2 The 'culture and civilization' tradition

The popular culture of the majority has always been a concern of powerful minorities. Those with political power have always thought it necessary to police the culture of those without political power, reading it 'symptomatically' (see Chapter 6) for signs of political unrest; reshaping it continually through patronage and direct intervention. In the nineteenth century, however, there is a fundamental change in this relationship. Those with power lose, for a crucial period, the means to control the culture of the subordinate classes. When they begin to recover control, it is culture itself, and not culture as a symptom or sign of something else, that becomes, really for the first time, the actual focus of concern. As we noted at the end of Chapter 1, two factors are crucial to an understanding of these changes: industrialization and urbanization. Together they produce other changes that contribute to the making of a popular culture that marks a decisive break with the cultural relationships of the past.

If we take early nineteenth-century Manchester as our example of the new industrial urban civilization, certain points become clear. First of all, the town evolved clear lines of class segregation; second, residential separation was compounded by the new work relations of industrial capitalism. Third, on the basis of changes in living and working relations, there developed cultural changes. Put very simply, the Manchester working class was given space to develop an independent culture at some remove from the direct intervention of the dominant classes. Industrialization and urbanization had redrawn the cultural map. No longer was there a shared common culture, with an additional culture of the powerful. Now, for the first time in history, there was a separate culture of the subordinate classes of the urban and industrial centres. It was a culture of two main sources: (i) a culture offered for profit by the new cultural entrepreneurs, and (ii) a culture made by and for the political agitation of radical artisans, the new urban working class and middle-class reformers, all described so well by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (see Chapter 3). Each of these developments in different ways threatened traditional notions of cultural cohesion and social stability. One threatened to weaken authority through the commercial dismantling of cultural cohesion; the other offered a direct challenge to all forms of political and cultural authority.

These were not developments guaranteed to hearten those who feared for the continuation of a social order based on power and privilege. Such developments, it was argued, could only mean a weakening of social stability, a destabilizing of the social

order. It marked the beginning of what Benjamin Disraeli would call the 'two nations' (Disraeli, 1980), and it eventually gave birth to the first political and cultural movement of the new urban working class – Chartism. It is out of this context, and its continuing aftermath, which the *political* study of popular culture first emerges.

Matthew Arnold

The study of popular culture in the modern age can be said to begin with the work of Matthew Arnold. In some ways this is surprising as he had very little to say directly about popular culture. Arnold's significance is that he inaugurates a tradition, a particular way of seeing popular culture, a particular way of placing popular culture within the general field of culture. The tradition has come to be known as the 'culture and civilization' tradition. My discussion of Arnold's contribution to the study of popular culture will focus mainly (but not exclusively) on *Culture and Anarchy* (1867–9), the work that secured, and continues to sustain, his reputation as a cultural critic. Arnold established a cultural agenda that remained dominant in debate from the 1860s until the 1950s. His significance, therefore, lies not with any body of empirical work, but with the enormous influence of his general perspective – the Arnoldian perspective – on popular culture.

For Arnold (1960), culture begins by meaning two things. First and foremost, it is a body of knowledge: in Arnold's famous phrase, 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' (6). Secondly, culture is concerned 'to make reason and the will of God prevail' (42). It is in the 'sweetness and light' of the second claim that 'the moral, social, and beneficial character of culture becomes manifest' (46). That is, 'culture . . . is a study of perfection . . . perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances' (48). In other words, culture is the endeavour to know the best and to make this knowledge prevail for the good of all humankind. But how is culture to be attained? According to Arnold, we shall attain it by 'the disinterested and active use of reading, reflection, and observation, in the endeavour to know the best that can be known' (179). Culture, therefore, no longer consists in two things, but in three. Culture is now the means to know the best that has been thought and said, as well as that body of knowledge and the application of that knowledge to the 'inward condition of the mind and spirit' (31). There is, however, a fourth aspect to consider: Arnold insists that culture seeks 'to minister to the diseased spirit of our time' (163). This would appear to be an example of culture's third aspect. However, we are quickly told that culture will play its part 'not so much by lending a hand to our friends and countrymen in their *actual operations* for the removal of certain definite evils, but rather in getting our countrymen to seek culture' (163–4; my italics). This is Arnold's fourth and final definition: culture is the seeking of culture, what Arnold calls 'cultivated inaction' (163). For Arnold, then, culture is: (i) the ability to know what is best; (ii) what

is best; (iii) the mental and spiritual application of what is best, and (iv) the pursuit of what is best.

Popular culture is never actually defined. However, it becomes clear when reading through Arnold's work that the term 'anarchy' operates in part as a synonym for popular culture. Specifically, anarchy/popular culture is used to refer to Arnold's conception of the supposedly disruptive nature of working-class lived culture: the political dangers that he believes to be inevitably concomitant with the entry of the male urban working class into formal politics in 1867. The upshot of this is that anarchy and culture are for Arnold deeply political concepts. The social function of culture is to police this disruptive presence: the 'raw and uncultivated . . . masses' (176); 'the raw and unkindled masses' (69); 'our masses . . . quite as raw and uncultivated as the French' (76); 'those vast, miserable unmanageable masses of sunken people' (193). The problem is working-class lived culture: 'The rough [i.e. a working-class political protester] . . . asserting his personal liberty a little, going where he likes, assembling where he likes, bawling as he likes, hustling as he likes' (80–1). Again:

> the working class . . . raw and half developed . . . long lain half hidden amidst its poverty and squalor . . . now issuing from its hiding place to assert an Englishman's heaven born privilege of doing as he likes, and beginning to perplex *us* by marching where it likes, meeting where it likes, bawling what it likes, breaking what it likes (105; my italics).

The context of all this is the suffrage agitation of 1866–7. Arnold's employment of the phrase 'beginning to perplex us' is a clear indication of the class nature of his discourse. His division of society into Barbarians (aristocracy), Philistines (middle class) and Populace (working class) would seem at first sight to defuse the class nature of this discourse. This seems to be supported by his claim that under all 'our class divisions, there is a common basis of human nature' (ibid.). However, if we examine what Arnold means by a common basis, we are forced to a different conclusion. If we imagine the human race existing on an evolutionary continuum with itself at one end and a common ancestor shared with the ape at the other, what Arnold seems to be suggesting is that the aristocracy and middle class are further along the evolutionary continuum than the working class. This is shown quite clearly in his example of the common basis of our human nature. He claims that

> every time that we snatch up a vehement opinion in ignorance and passion, every time that we long to crush an adversary by sheer violence, every time that we are envious, every time that we are brutal, every time that we adore mere power or success, every time that we add our voice to swell a blind clamour against some unpopular personage, every time that we trample savagely on the fallen [we have] found in our own bosom the eternal spirit of the Populace (107).

According to Arnold, it takes only a little help from 'circumstances' to make this 'eternal spirit' triumph in both Barbarian and Philistine. Culture has two functions in

this scenario. First, it must carefully guide the aristocracy and the middle class from such circumstances. Second, it must bring to the working class, the class in which this so-called human nature is said to reside, 'a much wanted principle . . . of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy that seems to be threatening us' (82). The principle of authority, as we shall see, is to be found in a strong centralized State.

Why did Arnold think like this? The answer has a great deal to do with the historical changes witnessed by the nineteenth century. When he recommends culture 'as the great help out of our present difficulties' (6), it is these changes he has in mind. The 'present difficulties' have a double context. On the one hand, they are the immediate 'problems' raised by the granting of the franchise to the male urban working class. On the other, they are recognition of a historical process that had been in play from at least the eighteenth century (the development of industrial capitalism). Arnold believed that the franchise had given power to men as yet uneducated for power. A working class which has lost 'the strong feudal habits of subordination and deference' (76) is a very dangerous working class. It is the function of education to restore a sense of subordination and deference to the class. In short, education would bring to the working class a 'culture' that would in turn remove the temptations of trade unionism, political agitation and cheap entertainment. In short, culture would remove popular culture.

Against such 'anarchy', culture recommends the State: 'We want an authority . . . culture suggests the idea of the State' (96). Two factors make the State necessary. First, the decline of the aristocracy as a centre of authority; second, the rise of democracy. Together they create a terrain favourable to anarchy. The solution is to occupy this terrain with a mixture of culture and coercion. Arnold's cultured State is to function to control and curtail the social, economic and cultural aspirations of the working class until the middle class is sufficiently cultured to take on this function itself. The State will operate in two ways: (i) through coercion to ensure no more Hyde Park riots, and (ii) through the instilling of the 'sweetness and light' of culture.

Culture and Anarchy informs its reader that 'education is the road to culture' (209). It is, therefore, worth looking briefly at his vision of education. Arnold does not envisage working-class, middle-class and aristocratic students all walking down the same road to culture. For the aristocracy, education is to accustom it to decline, to banish it as a class to history. For the working class, education is to civilize it for subordination, deference and exploitation. Arnold saw working-class schools (primary and elementary) as little more than outposts of civilization in a dark continent of working-class barbarism: 'they civilize the neighbourhood where they are placed' (1973: 39). According to Arnold, working-class children had to be civilized before they could be instructed. In a letter to his mother, written in 1862, he writes: 'the State has an interest in the primary school as a civilizing agent, even prior to its interest in it as an instructing agent' (1896: 187). It was culture's task to accomplish this. For the middle class, education was something quite different. Its essential function is to prepare middle-class children for the power that is to be theirs. Its aim is to convert 'a middle class, narrow, ungenial, and unattractive [into] a cultured, liberalised, ennobled, transformed middle class, [one to which the working class] may with joy direct its aspirations' (1954: 343).

Arnold (1960) called his various proposals, quoting the Duke of Wellington, 'a revolution by due course of law' (97). What it amounts to is a revolution from above, a revolution to prevent popular revolution from below. It works on the principle that a reform given is always better than a reform taken, forced or won. Popular demands are met, but in such a way as to weaken claims for further demands. It is not that Arnold did not desire a better society, one with less squalor, less poverty, less ignorance, etc., but that a better society could never be envisaged as other than a society in which the new urban middle class were 'hegemonic' (see Chapter 4).

Most of what I have said is a roundabout way of saying that the first grand theorist of popular culture had in fact very little to say about popular culture, except, that is, to say that it is symptomatic of a profound political disorder. Culture is not the main concern of Arnold's work; rather the main concern is social order, social authority, won through cultural subordination and deference. Working-class culture is significant to the extent that it signals evidence of social and cultural disorder and decline – a breakdown in social and cultural authority. The fact that working-class culture exists at all is evidence enough of decline and disorder. Working-class 'anarchy' is to be suppressed by the harmonious influences of culture – 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'.

Many of Arnold's ideas are derived from the Romantic critique of industrialism (see Williams, 1963). One writer in particular seems especially relevant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge (1972) distinguishes between 'civilisation' ('a mixed good, if not far more a corrupting influence') and 'cultivation' ('the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties which characterise our humanity') (33). To simplify, Coleridge suggests that civilization refers to the nation as a whole; cultivation is the property of a small minority, whom he calls the 'clerisy'. It is the function of the cultivated clerisy to guide the progress of civilization:

> the objects and final intention of the whole order being these – preserve the stores, and to guard the treasures, of past civilisation, and thus to bind the present to the past; to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future; but especially to diffuse through the whole community, and to every native entitled to its laws and rights, that quantity and quality of knowledge which was indispensable both for understanding of those rights, and for the performance of the duties correspondent (34).

Arnold builds on Coleridge's ideas. Instead of a clerisy, he writes of 'aliens' or 'the remnant'. But the purpose is essentially the same: the mobilization of culture to police the unruly forces of mass society. According to Arnold, history shows that societies have always been destroyed by 'the moral failure of the unsound majority' (1954: 640). Such a reading of history is hardly likely to inspire much confidence in democracy – let alone in popular culture. Arnold's vision is based on a curious paradox; the men and women of culture know the best that has been thought and said, but for whom are they preserving these treasures when the majority is unsound and has always been, and always will be, unsound? The inescapable answer seems to be: for themselves, a self-perpetuating

cultural elite. All that is required from the rest of us is to recognize our cultural difference and acknowledge our cultural deference. Arnold is clear on this point:

> The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them. On these inadequate ideas reposes, and must repose, the general practice of the world. That is as much as saying that whoever sets himself to see things as they are will find himself one of a very small circle; but it is only by this small circle resolutely doing its own work that adequate ideas will ever get current at all (364–5).

And again,

> The highly instructed few, and not the scantily instructed many, will ever be the organ to the human race of knowledge and truth. Knowledge and truth in the full sense of the words, are not attainable by the great mass of the human race at all (Arnold, 1960–77: 591).

These are very revealing statements. If the mass of humankind is to be always satisfied with inadequate ideas, never able to attain truth and knowledge, for whom are the small circle working? And what of the adequate ideas they will make current – current for whom? For other small circles of elites? Arnold's small circle would appear to be little more than a self-perpetuating intellectual elite. If they are never to engage in practical politics, and never to have any real influence on the mass of humankind, what is the purpose of all the grand humanistic claims to be found scattered throughout Arnold's work? It would appear that Arnold has been ensnared by his own elitism: and the working class are destined to remain to wallow in 'their beer, their gin, and their fun' (1954: 591). However, Arnold does not so much reject practical politics, as leave them in the safe hands of established authority. Therefore, the only politics that are being rejected are the politics of protest, the politics of opposition. This is a very stale defence of the dominant order. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, his influence has been enormous in that the Arnoldian perspective virtually mapped out the way of thinking about popular culture and cultural politics that dominated the field until the late l950s.

Leavisism

> For Matthew Arnold it was in some ways less difficult. I am thinking of the so much more desperate plight of culture today (Leavis, 2009: 12).

The influence of Arnold on F.R. Leavis is there for all to see. Leavis takes Arnold's cultural politics and applies them to the supposed 'cultural crisis' of the 1930s. According to Leavis and the Leavisites, the twentieth century is marked by an increasing cultural

decline. What had been identified by Arnold as a feature of the nineteenth century, it is argued, had continued and been compounded in the twentieth: that is, the increasing spread of a culture of 'standardisation and levelling down' (Leavis and Thompson, 1977: 3). It is against this process and its results that 'the citizen . . . must be trained to discriminate and to resist' (5).

The work of Leavisism spans a period of some forty years. However, the Leavisite attitude to popular culture was formed in the early 1930s with the publication of three texts: *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, by F.R. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, by Q.D. Leavis and *Culture and Environment*, by F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson. Together these form the basis of the Leavisite response to popular culture.

Leavisism is based on the assumption that 'culture has always been in minority keeping' (Leavis and Thompson, 1977: 3):

> Upon the minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there (5).

What has changed is the status of this minority. No longer can it command cultural deference, no longer is its cultural authority unchallenged. Q.D. Leavis (1978) refers to a situation in which 'the minority, who had hitherto set the standard of taste without any serious challenge' have experienced a 'collapse of authority' (185, 187). Just as Arnold regretted the passing of 'the strong feudal habits of subordination and deference' (see previous section), Q.D. Leavis is nostalgic for a time when the masses exhibited an 'unquestioning assent to authority' (191).[5] She quotes Edmund Gosse to confirm the seriousness of the situation:

> One danger which I have long foreseen from the spread of the democratic sentiment, is that of the traditions of literary taste, the canons of literature, being reversed with success by a popular vote. Up to the present time, in all parts of the world, the masses of uneducated or semieducated persons, who form the vast majority of readers, though they cannot and do not appreciate the classics of their race, have been content to acknowledge their traditional supremacy. Of late there have seemed to me to be certain signs, especially in America, of a revolt of the mob against our literary masters. . . . If literature is to be judged by a plebiscite and if the plebs recognises its power, it will certainly by degrees cease to support reputations which give it no pleasure and which it cannot comprehend. The revolution against taste, once begun, will land us in irreparable chaos (190).

According to Leavis and Thompson, what Gosse had only feared had now come to pass:

> culture has always been in minority keeping. But the minority now is made conscious, not merely of an uncongenial, but of a hostile environment. . . .

> 'Civilisation' and 'culture' are coming to be antithetical terms. It is not merely that the power and the sense of authority are now divorced from culture, but that some of the most disinterested solicitude for civilisation is apt to be, consciously or unconsciously, inimical to culture (1977: 26).

Mass civilization and its mass culture pose a subversive front, threatening 'to land us in irreparable chaos'. It is against this threat that Leavisism writes its manifestos, and proposes 'to introduce into schools a training in resistance [to mass culture]' (Leavis, 1933: 188–9); and outside schools, to promote a 'conscious and directed effort . . . [to] take the form of resistance by an armed and active minority' (Q.D. Leavis, 1978: 270). The threat of democracy in matters both cultural and political is a terrifying thought for Leavisism. Moreover, according to Q.D. Leavis, 'The people with power no longer represent intellectual authority and culture' (191). Like Arnold, she sees the collapse of traditional authority coming at the same time as the rise of mass democracy. Together they squeeze the cultured minority and produce a terrain favourable for 'anarchy'.

Leavisism isolates certain key aspects of mass culture for special discussion. Popular fiction, for example, is condemned for offering addictive forms of 'compensation' and 'distraction':

> This form of compensation . . . is the very reverse of recreation, in that it tends, not to strengthen and refresh the addict for living, but to increase his unfitness by habituating him to weak evasions, to the refusal to face reality at all (Leavis and Thompson, 1977: 100).

Q.D. Leavis (1978) refers to such reading as 'a drug addiction to fiction' (152), and for those readers of romantic fiction it can lead to 'a habit of fantasying [which] will lead to maladjustment in actual life' (54). Self-abuse is one thing, but there is worse: their addiction 'helps to make a social atmosphere unfavourable to the aspirations of the minority. They actually get in the way of genuine feeling and responsible thinking' (74). For those not addicted to popular fiction, there is always the danger of cinema. Its popularity makes it a very dangerous source of pleasure indeed: 'they [films] involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals, appeals the more insidious because they are associated with a compellingly vivid illusion of actual life' (Leavis, 2009: 14). For Q.D. Leavis (1978), Hollywood films are 'largely masturbatory' (165). Although the popular press is described as 'the most powerful and pervasive de-educator of the public mind' (Leavis and Thompson, 1977: 138), and radio is claimed to be putting an end to critical thought (Leavis, 2009), it is for advertising, with its 'unremitting, pervasive, masturbatory manipulations' (Leavis and Thompson, 1977: 139), that Leavisism saves its most condemnatory tone.

Advertising, and how it is consumed, is Leavisism's main symptom of cultural decline. To understand why, we must understand Leavisism's attitude to language. In *Culture and Environment*, Leavis and Thompson state: 'it should be brought home to learners that this debasement of language is not merely a matter of words; it is a

debasement of emotional life, and the quality of living' (1977: 4). Advertising, therefore, is not just blamed for debasing the language, but condemned for debasing the emotional life of the whole language community, reducing 'the standard of living'. They provide examples for analysis (mostly written by F.R. Leavis himself). The questions they pose are very revealing of Leavisism's general attitude. Here is a typical example, an advert for 'Two Quakers' tobacco:

> **THE TOBACCO OF TYPICAL TWIST**
> 'Yes, it's the best I've ever smoked. But it's deuced expensive.' 'What's the tuppence extra? And anyway, you get it back an' more. Burns clean and slow that's the typical twist, gives it the odd look. Cute scientific dodge. You see, they experimented. . . .' 'Oh! cut the cackle, and give us another fill. You talk like an advertisement.' Thereafter peace and a pipe of Two Quakers.

They then suggest the following questions for school students in the fifth and sixth forms:

1 Describe the type of person represented.
2 How are you expected to feel towards him?
3 What do you think his attitude would be towards us? How would he behave in situations where mob passions run high? (16–17)

Two things are remarkable about these questions. First of all, the connection that is made between the advertisement and so-called mob passions. This is an unusual question, even for students of cultural studies. Second, notice the exclusive 'we'; and note also how the pronoun attempts to construct membership of a small educated elite. Other questions operate in much the same way. Here are a few examples:

> Describe the kind of reader this passage would please, and say why it would please him. What kind of person can you imagine responding to such an appeal as this last? What acquaintance would you expect them to have of Shakespeare's work and what capacity for appreciating it? (40).
>
> Pupils can be asked to recall their own observations of the kind of people they may have seen visiting 'shrines' (51).
>
> In the light of the 'Gresham Law', what kind of influence do you expect the cinema to have on general taste and mentality? (114).
>
> What kind of standards are implied here? What would you judge to be the quality of the 'literature' he reads, and the reading he devotes to it? (119).
>
> Why do we wince at the mentality that uses this idiom? (121).
>
> [After describing the cinema as 'cheapening, debasing, distorting']: Develop the discussion of the educational value of cinema as suggested here (144).

It is difficult to see how such questions, rather than encouraging 'discrimination and resistance', would invite anything other than a critically debilitating and self-confirming snobbery.

In a temporary escape from the 'irreparable chaos' of the present, Leavisism looks back longingly to a cultural golden age, a mythic rural past, when there existed a shared culture uncorrupted by commercial interests. The Elizabethan period of Shakespeare's theatre is often cited as a time of cultural coherence before the cultural disintegration of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. F.R. Leavis (1933) writes of Shakespeare belonging 'to a genuinely national culture, to a community in which it was possible for the theatre to appeal to the cultivated and the populace at the same time' (216). Q.D. Leavis (1978), in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, has charted this supposed decline. Her account of the organic relations between populace and cultivated are very revealing: 'the masses were receiving their amusement from above. . . . They had to take the same amusements as their betters. . . . Happily, they had no choice' (85). According to Q.D. Leavis,

> the spectator of Elizabethan drama, though he might not be able to follow the 'thought' minutely in the great tragedies, was getting his amusement from the mind and sensibility that produced those passages, from an artist and not from one of his own class. There was then no such complete separation as we have . . . between the life of the cultivated and the life of the generality (264).

What is interesting about their account of the past is what it reveals about their ideal future. The golden age was not just marked by cultural coherence, but happily for the Leavisites, a cultural coherence based on authoritarian and hierarchical principles. It was a common culture that gave intellectual stimulation at one end, and affective pleasure at the other. This was a mythic world in which everyone knew their place, knew their station in life. F.R. Leavis (1984) is insistent 'that there was in the seventeenth century, a real culture of the people . . . a rich traditional culture . . . a positive culture which has disappeared' (188–9). Most of this culture was, according to Leavisism, destroyed by the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The last remnants of the organic community, however, could still be found in rural communities in nineteenth-century England. He cites the works of George Bourne, *Change in the Village* and *The Wheelwright's Shop*, as evidence of this.[6] In the opening pages of *Culture and Environment*, F.R. Leavis and Thompson (1977) offer a reminder of what had been lost:

> What we have lost is the organic community with the living culture it embodied. Folk songs, folk dances, Cotswold cottages and handicraft products are signs and expressions of something more: an art of life, a way of living, ordered and patterned, involving social arts, codes of intercourse and a responsive adjustment, growing out of immemorial experience, to the natural environment and the rhythm of the year (1–2).

They also claim that the quality of work has also deteriorated with the loss of the organic community. The growing importance placed on leisure is seen as a sign of this

loss. Whereas in the past a worker lived in his or her work, he or she now works in order to live outside his or her work. But as a result of industrialization, the experience of work has deteriorated to such an extent that workers are actually 'incapacitated by their work' (69). Therefore, instead of recreation (re-creating what is lost in work), leisure provides workers with only 'decreation' (a compounding of the loss experienced through work). Given such a situation, it is little wonder that people turn to mass culture for compensation and passive distraction; the drug habit develops and they become junkies addicted to 'substitute living'. A world of rural rhythms has been lost to the monotony and mediocrity of 'suburbanism' (99). Whereas in the organic community everyday culture was a constant support to the health of the individual, in mass civilization one must make a conscious and directed effort to avoid the unhealthy influence of everyday culture. The Leavisites fail to mention, as Williams (1963) remarks, 'the penury, the petty tyranny, the disease and mortality, the ignorance and frustrated intelligence which were also among its ingredients' (253). What we are presented with is not a historical account, but a literary myth to draw attention to the nature of our supposed loss: 'the memory of the old order must be the chief incitement towards a new' (Leavis and Thompson, 1977: 97). But, although the organic community is lost, it is still possible to get access to its values and standards by reading works of great literature. Literature is a treasury embodying all that is to be valued in human experience. Unfortunately, literature as the jewel in the crown of culture, has, like culture, lost its authority. Leavisism, as noted earlier, made plans to remedy this by dispatching cultural missionaries, a small select band of literary intellectuals, to establish outposts of culture within universities to maintain the literary/cultural tradition and encourage its 'continuous collaborative renewal' (Leavis, 1972: 27); and into schools to arm students to wage war against the general barbarism of mass culture and mass civilization. The re-establishment of literature's authority would not of course herald the return of the organic community, but it would keep under control the expansion of the influence of mass culture and thus preserve and maintain the continuity of England's cultural tradition. In short, it would help maintain and produce an 'educated public', who would continue the Arnoldian project of keeping in circulation 'the best that has been thought and said' (now more or less reduced to the reading of works of great literature).

It is very easy to be critical of the Leavisite approach to popular culture. But, as Bennett (1982b) points out,

> Even as late as the mid fifties . . . 'Leavisism' [provided] the only developed intellectual terrain on which it was possible to engage with the study of popular culture. Historically, of course, the work produced by the 'Leavisites' was of seminal importance, constituting the first attempt to apply to popular forms techniques of literary analysis previously reserved for 'serious' works. . . . Perhaps more importantly, the general impact of 'Leavisism' at least as scathing in its criticisms of established 'high' and 'middle brow' culture as of popular forms tended to unsettle the prevailing canons of aesthetic judgement and evaluation with, in the long term, quite radical and often unforeseen consequences (5–6).

In Chapter 3 we shall begin to consider some of these radical and often unforeseen consequences as they appear in the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams.

Mass culture in America: the post-war debate

In the first fifteen or so years following the end of the Second World War, American intellectuals engaged in a debate about so-called mass culture. Andrew Ross (1989) sees 'mass' as 'one of the key terms that governs the official distinction between American/UnAmerican' (42). He argues that, '[t]he history behind this official distinction is in many ways the history of the formation of the modern national culture' (ibid.). Following the Second World War, America experienced the temporary success of a cultural and political consensus – supposedly based on liberalism, pluralism and classlessness. Until its collapse in the agitation for black civil rights, the formation of the counterculture, the opposition to America's war in Vietnam, the women's liberation movement, and the campaign for gay and lesbian rights, it was a consensus dependent to a large extent on the cultural authority of American intellectuals. As Ross points out: 'For perhaps the first time in American history, intellectuals, as a social grouping, had the opportunity to recognize themselves as national agents of cultural, moral, and political leadership' (43). This newly found significance was in part due to 'the intense, and quite public, debate about "mass culture" that occupied intellectuals for almost fifteen years, until the late fifties' (ibid.). Ross spends most of his time relating the debate to the Cold War ideology of 'containment': the need to maintain a healthy body politic both within (from the dangers of cultural impoverishment) and without (from the dangers of Soviet communism). He identifies three positions in the debate:

1. An aesthetic–liberal position that bemoans the fact that given the choice the majority of the population choose so-called second- and third-rate cultural texts and practices in preference to the texts and practices of high culture.
2. The corporate–liberal or progressive–evolutionist position that claims that popular culture serves a benign function of socializing people into the pleasures of consumption in the new capitalist–consumerist society.
3. The radical or socialist position which views mass culture as a form of, or means to, social control.

Towards the end of the 1950s, the debate became increasingly dominated by the first two positions. This reflected in part the growing McCarthyite pressure to renounce anything resembling a socialist analysis. Given limited space, I will focus only on the debate about the health of the body politic within. In order to understand the debate one publication is essential reading – the anthology *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, published in 1957. Reading the many contributions, one quickly gets a sense

of the parameters of the debate – what is at stake in the debate, and who are the principal participants.

Bernard Rosenberg (co-editor with David Manning White) argues that the material wealth and well-being of American society are being undermined by the dehumanizing effects of mass culture. His greatest anxiety is that, 'At worst, mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism' (1957: 9). He claims that mass culture is not American by nature, or by example, nor is it the inevitable culture of democracy. Mass culture, according to Rosenberg, is nowhere more widespread than in the Soviet Union. Its author is not capitalism, but technology. Therefore America cannot be held responsible for its emergence or for its persistence. White (1957) makes a similar point but for a different purpose. 'The critics of mass culture' (13), White observes, 'take an exceedingly dim view of contemporary American society' (14). His defence of American (mass) culture is to compare it with aspects of the popular culture of the past. He maintains that critics romanticize the past in order to castigate the present. He condemns those 'who discuss American culture as if they were holding a dead vermin in their hands' (ibid.), and yet forget the sadistic and brutal reality of animal baiting that was the everyday culture in which Shakespeare's plays first appeared. His point is that every period in history has produced 'men who preyed upon the ignorance and insecurities of the largest part of the populace . . . and therefore we need not be so shocked that such men exist today' (ibid.). The second part of his defence consists of cataloguing the extent to which high culture flourishes in America: for example, Shakespeare on TV, record figures for book borrowing from libraries, a successful tour by the Sadler's Wells Ballet, the fact that more people attend classical music events than attend baseball games, the increasing number of symphony orchestras.

A key figure in the debate is Dwight Macdonald. In a very influential essay, 'A theory of mass culture', he attacks mass culture on a number of fronts. First of all, mass culture undermines the vitality of high culture. It is a parasitic culture, feeding on high culture, while offering nothing in return.

> Folk art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of High Culture, to suit their own needs. Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audience are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of kitsch, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class-rule . . . in Communist countries, only the second purpose obtains. Folk art was the people's own institution, their private little garden walled off from the great formal park of their masters' High Culture. But Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination (1998: 23).

Like other contributors to the debate, Macdonald is quick to deny the claim that America is the land of mass culture: 'the fact is that the U.S.S.R. is even more a land

of Mass Culture than is the U.S.A' (ibid.). This fact, he claims, is often missed by critics who focus only on the 'form' of mass culture in the Soviet Union. But it is mass culture (not folk culture: the expression of the people; nor high culture: the expression of the individual artist); and it differs from American mass culture in that 'its quality is even lower', and in that 'it exploits rather than satisfies the cultural needs of the masses . . . for political rather than commercial reasons' (24). In spite of its superiority to Soviet mass culture, American mass culture still represents a problem ('acute in the United States'): 'The eruption of the masses onto the political stage [produced] . . . disastrous cultural results' (ibid.). This problem has been compounded by the absence of 'a clearly defined cultural elite' (ibid.). If one existed, the masses could have mass culture and the elite could have high culture. However, without a cultural elite, America is under threat from a Gresham's Law of culture: the bad will drive out the good; the result will be not just a homogeneous culture but a 'homogenized culture . . . that threatens to engulf everything in its spreading ooze' (27), dispersing the cream from the top and turning the American people into infantile masses. His conclusions are pessimistic to say the least: 'far from Mass Culture getting better, we will be lucky if it doesn't get worse' (29).

The analysis changes again as we move from the disillusioned ex-Trotskyism of Macdonald to the liberalism of Ernest van den Haag (1957), who suggests that mass culture is the inevitable outcome of mass society and mass production:

> The mass produced article need not aim low, but it must aim at an average of tastes. In satisfying all (or at least many) individual tastes in some respects, it violates each in other respects. For there are so far no average persons having average tastes. Averages are but statistical composites. A mass produced article, while reflecting nearly everybody's taste to some extent, is unlikely to embody anybody's taste fully. This is one source of the sense of violation which is rationalized vaguely in theories about deliberate debasement of taste (512).

He also suggests another reason: the temptations offered by mass culture to high culture. Two factors must be particularly tempting: (i) the financial rewards of mass culture, and (ii) the potentially enormous audience. He uses Dante as an illustration. Although Dante may have suffered religious and political pressures, he was not tempted to shape his work to make it appeal to an average of tastes. Had he been 'tempted to write for *Sports Illustrated*' or had he been asked 'to condense his work for *Reader's Digest*' or had he been given a contract 'to adapt it for the movies', would he have been able to maintain his aesthetic and moral standards? Dante was fortunate; his talent was never really tempted to stray from the true path of creativity: 'there were no alternatives to being as good a writer as his talent permitted' (521).

It is not so much that mass taste has deteriorated, van den Haag argues, but that mass taste has become more important to the cultural producers in Western societies. Like White, he notes the plurality of cultural texts and practices consumed in America. However, he also notes the way in which high culture and folk culture are absorbed into mass culture, and are consequently consumed as mass culture: 'it is not new nor

disastrous that few people read classics. It is new that so many people misread them' (528). He cannot help in the end declaring that mass culture is a drug which 'lessens people's capacity to experience life itself' (529). Mass culture is ultimately a sign of impoverishment. It marks the de-individualization of life: an endless search after what Freud calls 'substitute gratifications'.[7] The trouble with substitute gratifications, according to the mass culture critique, is that they shut out 'real gratifications' (532–5). This leads van den Haag to suggest that the consumption of mass culture is a form of repression; the empty texts and practices of mass culture are consumed to fill an emptiness within, which grows ever more empty the more the empty texts and practices of mass culture are consumed. The operation of this cycle of repression makes it increasingly impossible to experience 'real gratification'. The result is a nightmare in which the cultural 'masturbator' or the 'addict' of mass culture is trapped in a cycle of non-fulfilment, moving aimlessly between boredom and distraction:

> Though the bored person hungers for things to happen to him, the disheartening fact is that when they do he empties them of the very meaning he unconsciously yearns for by using them as distractions. In popular culture even the second coming would become just another 'barren' thrill to be watched on television till Milton Berle comes on (535).

Van den Haag differs from the 'cultural nostalgics', who use romanticized versions of the past to condemn the present, in his uncertainty about the past. He knows that 'popular culture impoverishes life without leading to contentment. But whether "the mass of men" felt better or worse without mass production techniques of which popular culture is an ineluctable part, we shall never know' (536). Edward Shils (1978) has none of van den Haag's uncertainty. Moreover, he knows that when van den Haag says that industry has impoverished life he is talking nonsense:

> The present pleasures of the working and lower middle class are not worthy of profound aesthetic, moral or intellectual esteem but they are surely not inferior to the villainous things which gave pleasure to their European ancestors from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century (35).

Shils rejects completely

> the utterly erroneous idea that the twentieth century is a period of severe intellectual deterioration and that this alleged deterioration is a product of a mass culture. . . . Indeed, it would be far more correct to assert that mass culture is now less damaging to the lower classes than the dismal and harsh existence of earlier centuries had ever been (36).

As far as Shils can see the problem is not mass culture, but the response of intellectuals to mass culture. In similar fashion, D.W. Brogan (1978), whilst in agreement with much of Macdonald's argument, remains more optimistic. He believes that

Macdonald in being 'so grimly critical of the present America, is too kind to the past in America and to the past and present in Europe' (191). In this way, Macdonald's pessimism about the present is only sustained by his overly optimistic view of the past. In short, he 'exaggerates . . . the bad eminence of the United States' (193).

In 'The middle against both ends', Leslie Fiedler (1957), unlike most other contributors to the debate, claims that mass culture

> is a peculiarly American phenomenon. . . . I do not mean . . . that it is found only in the United States, but that wherever it is found, it comes first from us, and is still to be discovered in fully developed form only among us. Our experience along these lines is, in this sense, a preview for the rest of the world of what must follow the inevitable dissolution of the older aristocratic cultures (539).

For Fiedler, mass culture is popular culture that 'refuses to know its place'. As he explains,

> contemporary vulgar culture is brutal and disturbing: the quasi spontaneous expression of the uprooted and culturally dispossessed inhabitants of anonymous cities, contriving mythologies which reduce to manageable form the threat of science, the horror of unlimited war, the general spread of corruption in a world where the social bases of old loyalties and heroisms have long been destroyed (540).

Fiedler poses the question: What is wrong with American mass culture? He knows that for some critics, at home and abroad, the fact that it is American is enough reason to condemn it. But, for Fiedler, the inevitability of the American experience makes the argument meaningless; that is, unless those who support the argument are also against industrialization, mass education and democracy. He sees America 'in the midst of a strange two-front class war'. In the centre is 'the genteel middling mind', at the top is 'the ironical-aristocratic sensibility', and at the bottom is 'the brutal-populist mentality' (545). The attack on popular culture is a symptom of timidity and an expression of conformity in matters of culture: 'the fear of the vulgar is the obverse of the fear of excellence, and both are aspects of the fear of difference: symptoms of a drive for conformity on the level of the timid, sentimental, mindless-bodiless genteel' (547). The genteel middling mind wants cultural equality on its own terms. This is not the Leavisite demand for cultural deference, but an insistence on an end to cultural difference. Therefore, Fiedler sees American mass culture as hierarchical and pluralist, rather than homogenized and levelling. Moreover, he celebrates it as such.

Shils (1978) suggests a similar model – American culture is divided into three cultural 'classes', each embodying different versions of the cultural: '"superior" or "refined" culture' at the top, '"mediocre" culture' in the middle, and '"brutal" culture' at the bottom (206). Mass society has changed the cultural map, reducing the significance of 'superior or refined culture', and increasing the importance of both 'mediocre' and 'brutal' (209). However, Shils does not see this as a totally negative development: 'It 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' (ibid.). Like Fiedler, Shils does not shy away from the claim that America is the home of mass culture. He calls America 'that most massive of all mass societies' (218). But he remains optimistic: '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' (226). As Ross (1989) suggests, in Fiedler's essay, and in the work of other writers in the 1950s and early 1960s,

> the concept of 'class' makes a conditional return after its years in the intellectual wilderness. This time, however, class analysis returns not to draw attention to conflicts and contradictions, as had been the case in the thirties, but rather to serve a hegemonic moment in which a consensus was being established about the non antagonistic coexistence of different political conceptions of the world. Cultural classes could exist as long as they kept themselves to themselves (58).

Cultural choice and consumption become both the sign of class belonging and the mark of class difference. However, instead of class antagonism, there is only plurality of consumer choice within a general consensus of the dangers within and the dangers without. In short, the debate about mass culture had become the terrain on which to construct the Cold War ideology of containment. After all, as Melvin Tumin (1957) points out, 'America and Americans have available to them the resources, both of mind and matter, to build and support the finest culture the world has ever known' (550). The fact that this has not yet occurred does not dismay Tumin; for him it simply prompts the question: How do we make it happen? For the answer, he looks to American intellectuals, who 'never before have . . . been so well placed in situations where they can function as intellectuals' (ibid.), and through the debate on mass culture, to take the lead in helping to build the finest *popular culture* the world has ever known.

The culture of other people

It is easy to be critical of the 'culture and civilization' tradition's approach to popular culture. Given the recent developments in the field of cultural theory, it is almost enough to present a narrative of its approach to condemn it to populist disapproval. However, it must be remembered that from a historical point of view, the tradition's work is absolutely foundational to the project of the study of popular culture in British cultural studies. Furthermore, the impact of the tradition is difficult to overestimate: for more than a century it was undoubtedly the dominant paradigm in cultural analysis. Indeed, it could be argued that it still forms a kind of repressed 'common sense' in certain areas of British and American academic and non-academic life.

Although the 'culture and civilization' tradition, especially in its Leavisite form, created an educational space for the study of popular culture, there is also a real sense in which this approach to popular culture 'actively impeded its development as an area of study' (Bennett, 1982b: 6). The principal problem is its working assumption that popular culture always represents little more than an example of cultural decline and potential political disorder. Given this assumption, theoretical research and empirical investigation continued to confirm what it always expected to find.

> It was an assumption of the theory that there was something wrong with popular culture and, of course, once that assumption had been made, all the rest followed: one found what one was looking for – signs of decay and deterioration – precisely because the theory required that these be found. In short, the only role offered to the products of popular culture was that of fall guy (ibid.).

As we have noted, popular culture is condemned for many things. However, as Bennett points out, the 'culture and civilization' tradition is not noted for its detailed analyses of the texts and practices of popular culture. Instead, it looked down from the splendid heights of high culture to what it saw as the commercial wastelands of popular culture, seeking only confirmation of cultural decline, cultural difference, and the need for cultural deference, regulation and control. It

> was very much a discourse of the 'cultured' about the culture of those without 'culture'. . . . In short, popular culture was approached from a distance and gingerly, held at arm's length by outsiders who clearly lacked any sense of fondness for or participation in the forms they were studying. It was always the culture of 'other people' that was at issue (ibid.).

The anxieties of the 'culture and civilization' tradition are anxieties about social and cultural extension: how to deal with challenges to cultural and social exclusivity. As the nineteenth century receded, and those traditionally outside 'culture' and 'society' demanded inclusion, strategies were adopted to incorporate and to exclude. Acceptance brought into being 'high society' and 'high culture', to be distinguished from society and culture or, better still, mass society and mass culture. In short, it is a tradition that demanded, and expected, two responses from the 'masses' (see Photo 2.1) – cultural and social difference and cultural and social deference. As we shall see (in Chapters 9 and 10), some of the debates around postmodernism may be in part little more than the latest struggle for inclusion in, and exclusion from, Culture (with a capital C), which ultimately is less about texts, and much more about people and their everyday lived cultures.

Photo 2.1 A day trip to Blackpool in the early 1950s. There are . . . no masses; there are only ways of seeing [other] people as masses (Raymond Williams, 1963: 289).

Further reading

Storey, John (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th edition, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2009. This is the companion volume to this book. It contains examples of most of the work discussed here. This book and the companion Reader are supported by an interactive website (www.pearsoned.co.uk/storey). The website has links to other useful sites and electronic resources.

Baldick, Chris, *The Social Mission of English 1848–1932*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983. Contains interesting and informed chapters on Arnold and Leavisism.

Bilan, R.P., *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Although mostly on Leavis as a literary critic, it contains some useful material on his attitude to high and popular culture.

Bramson, Leon, *The Political Context of Sociology*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961. Contains an illuminating chapter on the mass culture debate in America.

Gans, Herbert J., *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, New York: Basic Books, 1974. The book is a late contribution to the mass culture debate in America. It presents a compelling argument in defence of cultural pluralism.

Johnson, Lesley, *The Cultural Critics*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979. Contains useful chapters on Arnold and on F.R. Leavis.

Mulhern, Francis, *The Moment of Scrutiny*, London: New Left Books, 1979. Perhaps the classic account of Leavisism.

Ross, Andrew, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, 1989. An interesting book, with a useful chapter on the mass culture debate in America.

Trilling, Lionel, *Matthew Arnold*, London: Unwin University Press, 1949. Still the best introduction to Arnold.

Waites, Bernard, Tony Bennett and Graham Martin (eds), *Popular Culture: Past and Present*, London: Croom Helm, 1982. A collection of essays on different examples of popular culture. Chapters 1, 4 and 6 address popular culture and the historical context that gave rise to the anxieties of the 'culture and civilization' tradition.

Williams, Raymond, *Culture and Society*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963. The seminal book on the 'culture and civilization' tradition: includes chapters on Arnold and F.R. Leavis.