to social class because people learn different cultural preferences through family background, education, economic resources, and social position (Bourdieu, 1984). His point was not that every person in a class likes exactly the same things. Rather, he showed that what societies call "good taste" often reflects the power of dominant groups to present their own preferences as superior.

For example, imagine two kinds of music: classical orchestral music and street-based popular music. In some institutions, the first may be treated as "serious culture," while the second may be treated as "noise," "low culture," or "youth disturbance." Cultural studies asks: Who has the authority to classify one sound as art and another as noise? What histories of class, race, education, and respectability shape that judgment? What happens when people proudly claim a stigmatized music as a source of identity and resistance?

Taste can include food as well. A traditional dish may be dismissed as "smelly" or "uncivilized" in one setting, then later celebrated as "authentic cuisine" in an expensive restaurant. The food has not changed in essence; the social frame around it has changed. Cultural studies studies that frame.

Taste is therefore never only about liking. It is also about classification. It can create belonging: "people like us enjoy this." It can also create exclusion: "people like them have no taste."

Ritual: Repetition With Symbolic Weight

Another important concept is ritual. A ritual is a repeated action that carries symbolic meaning beyond its practical function. Rituals can be religious, but they do not have to be. A prayer, a graduation ceremony, a birthday song, a national flag-raising, a wedding, a funeral, a school assembly, a sports chant, or even the routine of taking a family photo before travel can be ritual-like.

Rituals matter because they make values visible. They show what a community honors, fears, remembers, or hopes for. Mary Douglas's work on purity and pollution is useful here because it shows how societies use classifications of clean and unclean, pure and impure, proper and improper to organize symbolic order (Douglas, 1966). These classifications may seem natural, but they are cultural systems for managing boundaries.

For example, many societies have rules about where shoes may be worn. In some homes, entering with shoes is seen as dirty or disrespectful. In other settings, being barefoot may be seen as improper. The issue is not only hygiene. It is also symbolic order: inside and outside, clean and dirty, public and private, respect and disrespect.

Rituals also organize belonging. At a graduation ceremony, students wear special clothing, walk across a stage, receive a certificate, and are applauded. The practical act of giving a document could take ten seconds in an office. But the ritual transforms an administrative action into a public recognition of achievement. It says: “This person has passed from one status to another.”

Yet rituals can also discipline people. They may pressure individuals to perform loyalty, respectability, gender roles, nationalism, or religious conformity. A student who refuses to sing a national anthem, a couple who rejects a conventional wedding, or a worker who challenges a corporate ceremony may be treated as disrespectful because rituals often protect social authority.

The emancipatory question is not simply whether rituals are good or bad. The better question is: What do rituals teach people to feel, repeat, honor, and obey? And how can communities create rituals that support justice, memory, care, and liberation?

Media in Everyday Life

Media are not only large institutions such as television networks, film studios, newspapers, or digital platforms. Media are also part of everyday routines. Many people wake up to phone notifications, learn about public events through social media, relax through streaming platforms, use memes to express emotion, and maintain relationships through messaging apps.

A medium is a channel or form through which meaning is communicated. Speech is a medium. Writing is a medium. Photography, radio, film, television, music, clothing, architecture, and digital platforms can all function as media because they help carry meaning.

Cultural studies is interested not only in media content but in media practice. For example, watching a television drama is not only receiving a story. It may involve family bonding, gendered control over the remote, online fan discussion, moral debate, advertising, language learning, fashion inspiration, or political interpretation. Stuart Hall’s work on representation helps us understand that media do not simply mirror reality; they organize meaning through language, images, categories, and narratives (Hall, 1997).

Take a simple advertisement for skin-lightening products. It may appear to sell a cosmetic item, but it can also communicate ideas about beauty, race, class mobility, gender, modernity, and self-worth. Viewers may accept the message, reject it, laugh at it, criticize it, or reinterpret it. But the advertisement still participates in a wider cultural field where bodies are judged and ranked.

Now consider memes. A meme may seem like a joke, but it can condense shared knowledge, political anger, generational identity, or prejudice into a small repeatable form. A meme about exams can create student solidarity. A meme about a politician can become satire. A racist or sexist meme can normalize harm by hiding violence inside humor. Everyday media practices are therefore not trivial. They are part of how society feels and thinks.

Identity: Who We Are, and How We Are Recognized

Everyday life is also where identity is made. Identity means a socially meaningful sense of who someone is. Identity includes how people understand themselves and how others recognize, misrecognize, name, classify, or treat them. It may involve gender, race, class, religion, nationality, language, sexuality, disability, age, profession, region, taste, or political belonging.

Identity is not merely a private feeling. It becomes real in social situations. A person may think of themselves as confident, but in a classroom where their accent is mocked, they may become silent. A person may identify strongly with a minority religion, but in a workplace where that religion is stereotyped, they may have to decide whether to hide or display signs of belonging. A migrant may feel at home in more than one language, but official forms may force them into a single national category.

Erving Goffman’s work on self-presentation is useful for understanding everyday identity. He argued that social interaction often involves performances in which people manage impressions before others (Goffman, 1959). This does not mean identity is fake. It means that identity is expressed and negotiated in situations. We act differently with grandparents, friends, teachers, employers, police officers, strangers, and online audiences because each setting has different expectations.

For example, a student may use formal language in class, slang with friends, respectful speech at home, and ironic humor online. These are not necessarily contradictions. They show that identity is relational. People learn to move between social worlds.

But some people have more freedom to move than others. A wealthy person may be praised for dressing casually as “authentic,” while a poor person in the same clothing may be judged as “unprofessional.” A dominant-language speaker may be called articulate, while a minority-language speaker may be treated as deficient. Everyday identity is therefore linked to power.

Norms: The Invisible Rules of Ordinary Life

A key word for understanding everyday power is norm. A norm is a social expectation about what is considered normal, proper, acceptable, or desirable. Norms are not always written down. Many are learned through praise, shame, jokes, silence, imitation, punishment, and reward.

For example, there may be a norm that students should raise their hands before speaking. There may be a norm that men should not cry in public. There may be a norm that successful adults should marry, have children, earn money, own property, speak a dominant language, or dress “professionally.” There may be a norm that certain bodies are beautiful, certain accents are intelligent, and certain neighborhoods are dangerous.

Norms are powerful because they can feel like common sense. They often operate before conscious thought. Someone may say, “That just looks wrong,” without asking where the feeling of wrongness came from. Cultural studies trains us to ask that question.

Norms can help social life. A norm against interrupting others can support respectful conversation. A norm of queuing can reduce conflict in public service. But norms can also reproduce domination. If a norm says that only one kind of family is respectable, then other families may be shamed. If a norm says that only one language sounds educated, speakers of other languages may be excluded. If a norm says that disabled bodies must adapt silently to inaccessible spaces, then injustice is treated as individual difficulty rather than social failure.

To study everyday life critically is to make norms visible.

Discipline: How Power Enters the Body

Some forms of power do not work mainly by physical force. They work by training people to monitor themselves. Michel Foucault’s study of modern discipline examined institutions such as prisons, schools, barracks, and hospitals, showing how power can operate through surveillance, examination, classification, schedules, and bodily training (Foucault, 1977).

Discipline means the shaping of conduct through repeated regulation. It is not only punishment after wrongdoing. It is the production of habits before wrongdoing occurs. A school timetable teaches students to divide time. A classroom seating plan teaches bodies where to sit and how to face authority. Exams teach people to measure themselves. Workplace performance metrics teach workers to compare productivity. Fitness apps teach users to track steps, calories, sleep, and bodily improvement.

Discipline becomes cultural when people internalize expectations. A person may sit “properly,” speak “professionally,” dress “appropriately,” or feel guilty for resting because they have learned social rules about respectability and productivity. In this way, society enters the body.

This does not mean all discipline is oppressive. Learning an instrument, practicing a sport, studying a language, or training for medical skill requires discipline. The critical question is: discipline for what, under whose authority, and with what effects? Does a practice expand human capacity, or does it produce obedience to unjust norms? Does it serve collective well-being, or does it make people blame themselves for structural problems?

Everyday life is full of this tension. A uniform can create equality and shared identity, but it can also suppress difference. A school rule can support learning, but it can also punish cultural expression. A workplace schedule can coordinate labor, but it can also exhaust workers and erase care responsibilities.

Belonging and Exclusion

Everyday culture creates belonging. Belonging means the feeling and social recognition of being part of a group, place, or community. It is made through shared language, food, music, humor, memory, ritual, clothing, religion, neighborhood, political struggle, and common experience.

A family recipe can carry memory across generations. A local dialect can create warmth among speakers. A football chant can unite strangers in a stadium. A religious festival can make a city feel alive with shared time. A protest song can transform fear into collective courage.

But the same practices that create belonging can also mark outsiders. If belonging depends on speaking a certain language, those who do not speak it may be excluded. If belonging depends on national purity, migrants and minorities may be treated as threats. If belonging depends on gender conformity, queer and trans people may be pushed to the margins. If belonging depends on wealth, poor people may be made to feel ashamed in spaces designed for consumption.

This is why cultural studies does not romanticize community. Community can nourish people, but it can also police boundaries. The emancipatory task is to ask how belonging can be built without humiliation, domination, or forced sameness.

Creativity in the Ordinary

Because everyday life contains discipline and exclusion, we might be tempted to see it only as a place of domination. That would be a mistake. Everyday life is also a place of creativity.

Creativity does not only mean producing great art. It includes the small acts through which people make life livable and meaningful: inventing slang, remixing songs, decorating rooms, adapting recipes, repairing objects, telling jokes, creating informal support networks, reusing clothing, making protest signs, organizing mutual aid, or transforming religious and cultural traditions for new generations.

Dick Hebdige's study of subcultures showed how style can become meaningful political communication, especially among youth groups who use clothing, music, and visual signs to challenge dominant meanings (Hebdige, 1979). A punk jacket, a hip-hop style, a queer fashion choice, or a hairstyle associated with racial pride may interrupt what a dominant society considers respectable or normal. Style can say, "We are here," "We refuse your shame," or "We make meaning differently."

Of course, capitalism often absorbs creative resistance. A rebellious style can become a marketable fashion. A protest slogan can become a brand design. A community dance can become tourist entertainment. Cultural studies pays attention to this contradiction. Creativity can resist domination, but it can also be commodified, meaning turned into something sold for profit.

Still, the possibility of absorption does not make creativity meaningless. It means cultural struggle continues. People create, institutions appropriate, people reinterpret, markets sell, communities reclaim. Everyday culture is not a finished object. It is a moving field of struggle.

A Small Scene: Reading a Classroom

Let us practice reading everyday life by looking at a classroom.

At first, a classroom seems ordinary: desks, chairs, a board, a teacher, students, books, screens, a timetable. But each element carries cultural meaning.

The arrangement of chairs may show authority. Rows facing the front suggest that knowledge flows from teacher to students. A circle may suggest discussion and shared attention. A raised platform may make the teacher's authority visible. A locked door, attendance list, or exam schedule may connect learning to discipline.

Language also matters. Which language is used for teaching? Which accents are treated as intelligent? Are students allowed to use local examples, or must they speak in abstract academic style? Who feels confident asking questions? Who fears being judged?

Bodies matter too. Are disabled students able to enter, sit, hear, see, and participate? Are gender norms shaping who speaks more? Are students from poor backgrounds made uncomfortable by hidden costs such as books, devices, clothing, or transport? Are religious practices respected in the timing and organization of the day?

Media matter. Are phones banned, tolerated, or used for learning? Does the classroom depend on digital platforms? Who has reliable internet? Who is watched through learning-management systems or plagiarism software?

A cultural studies reading of the classroom does not say, "School is only oppression." It asks a more careful question: How does this space organize knowledge, authority, bodies, identities, and possibilities? It also asks: How could this space be changed to support more democratic and emancipatory learning?

Everyday Life as Politics

In this book, politics does not mean only elections, parties, governments, and laws. Those are important, but politics is broader. Politics means struggle over how life is organized: who has power, who gets resources, whose voice counts, whose body is protected, whose memory is honored, and whose future is imaginable.

Everyday life is political because ordinary practices help organize these questions. A joke can reproduce racism or challenge it. A school rule can protect students or silence them. A family habit can distribute care fairly or place unpaid labor on women and girls. A media trend can build solidarity or spread hatred. A neighborhood design can welcome pedestrians or exclude the poor. A workplace culture can support dignity or normalize exhaustion.

This does not mean every action must be treated with suspicion. It means that ordinary life is worthy of thought. Cultural studies does not ask us to become joyless. It asks us to become awake.

Pleasure, humor, beauty, comfort, and belonging are important parts of human life. Emancipatory cultural studies does not reject pleasure; it asks how pleasure is organized. Who is allowed to enjoy freely? Whose pleasure is shamed? Whose labor produces someone else's comfort? Which pleasures open solidarity, and which depend on domination?

Learning to Notice

The first skill of this chapter is noticing. To notice culturally is to see that ordinary life is structured by meaning. The second skill is connecting. To connect culturally is to relate a small practice to wider social forces. The third skill is questioning. To question culturally is to ask how meanings could be otherwise.

Try this with a simple everyday object: a school uniform.

At the level of practical function, it provides clothing for school. At the level of meaning, it may represent equality, discipline, institutional identity, modesty, respectability, childhood, nationalism, or class aspiration. At the level of power, it may reduce visible class differences, but it may also create costs for poor families, enforce gender binaries, punish religious or cultural expression, or make students' bodies easier to regulate. At the level of creativity, students may modify small details: shoes, bags, hairstyles, pins, posture, or ways of wearing the uniform. These small modifications may become tactics of identity.

This is cultural studies in miniature. We begin with the ordinary, then we uncover meaning, power, contradiction, and possibility.

Chapter Summary

Everyday life is not a background to culture. It is one of culture's main locations. Habits, tastes, rituals, media practices, identities, norms, spaces, and objects all participate in the making of social meaning. They can create belonging, pleasure, memory, and creativity. They can also reproduce discipline, inequality, exclusion, and domination.

The key lesson is not that everything ordinary is secretly bad. The lesson is that ordinary life is meaningful and organized. Cultural studies teaches us to examine this organization with care. It helps us see how power works through common sense, routine, taste, space, media, and the body. It also helps us see where people improvise, resist, repair, and imagine new ways of living.

In the next chapter, we will study how cultural studies emerged historically. We will see how debates about working-class life, adult education, Marxism, feminism, anti-racism, and popular culture shaped the birth of the field.

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