CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

Edited by

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With an Introduction by

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Thus, the functionalization of the world which occurs in both society and mass society deprives the world of culture as well as beauty. Culture can be safe only with those who love the world for its own sake, who know that without the beauty of man-made, worldly things which we call works of art, without the radiant glory in which potential imperishability is made manifest to the world and in the world, all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure.

ERNEST VAN DEN HAAG

A Dissent from the Consensual Society

EDWARD SHILS replaces Van Wyck Brooks' high, middle, and lowbrow classification (lately elaborated fruitfully by Richard Chase[1]) with his own: "refined," "mediocre," and "brutal" culture. The old terminology was unsatisfactory; but the new one is much more so. The evaluative element inherent in both should be formulated independently.[2] It is stronger in the new notation. Further, this notation is misleading in its implications. "Refined" has a genteel connotation, which I find hard to apply to such highbrows as Joyce, Kafka, Dostoyevski, Céline, or Nathanael West. Nor are lowbrow and "brutal" equivalent; indeed, the belief that they are is a middlebrow cliché, a projection of ambivalent desire and fear that identifies vitality and brutality. Actually, much lowbrow culture is maudlin and sentimental rather than brutal.[3] Even the term "mediocre" culture, though less misleading than the others, is not satisfactory and provides a criterion that would be hard to apply.

In my opinion, emphasis on cultural objects misses the point. A sociologist (and to analyze mass culture is a sociological enterprise) must focus on the function of such objects in people's lives: he must study how they are used; who produces what for whom; why, and with what effects. To be sure, value judgments cannot be avoided, but the qualities of the product become relevant only when related to its social functions. Middlebrow culture objects are not necessarily "mediocre." To be a middlebrow is to *relate* to objects, any objects, in a certain way, to give them a specific function in the context of one's life. A middlebrow might, for example, use a phrase, whatever its origin, as a cliché—i.e., in such a way that it loses its emotional impact and specific, concrete meaning and no longer communicates but labels or stereotypes and thus avoids perception and communication. The phrase is not middlebrow (or "mediocre"); he is. Beethoven does not become "mediocre," even though he may be-

come a favored middlebrow composer and function as part of middlebrow culture. Mozart may "tinkle" for the middlebrow; it is not Mozart but the audience that is "mediocre." Indeed, it is characteristic of much middlebrow culture to overuse highbrow cultural objects of the past without understanding them and thus both to honor and debase them. Mr. Shils's terminology precludes the description of cultural dynamics in these terms and thus disregards one of the most important aspects of mass culture: the corruption and sterilization of the heritage of the past.

Mass culture is not the culture of a class or group throughout history. It is the culture of nearly everybody today, and of nearly nobody yesterday; and because of production, market, and social changes, it is quite a new phenomenon which cannot be reduced to quantitative changes nor identified with timeless categories. Mr. Shils dismisses the conditions under which mass culture is produced and consumed with some descriptive phrases but does not relate mass production to the qualities of the cultural objects he discusses. His categories remain ahistorical, even though garnished with familiar historical references. Thus, the problem of mass culture is defined away, instead of being analyzed.

Mr. Shils hopefully maintains that "refined" culture now has become available to more people than ever before. This is true, but it constitutes the problem—not the solution. What are people making of the cultural heritage that is becoming available to them? What impact does it have on them? What are they doing to it? Mass culture involves a change in the conditions in which objects are produced, consumed, and related to on all levels, a change in the role each level plays, and a change finally in the way people relate to each other. At times Mr. Shils seems to recognize this change; but his categories preclude analysis of it. The destruction of folk culture by mass culture is apparently denied and then explained by the hypothesis that the proportion of gifted people remains "fairly constant" in any population and that they are now "diverted into other spheres." This is, of course, what is meant by the destruction of folk culture, in addition to other effects of increased mobility and communication. It is remarkable that Shils also says that, if high culture has declined (which he denies) possibly "our neural equipment is poorer than that of our ancestors." Neither of the two inconsistent hypotheses—unchanged or changed "neural equipment"—can be proved. Does this mean that we can use both? Since we know so little abont neurological change, would it not be sensible to look for social changes to explain cultural

changes? Mr. Shils recognizes social changes but refuses to relate them to cultural changes, which he denies, asserts, deplores, and approves. He cannot be wrong since he has left all possibilities open.

Mr. Shils suggests that anyone critical of mass culture must be a *laudator temporis acti;* I see no basis for this, nor for his own temporal chauvinism. We have no measurements; and history is not a homogeneous stream; hence, comparisons with the past depend largely on the period selected as standard. Comparison of specific aspects and levels of culture may be instructive or, at least, illustrative; but wholesale judgments seem futile.[4]

The crucial issue is fully comprised in the question with which Rostovtzeff concludes his *magnum opus*: "Is it possible to extend a higher civilization to the lower classes without debasing its standard and diluting its quality to the vanishing point? Is not every civilization bound to decay as soon as it begins to penetrate the masses?"

Mr. Shils describes mass society as one in which there is "more sense of attachment to society as a whole . . . more sense of affinity with one's fellows." According to him, the mass stands in a closer relationship to the center; there is a "dispersion of charisma" with "greater stress on individual dignity"; "the value of sensation has come to be widely appreciated"; individuality has been "discovered and developed," as has the value of personal relationships; the masses begin to "become capable of more subtle perception and judgment" as their "moral responsiveness and sensibility are aroused."

The society which Mr. Shils describes is not the one in which I live. I am forced to conjecture that the generosity of his wishes has relaxed the customary strictness of his methods and blunted the accuracy of his perception.[5]

Progress toward the fulfillment of Mr. Shils's wishes is implied by the terms he uses. Yet there are some material doubts. Is "the value of sensation" more widely appreciated than it was in antiquity, the Renaissance, or even the nineteenth century? I find American society singularly antisensual: let me just mention the food served in restaurants, or preprandial cocktails intended—often charitable—to kill sensation. And the congested seating arrangements in restaurants, or the way cities, suburbs, exurbs, and resorts are built hardly support the hypothesis of increased value placed on privacy. Even sex is largely socialized and de-sensualized. Do we stand in closer relationship to the center—or are we alienated, suffering from what Wordsworth described as "perpetual emptiness, unceasing change" because in Yeats'

words, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold"? Has there actually been a "dispersion of charisma"?[6] Or has there been a shift from real to Hollywood queens? Does our society foster "personal relationships," "individuality," and "privacy," or marketability, outer-directedness, and pseudo-personalizations parasitically devouring the genuine personalities of those who assume them? Could Jesus go into the desert today to contemplate? Wouldn't he be followed by a crew of *Life* photographers, cameramen, publishers' agents, etc? What of the gossip columns, of people's interest in other people's *private* lives and particularly their *personal* relations—don't these phenomena suggest a breakdown of reserve, vicarious living—indeed, pseudo-life and experience?

Statistical data reveal that there is now higher income, more education and leisure, more equally distributed, increased mobility, travel, and communication. Undoubtedly there is more material opportunity for more people than ever before. But if so many people are so much better off in so many respects, is culture better than ever? The lowered barriers, the greater wealth, the increased opportunities are material achievements but only cultural promises. Mr. Shils appears to have taken all the promises of the age and confused them with fulfillments. It is as though one were to take the data of the Kinsey report and conclude that since there seems to be so much intercourse, people must love each other more than ever. I have nothing against Mr. Kinsey's entomological enterprise (though it makes me feel waspish). But we must distinguish it from sociological enterprise even though it may furnish raw data for it.

If people address each other by their first names right away do they really love and respect each other more than people who do not? Or does equally easy familiarity with all suggest a lack of differentiation, the very opposite of personal relations, which are based on discriminating among perceived individualities? "In America," de Tocqueville wrote, "the bond of affection is extended but it is relaxed." Mr. Shils notes the extension but not the dilution. Yet extension can be bought at the price of lessened intensity, depth, and stability.

Of course we have more communication and mobility than ever before. But isn't it possible that less is communicated? We have all the opportunities in the world to see, hear, and read more than ever before. Is there any *independent* indication to show that we experience and understand more? Does the constant slick assault on our senses and minds not produce monotony and indifference and prevent experience? Does the discontinuity of most people's lives not unsettle,

and sometimes undo them? We surely have more external contacts than ever before. But most people have less spontaneous and personal (internalized) relationships than they might with fewer contacts and opportunities.

We have more equality of opportunity. But the burden of relative deprivations is felt more acutely the smaller they are and the greater the opportunities.[7] People become resentful and clamor for a different kind of equality, equality at the end rather than the beginning, in short, invidious leveling. Does the comminution of society not alienate people from one another—as the discontinuity of their existence fragments them—and replace their sense of purpose with a sense of meaninglessness? Is the increased "conviviality" Mr. Shils hails more than the wish for "togetherness" which marks the lonely crowd?

Mr. Shils contends that we have more intellectuals, consumers, and producers of "refined" culture than before. In one sense, he is quite right. But these are intellectuals by position (university teachers, authors, et al.), and having more of them tells us nothing about the number of intellectuals by ability, interest, and cultivation. Mr. Shils almost concedes as much. But he remains on the phenomenal level, and never goes to the root:[8] the marginal role, the interstitial life, of intellectuals in a mass culture society. And I mean those who remain engaged in intellectual life and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the status of technicians or manufacturers of middlebrow entertainment.

Similarly, Mr. Shils mentions the possibility that intellectual and artistic creators may be seduced into more remunerative pseudo-creative activities only to dismiss it by pointing out that "the mere existence of opportunity will not seduce a man of strongly impelled creative capacities once he has found his direction." Of course, no one is impelled *only* by "creative capacities." The trouble is that the lure of mass media (and of foundation money and prestige) and the values that go with them are internalized long before the potential creator "has found his direction."

Mr. Shils declares that "the heart of the revolution of mass culture" is "the expanding radius of empathy and fellow feeling" which "have given to youth opportunities never available before." These opportunities, Mr. Shils concedes, are utilized mainly through "mediocre and brutal culture." But he does not point out (though noting the effect) that the appalling ignorance of educated youth is produced by reliance on the equally ignorant peer group which is endowed with "charisma"; by the belief, in short, that there is little to learn from the

past and its representatives. The loss of respect for learning and tradition, particularly in its less tangible aspects, is not independent of the leveling dear to Mr. Shils; it is not unrelated to the widely held view that obsolescence automatically overtakes aesthetic and moral values, as it does technological invention. It should be evident that this notion is generated by the pragmatic nature of mass culture and by the high mobility that Mr. Shils extolls.[9]

To object to some of Mr. Shils's views is to agree with others. For he starts by praising and ends by deploring mass culture. This nice balance is achieved, I feel, at the expense of a coherent theory of mass culture. Let me suggest a few prolegomena to such a theory.

The most general characteristics of mass culture are deducible from premises on which there is no disagreement—they are concomitants of any industrial, mass production society. Among these are increased income, mobility and leisure, more equally distributed; increased egalitarianism, communication and education;[10] more specialization and less scope for individuality in work. The consequences that I deduce from these premises are consistent and fit my impressions. But there is no strict empirical proof, although I do believe it may be possible to test some of these hypotheses after appropriate reformulation. Further, other hypotheses may be consistent with these premises, and the real question turns on their relative importance and relevance. With these qualifications, I submit that this quasi-deductive method which relates the ascertainable to the less tangible is the only one that can yield a theory of mass culture deserving the name "theory."

(1) There is a separation of the manufacturers of culture from the consumers, which is part of the general separation of production and consumption and of work and play. Culture becomes largely a spectator sport, and life and experience become exogenous and largely vicarious. (Nothing will dissuade me from seeing a difference between a young girl walking around with her pocket radio listening to popular songs and one who sings herself; nor am I persuaded that the tales collected by the brothers Grimm remain the same when enacted on television or synthetically reproduced by Walt Disney.)

(2) Mass production aims at pleasing an average of tastes and therefore, though catering to all to some extent, it cannot satisfy any taste fully. Standardization is required and necessarily de-individualizes—as do the techniques required by mass production and marketing.

(3) Since culture, like everything else in a mass society, is mainly produced to please an average of consumer tastes, the producers become (and remain) an elite by catering to consumer tastes rather than developing or cultivating autonomous ones. Initiative, and power to bestow prestige and income, have shifted from the elite to the mass. The difference may be seen by comparing the development of ritual dogmatic beliefs and practices in the Protestant denominations and in the Roman Catholic church. The latter has minimized, the former maximized dependence on consumers. In the Protestant churches, there is, therefore, no body of religious (as distinguished from moral) beliefs left, except as an intellectual curiosity.

(4) The mass of men dislikes and always has disliked learning and art. It wishes to be distracted from life rather than to have it revealed; to be comforted by traditional (possibly happy and sentimental) tropes, rather than to be upset by new ones. It is true that it wishes to be thrilled, too. But irrational violence or vulgarity provides thrills, as well as release, just as sentimentality provides escape. What is new here is that, apart from the fact that irrelevant thrills and emotions are now prefabricated, the elite is no longer protected from the demands of the mass consumers.

(5) As a result of the high psychological and economic costs of individuality and privacy, gregariousness has become internalized. People fear solitude and unpopularity; popular approval becomes the only moral and aesthetic standard most people recognize. This tendency is reinforced by the shrinkage in the importance and size of primary groups, which have also become looser; by a corresponding increase in the size and importance of secondary groups and publics; and finally, by the shift of many of the functions of primary to secondary groups.

(6) The greatly increased lure of mass markets for both producers and consumers diverts potential talent from the creation of art. (Within the arts, the performing do better than the creative ones.) Here interesting empirical questions arise: to what extent is talent bent endogenously and exogenously? to what extent can it be?

(7) Excessive communication serves to isolate people from one another, from themselves, and from experience. It extends bonds by weakening them. People become indifferently and indiscriminately tolerant; their own life as well as everything else is trivialized, eclectic, and styleless.

(8) Mass media for inherent reasons must conform to prevailing

average canons of taste.[12] They cannot foster art; indeed, they replace it. When they take up classics, they usually reshape them to meet expectations. But even when that is not the case, they cannot hope to individualize and refine taste, though they may occasionally supply an already formed taste for high culture. Half a loaf, in these matters, spoils the appetite, even with vitamins added, and is not better than none. The technical availability of good reproductions and the paperback editions of noncondensed books are unlikely to change this situation; they often add alien elements which merely decorate lives styled by mass culture.[13]

(9) The total effect of mass culture is to distract people from lives which are so boring that they generate obsession with escape. Yet because mass culture creates addiction to prefabricated experience, most people are deprived of the remaining possibilities of autonomous growth and enrichment, and their lives become ever more boring and unfulfilled.

This very brief sketch of the general features of mass culture should make it clear that I do not agree with those optimists who favor and believe possible the wide presentation of "refined" culture through the mass media. I do not think this desirable or desired. Nor, for that matter, practicable. People get what they wish and I see no way of imposing anything else on them. I have to disagree with those who appear to think that the issue is to improve the culture offered the mass of men and to try to reach the masses in greater and greater numbers. My conclusion is different: high or refined culture, in my opinion, is best preserved and developed by avoiding mass media. I should go further and give up some advantages of mass production for the sake of greater individualization. This would reverse many present policies. For instance, I should favor fairly high direct taxes on most mass media, or a tax on advertising. Perhaps we are still capable of replacing the noise that would be thus eliminated with conversation.

REFERENCES

1 Richard Chase, *The Democratic Vista*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1958.

2 Unless it is contended that everything (and everyhody) "refined" is morally and aesthetically superior to everything (and everybody) "brutal" or "mediocre," etc. Yet the possibility of excellence *sui generis* must not be excluded by definition—unless, instead of social and cultural, purely aesthetic categories are to be discussed. On this score—and in the whole taxonomic scheme —Mr. Shils is confusing.

3 See *True Romances*, various soap operas, and lowbrow religious and familial piety. "Kitsch," which is part of low and of middle-lowbrow culture, means corny sentimentalization and, contrary to Mr. Shils, it does not "represent aesthetic sensibility and aesthetic aspiration, untutored . . ." but a synthetic, an *Ersatz* for both. Paper flowers, however real they look, will never grow.

4 Elsewhere Mr. Shils has suggested that critics of mass culture are sour ex-Marxists. Possibly. Ex-Marxists are likely to be critical minds. That is what made them first Marxists and then ex. But though ex-Marxists may incline to be critics of mass culture (and only some, by no means all), the converse certainly does not follow. At any rate, I am tempted to paraphrase advice attributed to Lincoln: abstemious sociologists might benefit by a draught of radical ex-Marxism.

5 John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty*, ch. 3) concludes his discussion of the power of public opinion in egalitarian societies by pointing out that as leveling proceeds, "there ceases to be any social support for nonconformity . . . any substantive power in society which . . . is interested in taking under its protection opinions and tendencies at variance with those of the public." From de Tocqueville to David Riesman, the dangers of "cultural democracy" have been considered. I do not believe that Mr. Shils comes seriously to grips with these dangers.

6 I am not convinced even that the greater inclusiveness of our society can quite be taken for granted. The fate of the Jews in Germany cannot be that easily dismissed. Nazism was political Kitsch as well as a rise of "brutal culture."

7 "The more complete this uniformity the more insupportable the sight of such a difference becomes," de Tocqueville notes.

8 Even on that level, one might quarrel with Mr. Shils. England is not yet as much imbued with mass culture as we are. The class system and selective education have not been entirely overcome; nor have the traditions of elite culture. With only a quarter of our population—not to speak of wealth—England publishes more books every year than we do. And it has at least as many economists, philosophers, and novelists of the first rank as we do.

9 The phenomenon is part of mass culture everywhere, but the ignorance and rejection of the past were particularly fostered in America because of the immigrant background of many parents, the melting-pot nature of the school system, and the rapid rate of change which makes the experience of the old seem old-fashioned and diminishes their authority.

10 Note that more has to be learned through formal instruction, partly because less culture is transmitted informally and individually. This is no advantage because our school system helps bring about the spread of a homogenized mass culture intentionally and unintentionally.

11 For a fuller exposition of my views, see Ralph Ross and Ernest van den Haag, *The Fabric of Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957), ch. 15.

12 In Frank Stanton's words, "Any mass medium will always have to cater to the middle grounds . . . the most widely held, or cease to be."

13 Joseph Bram has called my attention to the several distinct phases of mass culture. It often begins with a rather moving attempt of the uneducated to become seriously educated. One sees this in countries beginning their industrial development. The adulteration of, and disrespect for, education comes with full industrialization, when the mass culture market is created and supplied with goods manufactured for it.

OSCAR HANDLIN

Comments on Mass and Popular Culture

THE QUESTION of the uses of culture, raised in this discussion, offers a strategic point for analysis of the differences between those forms of expression communicated by the mass media and all other popular varieties of art. For, although no society has been devoid of culture, that which we now associate with the mass media appears to be unique in its relationship to the way of life of the people. A brief consideration of the function of culture will illuminate the character of that uniqueness.

Until the appearance of those phenomena which we now associate with the mass media, culture was always considered incidental to some social end. Men did not build architecture or compose music in the abstract. They constructed churches in which to worship or homes in which to live. They composed masses and cantatas as parts of a sacred service. The forms within which they built or composed were important in themselves, but they were also intimately related to the functions they served for those who used them.

Hence the significance of Miss Arendt's suggestive statement which pointed out that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, culture acquired another kind of utility: that is, it became a means by which the bourgeoisie sought to identify itself with aristocratic society. I would add that an analogous development occurred in the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, complicated by the fact that here the aristocracy was putative only and had to improvise its own standards. The difficulty of doing so brought the whole process to the surface and as a result it was much more open and visible in America than in Europe.

In any case, by 1900 almost everywhere in the Western world the term culture had acquired a distinctive connotation, just as the term Society had. Society no longer referred to the total order of the popu-