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CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

Edited by

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With an Introduction by

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PANEL DISCUSSION

EDWARD SHILS

Mass Society and Its Culture

Mass Society: Consensus, Civility, Individuality

A NEW ORDER of society has taken form since the end of World War I in the United States, above all, but also in Great Britain, France, Northern Italy, the Low and Northern European countries, and Japan. Some of its features have begun to appear in Eastern and Central Europe, though in a less even manner; more incipiently and prospectively so, in Asian and African countries. It is the style to refer to this new order as the "mass society."

This new order of society, despite all its internal conflicts, discloses in the individual a greater sense of attachment to the society as a whole, and of affinity with his fellows. As a result, perhaps for the first time in history, large aggregations of human beings living over an extensive territory have been able to enter into relatively free and uncoerced association.

The new society is a mass society precisely in the sense that the mass of the population has become incorporated *into* society. The center of society—the central institutions, and the central value systems which guide and legitimate these institutions—has extended its boundaries. Most of the population (the "mass") now stands in a closer relationship to the center than has been the case in either premodern societies or in the earlier phases of modern society. In previous societies, a substantial portion of the population, often the majority, were born and forever remained "outsiders."

The mass society is a new phenomenon, but it has been long in gestation. The idea of the *polis* is its seed, nurtured and developed in the Roman idea of a common citizenship extending over a wide territory. The growth of nationality in the modern era has heightened the sense of affinity among the members of different classes and regions of the same country. When the proponents of the modern idea of the nation put forward the view that life on a contiguous, con-

tinuous, and common territory—beyond all divisions of kinship, caste, and religious belief—united the human beings living within that territory into a single collectivity, and when they made a common language the evidence of that membership, they committed themselves, not often wittingly, to the mass society.

An important feature of that society is the diminished sacredness of authority, the reduction in the awe it evokes and in the charisma attributed to it. This diminution in the status of authority runs parallel to a loosening of the power of tradition. Naturally, tradition continues to exert influence, but it becomes more open to divergent interpretations, and these frequently lead to divergent courses of action.

The dispersion of charisma from center outward has manifested itself in a greater stress on individual dignity and individual rights. This extension does not always reach into the sphere of the political, but it is apparent in the attitudes toward women, youth, and ethnic groups which have been in a disadvantageous position.

Following from this, one of the features of mass society I should like to emphasize is its wide dispersion of "civility." The concept of civility is not a modern creation, but it is in the mass society that it has found its most complete (though still very incomplete) realization. The very idea of a *citizenry* coterminous with the adult population is one of its signs. So is the moral equalitarianism which is a trait unique to the West, with its insistence that by virtue of their sharing membership in the community and a common tongue men possess a certain irreducible dignity.

None of these characteristic tendencies of mass society has attained anything like full realization. The moral consensus of mass society is certainly far from complete; the mutual assimilation of center (i.e., the elite) and periphery (i.e., the mass) is still much less than total. Class conflict, ethnic prejudice, and disordered personal relations remain significant factors in our modern mass societies, but without preventing the tendencies I have described from finding an historically unprecedented degree of realization.

Mass society is an industrial society. Without industry, i.e., without the replacement of simple tools by complicated machines, mass society would be inconceivable. Modern industrial techniques, through the creation of an elaborate network of transportation and communication, bring the various parts of mass society into frequent contact. Modern technology has liberated man from the burden of physically exhausting labor, and has given him resources through which new

experiences of sensation, conviviality, and introspection have become possible. True, modern industrial organization has also been attended by a measure of hierarchical and bureaucratic organization which often runs contrary to the vital but loose consensus of mass society. Nonetheless, the fact remains that modern mass society has reached out toward a moral consensus and a civil order congruous with the adult population. The sacredness that every man possesses by virtue of his membership in society finds a more far-reaching affirmation than ever before.

Mass society has aroused and enhanced individuality. Individuality is characterized by an openness to experience, an efflorescence of sensation and sensibility, a sensitivity to other minds and personalities. It gives rise to, and lives in, personal attachments; it grows from the expansion of the empathic capacities of the human being. Mass society has liberated the cognitive, appreciative, and moral capacities of individuals. Larger elements of the population have consciously learned to value the pleasures of eye, ear, taste, touch, and conviviality. People make choices more freely in many spheres of life, and these choices are not necessarily made for them by tradition, authority, or scarcity. The value of the experience of personal relationships is more widely appreciated.

These observations are not meant to imply that individuality as developed in mass society exists universally. A part of the population in mass society lives in a nearly vegetative torpor, reacting dully or aggressively to its environment. Nonetheless, the search for individuality and its manifestations in personal relations are distinctly present in mass society and constitute one of its essential features.

The Culture of Mass Society

The fundamental categories of cultural life are the same in all societies. In all the different strata of any given society, the effort to explore and explain the universe, to understand the meaning of events, to enter into contact with the sacred or to commit sacrilege, to affirm the principles of morality and justice and to deny them, to encounter the unknown, to exalt or denigrate authority, to stir the senses by the control of and response to words, sounds, shapes, and colors—these are the basic elements of cultural existence. There are, however, profound variations in the elaboration of these elements, for human beings show marked differences in capacity for expression and reception.

No society can ever achieve a complete cultural consensus: there

are natural limitations to the spread of the standards and products of superior culture throughout society. The tradition of refinement is itself replete with antinomies, and the nature of creativity adds to them. Creativity is a modification of tradition. Furthermore, the traditional transmission of superior culture inevitably stirs some to reject and deny significant parts of it, just because it is traditional. More fundamental than the degrees of creativity and alienation is the disparity in human cognitive, appreciative, and moral capacities. This disparity produces marked differences in the apprehension of tradition, in the complexity of the response to it, and in the substance of the judgments aroused by it.

Thus a widely differentiated "dissensus" has become stabilized in the course of history. The pattern of this "dissensus" is not inevitably unchanging. The classes consuming culture may diminish in number, their taste may deteriorate, their standards become less discriminating or more debased. On the other hand, as the mass of the population comes awake when its curiosity and sensibility and its moral responsiveness are aroused, it begins to become capable of a more subtle perception, more appreciative of the more general elements in a concrete representation, and more complex in its aesthetic reception and expression.

The Levels of Culture. For present purposes, we shall employ a very rough distinction among three levels of culture, which are levels of quality measured by aesthetic, intellectual, and moral standards. These are "superior" or "refined" culture, "mediocre" culture, and "brutal" culture.*

* I have reservations about the use of the term "mass culture," because it refers simultaneously to the substantive and qualitative properties of the culture, to the social status of its consumers, and to the media by which it is transmitted. Because of this at least three-fold reference, it tends to beg some important questions regarding the relations among the three variables. For example, the current conception of "mass culture" does not allow for the fact that in most countries, and not just at present, very large sections of the elite consume primarily mediocre and brutal culture. It also begs the important questions as to whether the mass media can transmit works of superior culture, or whether the genres developed by the new mass media can become the occasions of creativity and therewith a part of superior culture. Also, it does not consider the obvious fact that much of what is produced in the genres of superior culture is extremely mediocre in quality. At present, I have no satisfactory set of terms to distinguish the three levels of cultural objects. I have toyed with "high," "refined," "elaborate," "genuine," or "serious," "vulgar," "mediocre," or "middle," and "low," "brutal," "base" or "coarse." None of these words succeeds either in felicity or aptness.

Superior or refined culture is distinguished by the seriousness of its subject matter, i.e., the centrality of the problems with which it deals, the acute penetration and coherence of its perceptions, the subtlety and wealth of its expressed feeling. The stock of superior culture includes the great works of poetry, novels, philosophy, scientific theory and research, statues, paintings, musical compositions and their performance, the texts and performance of plays, history, economic, social, and political analyses, architecture and works of craftsmanship. It goes without saying that the category of superior culture does not refer to the social status, i.e., the quality of their attainment, of the author or of the consumers of the works in question, but only to their truth and beauty.

The category of mediocre culture includes works which, whatever the aspiration of their creators, do not measure up to the standards employed in judging works of superior culture. Mediocre culture is less original than superior culture; it is more reproductive; it operates largely in the same genres as superior culture, but also in certain relatively novel genres not yet fully incorporated into superior culture, such as the musical comedy. This may be a function of the nature of the genre or of the fact that the genre has not yet attracted great talent to its practice.

At the third level is brutal culture, where symbolic elaboration is of a more elementary order. Some of the genres on this level are identical with those of mediocre and refined culture (pictorial and plastic representation, music, poems, novels, and stories) but they also include games, spectacles (such as boxing and horse racing) and more directly expressive actions with a minimal symbolic content. The depth of penetration is almost always negligible, subtlety is almost entirely lacking, and a general grossness of sensitivity and perception is a common feature.

The greatest difference among the three levels of culture, apart from intrinsic quality, is the tremendous disparity in the richness of the stock available in any society at any given time. What any given society possesses is not only what it creates in its own generation but also what it has received from antecedent generations and from earlier and contemporaneous generations of other societies. Superior culture is immeasurably richer in content because it contains not only superior contemporary production but also much of the refined production of earlier epochs. Mediocre culture tends to be poorer, not only because of the poorer quality of what it produces in its own generation, but because these cultural products have a relatively

shorter life span. Nevertheless, mediocre culture contains much that has been created in the past. The boundaries between mediocre and superior culture are not so sharp, and the custodians of superior culture are not so discriminating as always to reject the mediocre. Furthermore, a considerable amount of mediocre culture retains value over long periods; and even though mediocre taste varies, as does superior taste, there are stable elements in it, too, so that some of the mediocre culture of the past continues to find an appreciative audience.

At the lowest cultural level, where the symbolic content is most impoverished and where there is very little original creation in each generation, we come again to a greater, if much less self-conscious, dependence on the past. Games, jokes, spectacles, and the like continue traditional patterns with little consciousness of their traditionality. If the traditional element in brutal culture has been large, this is due to the relatively low creative capacities of those who produce and consume it. Here, until recently, there has been little professional production, machinery for preservation and transmission is lacking, and oral transmission plays a greater part in maintaining traditions of expression and performance than with superior and mediocre cultures.

The Magnitudes: Consumption. The quantity of culture consumed in mass society is certainly greater than in any other epoch, even if we make proper allowance for the larger populations of the mass societies at present. It is especially at the levels of mediocre and brutal culture that an immense expansion has occurred, but the consumption of superior culture has also increased.

The grounds for this great increase, and for the larger increase in the two lower categories, are not far to seek. The most obvious are greater availability, increased leisure time, the decreased physical demands of work, the greater affluence of the classes which once worked very hard for long hours for small income, increased literacy, enhanced individuality, and more unabashed hedonism. In all these, the middle and the lower classes have gained more than have the elites (including the intellectuals, whatever their occupational distribution).

The consumption of superior culture has increased, too, but not as much as the other two categories, because the intellectual classes were more nearly saturated before the age of mass society. Moreover, the institutions of superior culture—the collections of connoisseurs, academies, universities, libraries, publishing houses, periodicals—

were more elaborately and more continuously established in the pre-mass society than were the institutions which made mediocre and brutal culture available to their consumers.

Thus in mass society the proportion of the total stock of cultural objects held by superior culture has shrunk, and correspondingly the share of mediocre and brutal culture has grown.*

Note on the Value of Mediocre and Brutal Culture. Mediocre culture has many merits. It often has elements of genuine conviviality, not subtle or profound perhaps, but genuine in the sense of being spontaneous and honest. It is often very good fun. Moreover, it is often earnestly, even if simply, moral. Mediocre culture, too, has its traditions; many of the dramas and stories which regale the vulgar have a long history hidden from those who tell and enjoy them. Like anything traditional, they express something essential in human life, and expunging them would expunge the accumulated wisdom of ordinary men and women, their painfully developed art of coping with the miseries of existence, their routine pieties and their decent pleasures.

There is much ridicule of *Kitsch*, and it *is* ridiculous. Yet it represents aesthetic sensibility and aesthetic aspiration, untutored, rude, and deformed. The very growth of *Kitsch*, and of the demand which has generated the industry for the production of *Kitsch*, is an indication of a crude aesthetic awakening in classes which previously accepted what was handed down to them or who had practically no aesthetic expression and reception.

The Reproduction and Transmission of Culture

In medieval society, the church and, to a less effective and more limited degree, the schools (which were immediate or indirect adjuncts of the church) brought the culture of the center into the peripheral areas of a very loosely integrated society.† Protestantism

* This change in the relative shares of the three levels of culture has been distorted by contrast with the preceding epochs. The cultural life of the consumers of mediocre and brutal culture was relatively silent, unseen by the intellectuals. The immense advances in audibility and visibility of the two lower levels of culture is one of the most noticeable traits of mass society. This is in turn intensified by another trait of mass society, i.e., the enhanced mutual awareness of different sectors of the society.

† A society which was far less "organic" in its structure and outlook than the critics of modern society allege and less "organic" also than the modern society which is so unsympathetically assailed by these critics.

and printing led to a pronounced change which showed the direction of the future. The cheapened access to the printed word and the spread of a minimal literacy (which became nearly universal within European societies only at the beginning of the present century) resulted in an expansion of each of the three strata of culture. In this expansion, the chief beneficiaries were mediocre and brutal culture.

The increased wealth, leisure, and literacy of the lower classes, and the flowering of hedonism which these permitted, would undoubtedly have produced the great expansion in mediocre and brutal—as well as superior—cultural consumption, even without the further technological developments of communication in the twentieth century. This technological development did, however, supply a mighty additional impetus. The popular press of the last decades of the nineteenth century showed the way. The development of new methods of graphic reproduction in lithography and in both still and moving pictures, new methods of sound recording and the transmission of sound and picture, increased the flow of communication from the center to the periphery. Where previously the custodians of superior culture and its mediocre variants had nearly a monopoly—through their quasi-monopoly of the institutions of transmission—the new methods of mass communication have transformed the situation.

The quest for a larger audience, which would make it feasible to obtain a subsidy (in the form of advertising) to cover the difference between what the consumers pay and what it costs to produce cultural objects, has been of the greatest importance to the interrelations of the various strata of culture. The dependence of the subsidy on greatly extended consumption would in itself have required a reaching-out toward a heterogeneous audience. The increased overhead of communication enterprises in television, for example, as compared with book printing, has intensified the need for large and heterogeneous audiences.

Before the emergence of the most recent forms of mass communication, with their very large capital requirements, each stratum of culture had its own channels and institutions. As long as books were the chief means of impersonal cultural transmission, the cultural segregation of the classes could be easily maintained. The drive toward a maximum audience has helped change this, and the change has had momentous repercussions. The magazine is the embodiment of this new development. The form of the magazine is an eighteenth-century phenomenon; but the enlargement of its role in the reproduction and transmission of culture is the product of the latter-day

need to gain the maximum audience, one in its turn impelled by the economic necessity of the subsidy. To speak to the largest possible audience, it has been necessary to make the content of what is transmitted in a single issue as heterogeneous as the audience sought.

The general principle of providing something for everyone in the family became well established in the first decades of the popular press. The principle was developed to the point where every class which could possibly increase the total audience was offered something. This principle has not succeeded in dominating the entire field. There are still specialized organs and institutions which seek to please only one particular stratum of consumers, and in Europe the tradition of a unitary public still persists—but even there not without making very substantial concessions to the new principle. Even the universities (which do not necessarily seek large numbers) in Europe, although not as much as in America, have also diversified their programs in order to meet the diversified demand. In popular periodicals like *Time, Life, Look, Picture Post, Match, Der Spiegel, Esquire,* and in distinguished daily newspapers like *The New York Times,* and recently, even in a cumbersome way, *The Times* of London, there is an intermixture of superior, mediocre, and brutal culture which is historically unique. The same can be observed in television and, of course, in the film: a single network presents a wide variety of levels, and films of genuinely high artistic and intellectual merit may be produced in the same studio which produces numerous mediocre and brutal films.

The Consumption of Culture

In modern society, the number of consumers of superior culture has never been very large; in premodern societies, it was even smaller. The chief consumers of works of superior culture are the intellectuals, i.e., those whose occupations require intellectual preparation, and in practice, the application of high intellectual skills. In the contemporary world this category includes university teachers, scientists, university students, writers, artists, secondary-school teachers, members of the learned professions (law, medicine, and the church), journalists, and higher civil servants, as well as a scattering of businessmen, engineers, and army officers.

Outside the intellectual occupations, where the largest number are found, the consumers of superior culture are spread thin and at random. This situation has probably never been different, even in periods when the princes of the church were patrons of painting and

sculpture, or when in most grand-bourgeois households one could find sets of Goethe, Nietzsche, Fielding, the memoirs of Sully, or the letters of Mme. de Sévigné.

The political, technological, military, ecclesiastical, and economic elites have not usually been intellectuals, even though their members have had intellectual training and followed intellectual careers before entering their particular profession. Politican and intellectual come closest in regimes just established by revolution or by a successful nationalist movement (their quality as intellectuals, however, is usually not particularly distinguished). In established political regimes, although there may be a significant number of politicians who were once intellectuals of a respectable level, over a long period the demands of the profession of politics leave little time, strength, or sensitivity for the continued consumption of intellectual goods.

Among the leading Western countries, it is in the United States that the political elite gives a preponderant impression of indifference toward works of superior culture. The situation is probably not very different in Great Britain, France, Germany or Italy—though there, the political elite, living amidst aristocratic and patrician traditions, possesses an external gloss of intimacy with high culture. In the United States, however, despite Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, the Plutarch-reading Harry Truman, and the *De re metallica*-editing Herbert Hoover, the political elite gives a definitely unintellectual impression.

The same is true of the American plutocracy: as a body of collectors of the works of painting and sculpture and as patrons of learning, it will take an outstanding place in the history of the great Maecenases. Yet the dominant impression is one of indifference and inhospitality to intellectual work. The great industrial system of the United States has required a large corps of engineers and applied scientists, men of great imagination and even high creativity; yet their cultural consumption (not only of superior culture but also of mediocre culture) is rather small. The vigor and pre-eminence of these sectors of the American elite, and the conventions of the media of information through which their public image is formed, fortify intellectuals with the sense that they alone in their society are concerned with superior culture.

Among the middle classes the consumption of the traditional genres of superior culture is not large. Popular periodicals, best-selling novels, political books of transient interest, inferior poetry, inspirational works of theology and moral edification and biographies—these made up and still make up the bulk of their consumption. More recently, the films and radio, and most recently, television, have provided the substance of their cultural consumption. Their fare is largely philistine—mediocre culture and brutal culture. Nonetheless, because of exposure to the "mass media," e.g., periodicals like *Life* and a narrow band of the output on television, film, and radio, a larger section of these classes has come into contact with and consumed a larger quantity of extra-religious, superior culture than has been the case throughout the course of modern history.

Finally, the industrial working class and the rural population remain to be considered. Together, these classes consume almost nothing of the inheritance and current production of superior culture. Very little mediocre culture of the conventional genres reaches them except in such periodicals as *Life*, *Look*, and *The Reader's Digest*. Much of their culture as transmitted by mass media is brutal—crime films and television spectacles, paperbacks of violence, pornographic oral and printed literature, and the culture of the world of sports.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the culture possessed by these classes is exhausted by what comes to them through the mass media. A large amount of traditional religious culture (and of sectarian variants of traditional religious culture) flourishes in all the nonintellectual classes. Much of regional and class culture, maintained by family, by colleagues, neighbors, and friends and by local institutions, survives and is unlikely to be supplanted by the larger culture which emanates from the center. This places limits on what is incorporated from the current flow of the mass media.*

A special stratum of the population that cuts across all classes and gives a particular tone to mass society is the younger generation, the maligned and bewildering "youth." The coming forth of youth in contemporary society rests on primordial foundations which exist in all societies. In most societies, however, the institutional structure and the niggardliness of nature have kept youth in check. In modern times, romanticism and increased wealth and (more deeply) the expanding radius of empathy and fellow-feeling have given

* Also, it should be added, this persistence of traditional and orally transmitted culture renders fruitless the effort to diagnose the dispositions and outlook of a people by analyzing what is presented to them through films, television, and wireless broadcasts, the press, etc.

youth opportunities never before available. The enhanced productivity of the economy of Western countries has, on the one hand, allowed young people to remain outside the hard grind of work for a longer time; it has given them opportunities to earn and spend substantial individual incomes. The resulting cultural manifestations are largely responsible for what is called "mass culture."

Before the advent of mass society, a small proportion of the youth were rigorously inculcated with superior culture; the rest were exposed to the brutal culture of their seniors. It is one of the marks of mass society, however, that youth has become a major consumer of the special variants of mediocre and brutal culture that are produced for transmission through the mass media. An extraordinary quantity of popular music, mediocre and brutal films, periodical literature, and forms of dance is produced for and consumed by youth. This is something unprecedented, and this is the heart of the revolution of mass culture.

Most of the "youthful mass" comes from strata of society which have had little connection except through religious education with high or superior culture. Not yet enmeshed in the responsibilities of family and civic life, and with much leisure time and purchasing power, youth constitutes both an eager and a profitable public which attracts the attention of the mass media. The eagerness of youth for the mediocre and brutal culture provided by the mass media, and that youth's own creative poverty are a universal phenomenon. Where the political elite does not grant this eagerness the right of direct expression, but seeks instead to divert it into ideological channels or to dam it up, it still remains powerful and indomitable. Where the political order allows this passionate and uncultivated vitality to find a free expression, the result is what we see throughout the Western world.

The Production of Culture

The High Intelligentsia. A differentiated creative intelligentsia is the oldest stratum of Western society with a set of continuous traditions. Such a stratum still exists today, far broader than ever before, far more extended and with international ties exceeding that of any other section of our own or any other society.* There is

* The internationality of the medieval church and of the European aristocracy in the eighteenth century was thin and parochial in comparison with the scope and intensity of that exhibited by present-day intellectual classes.

today more internal specialization than in the past: it is impossible for any one man to be fully conversant with the inherited and currently produced stock of cultural objects. The productive intelligentsia is perhaps less intensely like-minded now than in the past, when it was smaller and the body of what it had to master was smaller. Nonetheless, despite changes in society, in the modes of financial support and in the organization of intellectual life, this creative stratum is constantly reproducing and increasing.

The Mediocre Intelligentsia. The modern age, however, has seen growing up alongside this creative intelligentsia a much larger stratum of producers of mediocre culture. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when letters and the arts began to offer the possibilities of a professional career, thanks to the advance of printing and to an enlarging public, there emerged, besides those whose creative capacities achieved the heights of greatness, a wider group of writers, artists, and scholars. From these were recruited the residents of Grub Street, who, while still trying to reach the highest levels, had to live by producing for a less discriminating public. The nineteenth century saw the stabilization of the profession of those who produced almost exclusively for the public that consumed mediocre culture. The popular press, the film, radio, and television have deepened and extended their ranks. The enlargement of university populations and the corresponding increase in the number of university teachers, the increased opportunities for careers in research, in the applied natural and social sciences, have similarly added to the producers of mediocre culture.*

The professional practitioner with a mediocre culture has developed traditions, models, and standards of his own. More frequently than in the past he engages directly in the professional production of mediocre culture without first essaying the production of works of superior culture. He can attain an excellence within his own field that often brings him satisfaction and esteem. Indeed, in certain genres of mediocre culture that are new or at least relatively

* The increase in numbers of persons in intellectual occupations and those that require intellectual training might well be pressing hard against the supply. The supply of high talent is limited; improved methods of selection and training can somewhat increase it, but they cannot make it limitless or coterminous with the population of any society. Hence as the numbers expand, modern societies are forced to admit many persons whose endowments are such as to permit only a mediocre performance in the creation and reproduction of cultural works.

new, he can reach heights of unprecedented excellence, to the point where, if the genre is admissible, his work can take on the lineaments of superior cultural achievement.

Yet despite this approximation to autonomy, the autonomy remains incomplete. The producer of mediocre culture is exposed to the standards of superior culture, and he cannot entirely escape their pressure. If he prospers and his colleagues on the level of superior culture do not, then he is guilt-ridden for having "betrayed" higher standards for the sake of the fleshpots.

This troubling juxtaposition of two consciences is rendered more acute by the physical juxtaposition of the two levels of cultural objects and the social contact of their producers in the media through which mediocre culture chiefly finds its audience, namely, the media of mass communication. The professionals of mediocre culture cannot, even if they would, forget the standards of superior culture, because they mix with persons who often attain them, because the media from time to time present works composed according to those standards, and because critics continually refer to them. These factors provide an increasing stimulus to an awareness of and a concern for high standards, even when they are not observed.

The Brutal Intelligentsia. The producers of brutal culture confront a quite different situation. They have neither a similarly compelling historical past nor the connections with superior culture which their "colleagues" in the field of mediocre culture possess. They do not, so far as I know, justify their performance by reference to the great masters of their art. There are some exceptions among crime-story writers, boxers, jockeys, and certainly among a few of the best sports writers. But these are new professions. Their practitioners feel no continuity with their forerunners, even though the objects they produce bave been produced for a long time. Brutal culture therefore has only recently developed a differentiated professional personnel.

Brutal culture has not shown great potentialities for development. Nonetheless, certain genres of brutal culture have produced works of great excellence, so that these reach through mediocre culture into the outer confines of superior culture. Some works of pornography have found a place in superior culture, some horror stories have done the same, as have the chronicles of sports. Since brutal culture is by no means restricted to the uncultivated classes for its audience, works of brutal culture, which reach a form of high refinement, also make their way upward, and with them, their

producers move in the same direction. In the main, however, there is a wall which separates the producers of brutal culture from the producers of superior culture. Even where they find the same audience, the tradition of superior culture is such as to erect a barrier to a massive interpenetration.*

A few words should be said here about another kind of cultural production: the anonymous production of folk art and literature and linguistic innovation. In their highest manifestations, the production of these arts was probably never very widely spread. They grow on the edge of craftsmanship, of religious worship and of brutal entertainment. Considerable creative talents must have impelled them into existence. Their creators must have been men of genius, working with subterranean traditions that scarcely exist any more, and that had only a small direct connection with the great tradition of superior culture. In so far as they were inspired by craftsmanship, machine production has greatly restricted their emergence; the traditions which sustained them have atrophied.

It is sometimes asserted that the anonymous cultural production of craftsmen and peasants in the Europe of the later Middle Ages and of early modern times has been destroyed by the growth of mass culture. This is possible, but it is not the only possibility. If we assume that the proportion of geniuses and outstandingly gifted intelligences and sensibilities in any population remains fairly constant (not an unreasonable assumption) and that modern Western societies with their increasing cultivation of science, literature, art, enterprise, administration, and technology have been drawing more and more on their reservoirs of talent, then it appears quite plausible to assert that the talents of the type once manifested in the anonymous productions of folk culture have been recruited and diverted into other spheres and are active at different levels of culture and social life.

The Position of Superior Culture in Mass Society

Has the culture created in the past forty years—the approximate age of mass society—deteriorated as much as its detractors claim?

* The bohemian sector of the high intelligentsia, past and present, is an exception to this generalization. The mingling of poets and cut-purses has a long and special history which runs down to the occasional highbrow glorification of the hipster.

The task of assessment is most difficult.

Let us for the moment grant that contemporary refined culture may be poorer than the superior culture produced in any comparable span of years in the past. There may be any number of reasons or causes, totally unrelated to the development and impact of mass society on culture. For example, the distribution and efflorescence of genius are matters that still await full understanding. It is conceivable, if unlikely, that our neural equipment is poorer than that of our ancestors. And even if it is as good, it is also possible that our cultural traditions have passed their point of culmination, that they contain no possibilities of further development, that they offer no point of departure even for creative minds. Another important consideration is whether the alleged deterioration is being evaluated in the light of standards that are applied equally to other periods. We must be sure to comprehend in our assessment the whole range of intellectual and artistic activities. We must remember that the genius which is expressed in refined culture may be of diverse forms, aud that it can flow into some domains in one age, and into other domains in other ages.

Yet these might be idle reflections. The evidence of decline is not by any means very impressive. In every field of science and scholarship into which so much of our contemporary genius flows (in physics, chemistry, and in mathematics, in biology and neurology, in logic, linguistics, and anthropology, in comparative religion, in Sinology and Indology), outstanding work is being done, not only in the older centers not yet afflicted by the culture of mass society, but in the United States as well, that most massive of all mass societies. Theology seems to be in a more vital and powerful state than it has been for several centuries. Economics proceeds on a high level, higher on the average than in past periods; sociology, barbarous, rude, and so often trivial, offers at its best something which no past age can match in the way of discovery and penetration. In political philosophy, in which our decay is said to be so patent, we have no Aristotle, Hobbes, or Bentham, but there are probably only a half dozen such masters in all human history. On the other hand, in France and America there are men and women who are at least as deep and rigorous in their analysis of central issues as John Stuart Mill or Walter Bagehot or de Tocqueville were. In the novel, we have no Tolstoy, no Stendhal or Dostoievsky or Flaubert; still, the level of achievement is high. In poetry and in painting, there may indeed have been a falling-off from the great heights; in drama there

is no Aeschylus, no Shakespeare, no Racine. But these are among the highest peaks of all human history, and the absence of any such from our two-fifths of a century can scarcely constitute evidence of a general decline in the quality of the products of superior culture in our own time.

That there is, however, a consciousness of decline is undeniable. Intellectuals are beset by a malaise, by a sense of isolation, of disregard, of a lack of sympathy. They feel they have lost contact with their audiences, especially that most important of all audiences, those who rule society. This is nothing new. Romanticism is still far from dead, and it is a cardinal tenet of romanticism that the creative person is cut off from his own society and especially from its rulers. The contemporary romantic intellectual has in addition an acute sense of being cut off from the people.

The noisy, visible, tangible presence of mediocre and brutal culture has heightened his anguish. Whereas intellectuals in earlier ages of modern society could remain ignorant of the cultural preferences of those who consumed cultural objects other than their own, this is not really possible for contemporary intellectuals. By virtue of their own relations to production, the vigor with which mediocre and brutal cultures are promoted, and the evident enjoyment of their consumers, intellectuals are forced to be familiar with what takes place on these levels of culture.

But what are the specific threats to superior culture in mass society? To what extent do they differ from earlier dangers? To what extent do these dangers derive from mass society itself? For superior culture is and has always been in danger. Since it never is and never has been the culture of an entire society, it must necessarily be in a state of tension *vis-à-vis* the rest of society. If the producers and consumers of superior culture see further and deeper than their contemporaries, if they have a more subtle and more lively sensitivity, if they do not accept the received traditions and the acknowledged deities of their fellow countrymen, whatever they say or believe or discover is bound to create tension.

Are intellectuals more endangered in the age of mass society by the jealousy and distrust of the powerful than in other social eras? Surely, censorship, arrest, and exile are nothing new. Can the occasional anti-intellectual flurries of American politicians and businessmen be equated with the restraints imposed on intellectuals in Soviet Russia, Fascist Spain, or National Socialist Germany? None of these countries, it should be noted, are or were mass societies in

the sense that the contemporary United States is, or as the United Kingdom, Western Germany, and France are becoming. Does the role played by advertising on the television screen represent a greater intrusion into the creative sphere than did the prosecutions of Flaubert and Baudelaire in nineteenth-century France, or the moral censorship which Mrs. Grundy used to exercise so coarsely in the United States and which she still does in Britain, or the political and religious censorship practiced in eighteenth-century France? Athenian society was no mass society, and there were no advertisers there, yet Socrates was executed. I do not wish to belittle the present or recent attacks on intellectual or artistic liberty in the United States, but I do wish to stress that they are not unique to mass society.

It is sometimes asserted that the culture of mass society produces its insidious effects in roundabout ways that constitute a greater danger than the crude external pressures employed by the rulers of earlier societies. It seduces, it is said, rather than constrains. It offers opportunities for large incomes to those who agree to the terms of employment offered by institutions of mediocre and brutal culture. But does this opportunity, and even its acceptance, necessarily damage superior culture? The mere existence of the opportunity will not seduce a man of strongly impelled creative capacities, once he has found his direction. And if he does accept the opportunity, are his creative talents inevitably stunted? Is there no chance at all that they will find expression in the mass medium to which he is drawn? The very fact that here and there in the mass media, on television and in the film, work of superior quality is to be seen, seems to be evidence that genuine talent is not inevitably squandered once it leaves the traditional refined media.

It is, of course, possible for men to waste their talents, to corrupt themselves for the pleasures of office, for the favor of authority, for popularity, or for income or for the simple pleasure of self-destruction. Qualitatively, the financial temptations of work in the media of mass communication are of the same order as the other temptations intellectuals encounter. Quantitatively, it is difficult to estimate the magnitude of the temptation. There are certainly more opportunities now for intellectuals to earn much money in the production of mediocre and brutal cultural objects than there were before the development of the mass media. It is clear, however, that the large majority of literary men, poets, scholars, painters, scientists, or teachers have not been tempted nor have they yielded to the temptation—even if we concede, which we do not, that their experience in

the mass media prevents them from finding creative expression either in the mass media or outside them.

Popularization is sometimes cited as one of the ways in which superior culture is being eroded. Does the contact between mediocre and refined culture which occurs in popularization do damage to refined culture? Raymond Aron's thought does not deteriorate because he occasionally writes in *The New York Times Magazine* and much more frequently in *Le Figaro*; Bertrand Russell suffers no injury from an article in *Look Magazine*. There is no reason why gifted intellectuals should lose their powers because they write for audiences unable to comprehend their ordinary level of analysis and exposition. An intellectual who devotes all his efforts to popularization would soon cease to have anything of his own to popularize and would have to become a popularizer of the works of other persons. But there is no convincing evidence that persons who are capable of refined cultural production and who are strongly impelled to it are being gradually drawn away from their calling by the temptations of popularization. What has been the loss to American, British, and French science in the past forty years from the development of the new branch of journalism which is involved in scientific popularization?

The production of mediocre or brutal culture need not (so the argument goes) destroy superior culture by striking at its producers, either constrainingly or seductively. It can deprive them of their market, and especially of the discriminating appreciation they need to keep their skills at the highest pitch. The corruption of public taste, of those consumers whose natural discriminative powers are not so great that they can dispense with the cultivation which a refined cultural environment provides, is certainly a possibility. In contrast to this possibility, however, is the fact that in the United States today discrimination in a small minority (certainly no smaller than at the end of the nineteenth century or in England today) is as acutely perceptive as it ever was. The quality of literary criticism in *The Partisan Review, The Hudson Review, The Sewanee Review,* and *The New Yorker* is as informed, as penetrating, and as reflective as it was fifty years ago in the best American or British periodicals.

The demand for the products of mediocre and brutal culture certainly affects the market for the products of superior culture. If there were no inferior cultural products available and if the purchasing power were there, there certainly would be a larger body of purchasers of the products of superior culture. This was the situa-

tion in Britain during the war, and it is probably the situation in the Soviet Union today. As to whether this represents an improvement in public taste is another matter. In Britain, after the war, once inferior cultural objects became available in larger supply, the prosperity of serious booksellers markedly declined. The same would probably occur in the Soviet Union if a larger range of consumer goods, cultural and other, were to enter the market.

Therefore, when public demand is free to obtain the objects it desires, the market for superior cultural objects, given the present distribution of tastes, is restricted, and enterprisers with capital to invest will not rush in to use their resources in areas of the market where the return is relatively poor. Yet are there many manuscripts of books of outstanding merit lying unpublished today?

The relative unprofitability of the market for superior cultural objects is compensated for in part by the existence of enterprises motivated by other than profit considerations. There is no reason to assume that such uneconomically oriented investors will be fewer in the future than in the recent past. In part, the unprofitability of the market is circumvented by subsidy or patronage.

We often hear the old system of patronage praised by those who bemoan its passing. It is well to remember, however, what misery and humiliation it imposed on its beneficiaries, how capricious and irregular it was, and how few were affected by it during the period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries when intellectuals were growing in numbers. Many more were supported by administrative sinecures in church and state.

The private patronage of individual intellectuals by individual patrons still exists, but it plays a scant role. The place of this older form of subsidy has been taken over by the universities, the state, and the private foundations, and they appear to be more lavish, more generous, and more just than their predecessors were in earlier centuries.

There is, however, a major deficiency in the institutional system of high culture in the United States, one that can be largely attributed to the successful competition among the best of the newer organs of mass communication. America lacks a satisfactory intellectual weekly press, and, ironically, this is in part the achievement of *Time Magazine*. *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, which thirty years ago provided something quite comparable in journalistic and intellectual quality to *The Spectator*, have declined in quality and influence.

The absence of a passable intellectual weekly* does damage to American intellectual life. The country is so large and the intellectuals so scattered that a continuous focus on intellectual concerns (including the evaluation of political and economic affairs in a manner acceptable to a sophisticated, intellectual public) would serve invaluably to maintain standards of judgment and to provide a common universe of discourse.† There is a danger in the United States today of a centrifugal force within the intellectual classes, arising from their numbers, their spatial dispersion and their professional specialization. These factors tend to weaken the sense of community among our intellectual classes. Without this sense of community, the attachment to high standards might slacken or even collapse altogether.

Puritanism, Provincialism, and Specialization

If the arguments of those who attribute to mass society the alleged misery of contemporary culture are not sound, there is no gainsaying the fact that the consumption of superior culture does not rest in a perfectly secure position in the United States. The culture of the educated classes, who in America as elsewhere should be its bearers, leaves much to be desired. One is distressed by the boorish and complacent ignorance of university graduates, by the philistine distrust of or superciliousness toward superior culture which is exhibited by university professors in the humanities and social sciences or in the medical and law schools of this country, and by journalists and broadcasters. The political, economic, military, and technological elites are no better. The near illiteracy of some of the better American newspapers, the oftentimes raucous barbarism of our weeklies and our one widely circulated fortnightly, the unlettered-ness of many of our civil servants, the poverty of our bookshops, the vulgarity of our publishers (or at least those who write their jacket blurbs and their advertising copy) can give little comfort.

There is undeniably much that is wrong with the quality of culture consumed by the more or less educated classes in America. Very

* *Commonweal* exists on a higher intellectual plane than that of our two secular weeklies, but its religious preoccupations restrict the generality of its appeal.

† The excellent highbrow reviews are no substitute for an intellectual weekly. They are too infrequent, they are too apolitical, and even where they are not, as in the case of the *Partisan Review* or *Commentary*, they cannot maintain a continuous flow of comment and coverage.

little of what is wrong, however, can be attributed to the mass media, particularly to the films, television, radio, and popular magazines.

It is not that the cascade of mediocre and brutal culture which pours out over the mass media is admirable. Quite the contrary. The culture of the mass media is not, however, the reason that the distribution and consumption of superior culture disclose (alongside so many profoundly impressive achievements) many things that are repellent.

What is wrong, is wrong with our intellectuals and their institutions and with some of our cultural traditions, which have little to do with the culture created for and presented by the mass media.

The dour Puritanism that looked on aesthetic expression as self-indulgence does not grow out of mass society. Nor does the complacent and often arrogant provincialism that distrusts refined culture because it believes it to be urban, Anglophile, and connected with a patrician upper class. America was not a mass society in the nineteenth century, it was a differentiated society in which pronounced equalitarian sentiments often took on a populistic form. Certain tendencies which have culminated in a mass society were at work in it. However, much of its culture, although mediocre and brutal, was not produced by the institutions or by the professional personnel now producing the culture of mass society.

Refined culture in nineteenth-century America, reflecting the taste of the cultivated classes of New England and the Middle Atlantic States, did not enjoy a hospitable reception in the Middle West, as a result of the usual hostility of province against metropolis and of those who arrived later in America against those who arrived earlier and who became established sooner. American provincial culture in the nineteenth century was a variant of the British provincial dissenting culture that Matthew Arnold criticized unsparingly in *Culture and Anarchy*. Whereas this culture collapsed in England after World War I, in America it has continued powerful almost up to the present.

These are some of the special reasons for the present uncongeniality of superior culture to so many Americans. It springs from a general distrust that superior culture must always encounter in any society. In this country it expresses itself with greater strength, virulence, and freedom because the political and economic elites of American society feel little obligation to assume a veneer of refined culture, as in Great Britain and France.

Against this background of tradition and sentiment, the development of education in the United States in the past decades has created a technical intelligentsia that does not form a coherent intellectual community. While secondary education became less intellectual in its content and undergraduate education dissipated itself in courses of study of very low intensity and little discipline, a very superior and vigorous type of postgraduate education developed. In trying to make up for lost ground and in seeking to make a deep and thorough penetration into a rapidly growing body of knowledge, postgraduate training in each discipline has had to become highly specialized.

This impetus toward specialization has been heightened by the natural development of science and by the growth of the percentage of the population that pursues postgraduate studies. The development of science has greatly increased the volume of literature a student must cover in each discipline; the increasing number of students, and the necessity for each to do a piece of research no one has ever done before have tended to narrow the concentration within the discipline imposed by the internal evolution of the subject.*

The product of these educational and scientific developments has been the specialist who is uncultivated outside his own specialty. Except for those strong and expansive personalities whose curiosity and sensitivity lead them to the experience of what their education has failed to give them, even the creative American scientist, scholar, or technologist often possesses only a narrow range of mediocre culture.

The ascent of the universities to preponderance in the life of superior culture in the United States, and increasingly (though still not to the same extent) in Europe, has meant that trends within the university tend to become the trends of intellectual life as a whole to a much greater degree than in earlier periods of modern society. As the universities have become more internally differentiated and specialized, superior cultural life has also tended to become more specialized.

What we are suffering from is the dissolution of "the educated public," coherent although unorganized, with a taste for superior cultural objects with no vocational import. The "universitization" of superior culture—most advanced in America but already visible

* The romantic idea of originality, which claimed that genius must go its own unique way, has been transposed into one that demands that the subject matter should be unique to the investigator. This has led to much specialized triviality in humanistic research.

in Great Britain, too, though not at all a completely realized tendency—is part of this process of the dissolution of the body of consumers of superior culture.

At the same time, it would be disregarding the truth to overlook the extraordinary vitality of the contemporary American university. Vitality by its nature is diffuse and inflammatory. It is possible, therefore, that despite the densely specialized clutter of the postgraduate system and the prevailing pattern of research which is partly a cause and partly a result of that system, this vitality will do more than withstand the pressure; it is possible that it will ignite interest along a broader front than specialized training commands. It is also possible that the waste of undergraduate education will turn into lively cultivation through the vitality of the new generation of college teachers who are at present among the chief consumers and reproducers of superior culture.

Specialization has lessened the coherence of the intellectual community, comprising creators, reproducers and consumers; it has dispersed its focus of attention, and thus left ungratified cultural needs which the mediocre and brutal culture of the mass media and of private life have been called in to satisfy. The consumption of brutal and mediocre culture is the consequence, not the cause, of developments which are quite independent of the specific properties of mass society. As a matter of fact, the vitality, the individuality, which may rehabilitate our intellectual public will probably be the fruits of the liberation of powers and possibilities inherent in mass societies.

The Prospects of Superior Culture in Mass Society

The problems of superior culture in mass society are the same as in any society. These problems are the maintenance of its quality and influence on the rest of the society.

To maintain itself, superior culture must maintain its own traditions and its own internal coherence. The progress of superior culture (and its continued self-renewal and expansion) require that the traditions be sustained, however much they are revised or partially rejected at any time.

Respect for the traditions in one's own field, together with freedom in dealing with those traditions, are the necessary conditions for creative work. The balance between them is difficult to define, and it is no less difficult to discern the conditions under which that balance can be achieved and maintained. Of great importance is the morale (in its broadest sense) of the intellectuals who take on administrative and teaching responsibilities for the maintenance and advancement of high culture. Within this section of the intellectual class, there must be an incessant scrutiny of every institutional innovation, with regard to its possible impact on intellectual morale. An essential element in this internal state is a balance between respect and freedom in relation to the immanent traditions of each field of intellectual work.

Serious intellectuals have never been free from pressure on the part of sectors of society other than their own. The intellectual sector has always been relatively isolated, regardless of the role of intellectuals in economic and political life. The external world is always jealous of the devotion of the intellectuals to their own gods, and of the implicit criticism which that devotion directs against the ruling values of the other spheres. Intellectuals have always been faced with the task of continuing their own tradition, developing it, differentiating it, improving it as best they could. They have always had to contend with church, state, and party, with merchants and soldiers who have sought to enlist them in their service and to restrict and damage them in word and deed if they did not yield to temptations and threats. The present situation has much in common with the past. The responsibilities of intellectuals also remain the same: to serve the standards they discern and develop and to find a way of rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's without renouncing what belongs to their own proper realm.

There is no doubt in my mind that the main "political" tradition by which most of our literary, artistic, and social-science intellectuals have lived in America is unsatisfactory. The fault does not lie exclusively with the intellectuals. The philistine Puritanism and provincialism of our elites share much of the blame, as does the populism of professional and lay politicians. Nonetheless, the intellectuals cannot evade the charge that they have done little to ameliorate the situation. Their own political attitudes have been alienated, they have run off into many directions of frivolity. The most recent of such episodes in the 1930's and 1940's were also the most humiliating, and temporarily the most damaging, to the position of intellectuals in American society.

One of the responsibilities implied by their obligation to maintain good relations with the nonintellectual elite is the "civilization" of political life, i.e., the infusion of the standards and concerns of a serious, intellectually disciplined contemplation of the deeper issues of political life into everyday politics. Our intellectuals have in the

main lectured politicians, upbraided them, looked down their noses at them, opposed them, and even suspected those of their fellow intellectuals who have become politicians of moral corruption and intellectual betrayal.

The intellectuals who have taken on themselves the fostering of superior culture are part of the elite in any country; but in the United States they have not felt bound by any invisible affiliation with the political, economic, ecclesiastical, military, and technological elites.*

The "civilization" of political life is only one aspect of the "process of civilization," which is the expansion of the culture of the center into the peripheries of society and, in this particular context, the diffusion of superior culture into the areas of society normally consuming mediocre and brutal culture.

Within the limits mentioned earlier in this essay, the prospects for superior culture seem to be reasonably good. The overlapping at certain points on the part of the producers of superior culture and those of mediocre culture has resulted in an expansion of the elements of superior culture which reaches persons whose usual inclinations do not lead them to seek it out. Popularization brings a better content, but not all of this expansion is popularization; much of it is the presentation (and consumption) of genuinely superior cultural work. An improvement in our educational system at the elementary and secondary levels, which is assuredly practicable and likely, will also further this process of civilization. A better education of taste, which a richer, less scarcity-harassed society can afford, the opening and enrichment of sensitivity, which leisure and a diversified environment can make possible, and a more fruitful use of available intelligence can also push forward the "process of civilization."

Of course, men will remain men, their capacities to understand, create, and experience will vary, and very many are probably destined to find pleasure and salvation at other and lower cultural levels. For the others, the prospect of a more dignified and richer cultural life does not seem out of the question. It would certainly be an impossible one, however, if all intellectuals devoted themselves to education and popularization. In a short time the superior culture which would be transmitted through the "process of civilization" would fade and dessicate.

* This is not a condition unique to the United States. Only Great Britain has managed to avoid it for most of the period since the French Revolution, yet there, too, the past few years have not provided notable examples of Britain's good fortune in avoiding this separation.

Thus, if the periphery is not to be polished while the center becomes dusty, the first obligation of the intellectuals is to look after intellectual things, to concentrate their powers on the creation and reproduction and consumption of particular works of philosophy, art, science, literature, or scholarship, to receive the traditions in which these works stand with a discriminating readiness to accept, elaborate, or reject. If that is done, there will be nothing to fear from the movement of culture in mass society.