

Cultural Conservatism and Mass Culture: The Case Against Democracy

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From the Roman games to the age of television and rock and roll, European and American intelligentsia have found little redeeming value in mass culture. Depending on their ideological angle of vision, intellectuals have viewed mass culture as the opiate of the people or as a mirror reflecting the values and standards of the ignorant majority. The liberals assume the vast majority of the public is unable to tell that it is being manipulated by a ruling class who control the system of mass communication and entertainment. In exchange for bread and circuses, the people unthinkingly collaborate in their economic and social exploitation. Mass culture is for the left an instrument of political control that maintains the status quo.

The neoconservative heirs of 18th century Tories Edmund Burke and Jonathan Swift do not see mass culture as a sign of the intentional benightment of the public by the ruling elite. They deplore the vulgarity and mindlessness of mass culture, but do not view it as a form of social control inflicted on the people for the purpose of frustrating social change. Mass taste, conservatives argue, determines the kind of music listened to, the content of television and the films showing at the local theater. It is not the product of some deliberate effort in shaping the public consciousness to accept the dominion of the ruling class. Mass culture is what people want: if eroticism and violence are the staples of the popular arts, it is because melodrama and sensationalism are sure crowd-pleasers. Unlike the liberals, the conservatives do not believe that educating the public to the system of media machinations, debunking popular myths or exposing the masses to high art will in any way elevate public taste.¹

To contemporary adherents of Burke, the mass arts are vulgar because the majority in every society is ignorant and lazy and will always be so. The conservatives have no romantic faith in humanity's essential goodness and in the inevitability of cultural progress. They believe that man is a corrupt being, spiritually flawed by original sin and that

mass culture is the arena in which the spectacle of natural depravity is on display.

Cultural conservatives do not believe in mankind's capacity for regeneration, but in the necessity of limiting the masses' access to political power. Although both the left and right regard popular culture as fundamentally a political and social phenomenon, denying it any aesthetic value, their conclusions are derived from different assumptions about human nature. Conservatives think Christianity's most profound theological insight is the concept of original sin. Therefore, liberal schemes postulating a world free of greed and cruelty, filled with material abundance and love, ignore the obvious reality of a perverse human nature. Utopia to the ancient Greeks and the modern conservatives who call themselves neoclassicists, means "no place." For conservatives, democracy is the form of government least compatible with the classical ideals of order and stability.²

To a neoclassicist, the most desirable world is a modern version of Plato's Republic. Governing by reason of background, training, birth, the ruling class makes provisions for promoting the most able regardless of social origins. The elite emphasizes order, authority, stability, hierarchies and inequality, and rejects democracy, science, machinery and ideas of human equality and progress.

Between the wars, conservative intellectuals such as Ortega y Gasset, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wyndam Lewis, W. B. Yeats, F. R. Leavis, D. H. Lawrence, Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt equated the cultural decline of the period with the rise of democracy and the mass media. To arrest the cultural decay caused by democracy, they supported fascist movements that promised to restore the neoclassical ideals of the Augustan Age of the 18th century. Democracy, they believed, had sacrificed culture and reversed the classical dictum that man exists for art. Society would have to be reorganized to permit the arts to flourish—and the individual, if necessary, sacrificed to that cultural end.

Democracy had raised the level of the masses, but lowered artistic standards by depriving the artist of an intellectual aristocracy that understood the work of the creative elite. Egalitarianism, the conservatives feared, augured the end of an audience sufficiently educated to appreciate modern poetry and art. Before aesthetic standards could be raised to the level of classical Greece, immoral and irrational man had to be disciplined by political authoritarianism. For conservatives consider the restraints imposed on the literary imagination by form, the aesthetic recognition of original sin. Absolutism imposing order on the unruly masses is the political recognition of natural depravity.³

Perhaps their antipathy for democracy blinded them to the obvious defects of authoritarianism. The conservatives on the right were as guilty of self-deception as the intellectuals on the left who saw in Stalin's Russia the land of milk and honey. Fascism, conservatives thought, would restore the classical ideals of beauty, harmony and order by forcing the chaotic and formless democratic masses into patterns of hierarchy and stratification. True freedom for the masses would be found in authority, fixed rules, habits and discipline. If human suffering was the result of organizing a society where the arts could flourish, then the price was worth it, for conservatives then and now believe the individual is less important than culture and tradition.

Fascism's failure did not alter the conservative conviction that democracy was responsible for the decline of high culture in the modern world. Conservatives like Ezra Pound were duped by Mussolini's promises of order and authority. Artists and poets were told that they would be granted an active role in the affairs of state and assumed that fascism would provide a ruling elite receptive to classical standards. If they had measured fascism's promises by their own commitment to rationality, personal freedom of expression and the Kantian morality, they would have realized that Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy were hardly modern versions of Periclean Athens nor either dictator a Philosopher King.⁴

Many of the nation's intellectuals admired the reputed efficiency of the Italian dictator's government and wished to imitate it in the United States, a fact conveniently forgotten in the postwar panic over communism. In the creation of an anti-communism consensus in the United States, the intellectuals who had espoused anti-democratic ideas in the guise of neoclassicism and neohumanism were forgiven their illiberal transgressions as they rallied to protect Western civilization from

the menace of Soviet communism. The rise of the Cold War and the domestic anti-communist crusade of the 1940s and 1950s obscured the fact that a large number of the most prominent conservatives of the twenties and thirties had been advocates of reactionary and fascist ideas—in Ezra Pound's case, active involvement in the government of Mussolini's Italy. Yet, the leftist intellectuals, the communists, fellow travelers and liberals, who had opposed fascism were to endure years of persecution as traitors for having aided the communist cause by their support of the Soviet Union.

If the liberals and leftists must assume responsibility for the Gulag, by the same logic it is possible to argue that the conservative literati of the 20s and 30s must accept part of the guilt for the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism was fashionable among intellectuals during the 20s and 30s: T. S. Eliot blamed the Jews for introducing the egalitarian principle into Western Europe thought. Furthermore, the intellectual inferiority of the masses had been declared by scientific racists, who had drawn fallacious conclusions on the innate mental abilities of the masses from the World War I Army IQ tests and from studies of mass manipulation via the modern art of propaganda. These studies, conducted by respected scientists in biology and psychology, depicted the masses as subhuman, inferior beings incapable of rational thought. These same theories would be used during the Twenties in the critique of the mass media, particularly film and popular music, to demonstrate the public's vulnerability to sensationalism and immorality. Popularity became synonymous with vulgarity.⁵

There is a discernible correlation between the shift to the right of America's intellectuals since 1950 and the harshness of their criticism of mass culture as psychic narcotic or mindless trash. The neoconservative cause also profited by the postwar disillusionment of the liberals with communism, socialism and all utopian ideologies, and the concurrent revival of the doctrine of original sin as the conservative Christian movement known as neoorthodoxy. The interpretation of McCarthyism as a populist movement and the defeat of Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 election also contributed to the widespread belief that America was an anti-intellectual country. The end of progressive idealism and optimism, the disenchantment with the cult of the "People, Yes," as proclaimed by Carl Sandburg, is evident in the highbrow journals and periodicals of the fifties. Neoconservatives begin to argue that Rousseau's natural man is a fallacy and

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that Edmund Burke's brute beneath the skin is the true image of humanity.⁶

Ironically, in searching for an explanation for the War, the Holocaust and the postwar imperialism of the Soviet Union, intellectuals in the United States accepted the conservative assertion that democracy inevitably leads to totalitarianism through stages of populism, demagoguery and dictatorship. Particularly appealing were the conclusions of the Frankfurt School of German intellectuals, who saw mass man as an anomic, alienated and isolated being without benefit of family and community ties. Denied roots and tradition, mass man was an easy prey for any charismatic leader who promised freedom from anxiety in new group identities. The need to belong and to find a scapegoat to blame for his alienation transformed democratic man into the authoritarian personality, the pseudo-conservative waiting for the man on horseback, the modern philosopher king who promises freedom in the submergence of the individual in the state.⁷ In Mussolini's utopia, it was, "Everything for the state, nothing against the state, no one outside the state."

Using psychological and theological theories to convince themselves democracy has failed, the intelligentsia, with the exception of a handful of diehard socialists publishing in *Dissent*, act as if the country had turned against them and they were under siege. Former liberals and fellow travelers counsel a retreat from political activism and the creation between them and the public of intellectual and aesthetic barriers. For some, the universities would provide a sanctuary for preserving the great tradition of Western culture from the irrational multitudes. Others urge a union with the new white collar class, the university-educated, managerial elite that would permit the mass media to formulate a more efficient and effective regulation of the passions of the masses. The diabolical art of manipulation, in all of its subliminal and overt manifestations, has been a recurrent theme in popular psychology since Vance Packard's books of the 1950s. The conservatives also argue for a substitution of pluralism and government by experts for populism. The relativism and tolerance that minimize conflicts between groups, that work as a compromise between contending factions in the market place of ideas, now are seen by cultural conservatives, Allan Bloom for example, as undermining values and standards by denying any timeless and ultimate forms of order and authority.

E.J. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* in addition to numerous government and foundation reports on

the plight of education in the United States, suggest that the wall separating high from mass culture has been breached and a new Dark Age threatens to engulf the land. This dreary eschatology with its apocalyptic predictions is identical to the cry of crisis raised in this country during the 20s and 30s by neohumanists Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt and by Ortega y Gasset's influential 1932 work *The Revolt of the Masses*.

Like his predecessor in the 20s, the contemporary prophet of doom blames the benightment of the people on the mass media. American youth's ignorance of high culture and indifference to the great books has been attributed for over two generations to popular culture. From the hot jazz of the twenties to today's rock and roll, music is a favorite target of conservatives who also see evil influences in film, television, radio and sport. It is difficult to separate Allan Bloom's uninformed damnation of popular music from that of the evangelist who warns high school students of the satanic influence in rock music. Indeed, the condemnation by fundamentalists and conservative intellectuals of mass culture on moral grounds reveals the essentially puritanical basis of the conservative critique.

Mass culture, irreverent, sensual and crude, unlike formal, elitist culture, is assumed conducive to immorality. It encourages spontaneity of expression, imaginative excess and the pursuit of entertainment and pleasure, activities that have been regarded since Pascal and Montaigne as gratifying the baser senses. Escapist fantasies, the comic and the adventure story, dote on the worldly and sensual. High or elite culture, on the other hand, is a substitute for religion, a kind of divine service to truth and beauty that is moral and spiritual in nature. It is an edifying force that raises man into the ideal; mass culture enthralles humanity in the material. Blessed with transcendental power, the great works of art are liberating experiences, providing sublime moments and allowing the audience to enter a spiritual realm. But the way is open only to the elect, whose superior intelligence, mental discipline and education distinguish them from the culturally illiterate masses.

The conservative protest against democracy has concentrated on its social and cultural failures. The ugliness and vulgarity of mass culture, the destruction of the environment, the cheapening of political life and the decay of moral values are the result of what democracy has made the country. Burke's statement, "For us to love our country, our country must be lovely," explains why the

conservatives are discontented with modern America. The nation is anti-intellectual, creates little good art and lacks the classical ideals of symmetry, balance, harmony and order. It is chaotic, formless and anarchic. It is, the conservatives regret, culturally and politically democratic. And since the spiritually corrupt masses hold political power, there is no way for the superior minority to gain control of the nation and impose order on discord. Humanity's fall from grace and alienation from nature make it impossible to emulate the ideal of order in nature. Strife and contention result from the innate inability to cooperate voluntarily for the benefit of the community.⁸

Cultural conservatives in the 20th century are obsessed with the threat posed by mass culture to the perpetuation of the "great tradition." If the finest achievements of Western civilization are secular manifestations of divine wisdom, then any threat to the classics potentially imperils the entire hierarchy of order and authority the conservatives believe necessary to preserve civilized values and standards. Relativism denies any ultimate authority. Therefore, the preservation of order and stability justifies the imposition of philosophical absolutism or epistemological totalitarianism on the masses. Immoral man needs discipline and repression to save him from his sinful self.⁹

Ideal forms of social control are derived from custom, habit and tradition. Conservatives from Ezra Pound to Gore Vidal admire Confucius as much as they do Plato and Edmund Burke. In Confucian China, patterns of personal behavior reflected an internalization of restraint far more effective as a form of social control than that enforced by statutes and contracts. Everyone knows his place in the hierarchy, and his obligations and duties to his fellow citizen are dictated by tradition. Conservatives argue that a society that venerates and preserves the past must have a keen sense of history. A people who worship their traditions are not troubled by questions of either individual rights or the democratic dogma. Conflict and strife are diminished. All forms of personal expression are governed by the individual's responsibility to act in a manner that does not disturb the stability, harmony and order of the society.¹⁰

For conservatives, the preservation of tradition is the most effective way to achieve and sustain the good society. They deny all romantic and enlightenment visions of human nature and profess the Calvinist doctrine of natural depravity. The world is not perfectible and the romantic yearning for utopia and equality is the source of much of the discord and misery in the world. The vast bulk

of humanity they see as incapable of redemption and the liberal intellectuals' defense of the public's claim to political hegemony foolish and misguided. Consequently, all efforts to uplift the masses by extending the privilege of the vote to the multitudes has ended in the corruption of government and the dilution and debasement of high culture. The cultural drift in a democracy is always downward to the lowest common denominator.

The perfect society for conservatives, the one they would like to see humanity imitating, is the bee hive. Allan Bloom compares the natural order and harmony of the hive with the morals and manners of modern society which he equates with a herd. Matthew Arnold called the bee hive the model of "harmonious perfection." The bee in following the dictates of its instinct produces "sweetness and light," metaphors for Arnold of the beauty and reason that are created by the seekers of perfection and the lovers of culture regardless of their class origins. This is the distinguishing characteristic of the genuine elite. And in Swift's "The Battle of the Books," the bee, obviously enjoying Swift's sympathy, symbolizes the empirical mode of conduct against the spider who represents the rationalistic. The original fable of the bee and the spider is from Aesop and celebrates the classical ideal of community organization personified by the hive.

Truth and beauty emerge from an orderly and organic society in which authentic liberty springs from an instinctive adherence to fixed rules. But since mankind has no such intuitive sense of discipline, the masses have to be educated and, if needed, duped into surrendering their freedom for the good of the community.

Conservatives from the 18th century to the present have protested the use by radicals and romantics of language and terminology that is divorced from observable reality. For Tories such as Jonathan Swift and Edmund Burke the first step was a return to the world of concrete phenomena. Swift's satirical floating city of scholars in *Gulliver's Travels*, La Puta, is a world governed by abstract systems of reason that are divorced from anything verifiable in the natural world. The opponents of democracy have persistently contended that the language of egalitarianism is empirically invalid. Words such as equality, progress, and freedom are abstractions that do not have any observable referent in human affairs. Cultural conservatives think the language of political discourse should be purged of all abstract terms and the rhetoric of political philosophy anchored in the concrete.

Edmund Burke understood, according to conservative theorist Russell Kirk, that "under the skin of modern man stirs the brute, savage and demon." To ignore the lessons of our senses and of history in favor of some plan for future perfection, opens the door to any abstract design for making the world over. Humanity cannot be changed; human nature is not mutable and millennial schemes pure fantasy. By rejecting tradition and embracing the idea of progress, either Marxist or Darwinian, the intellectual champions of egalitarianism substituted the abstract for the concrete. The undisciplined imagination conjuring up utopian visions has made possible in the 20th century the horrors of totalitarianism and imposed on humanity the faceless bureaucracies and monolithic organizations of the authoritarian state. Conservatives think that most of the gratuitous suffering of the age could have been avoided if words were made to conform to what they are supposed to describe. Ezra Pound believed that Confucius and Socrates aspired to the same ideal: they tried to make men think by demanding that they use their language with "greater precision" and thereby learn "to distinguish knowledge from not-knowledge."¹¹

The conservative distaste for democracy and desire for a more structured and stable world is reflected in their linguistic concerns. Words separated from the object they describe can, as Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty says, mean anything the speaker wants them to mean. In both Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the language spoken by the inhabitants of these dystopias bears no resemblance to the world it is supposed to describe. Orwell's "newspeak" is a calculated distortion of language by the state that serves to separate the inhabitants of the country from their history and traditions and to make communication between them impossible. When words no longer conform to the object they are supposed to describe and language is free from any obligation to the specific and concrete, then words have the power to alter the reality they are supposed to symbolize. The image making power of the word becomes a form of magic; the word can transform reality in any manner the user desires.

Great art and the language of the culture should imbue in the public a sense of veneration and awe for the accomplishments of mankind. The elite view the purpose of art as a form of social control that does not rely on legality or threats of punishment and ostracism. Democracy, the conservatives believe, has reversed the classical notion that man exists for art. The purpose of art and literature is to impose on the disorder and confusion of democracy a sense

of discipline and an awareness of limitations. Ultimately, art should diminish the ego in the same way an awareness of the sacred and the sublime evoke in the person feelings of awe, fear and reverence. A museum, a library, a cathedral, a battlefield should awaken the same emotional responses: the human should be dwarfed, reduced to insignificance, by the sense of history and tradition, by genius and heroism and by one's sense of inferiority and gratitude. Order would be maintained, according to the Burkeans, if the past symbolized in the rituals, artifacts, architecture, monuments, costumes, music, art and literature were objects of mass devotion.¹²

Burke's idea of the sublime and the beautiful is the basis for the neoconservative protest against aesthetic relativism. Standards are necessary to establish a hierarchy of absolute values, that is, to enable people to tell the magnificent from the mundane, to know that Pavarotti is superior to Prince. The failure to breed the proper feeling of reverence for past traditions is inevitably blamed on the doctrine of equality and the absence in the United States of an aristocracy of taste and cultivation, an observation made by Alexis De Tocqueville and still used to explain the philistinism and anti-intellectualism conservatives find rampant in this country. The lack of authority accorded the great tradition is the aesthetic equivalent of the lack of deference and respect shown to the intellectually superior individual. Art in a bourgeois society seems to have been adapted to maintaining the illusion of equality, not to overturning democracy for some form of cultural and political elitism.

The lost world of the conservatives, the culture that most resembles the hierarchical and stable society of absolute values and standards they wish to recreate, is less classical than it is feudal. Europe before the rise of the middle class and the materialistic culture of the modern world represents to traditionalists a haven from mass society. The exchange of feudal traditions for bourgeois has the effect of destroying the harmonious relations, the community and class structure, that provided everyone with a sense of belonging and identity. The feudal image is particularly appealing to rural elites. The Southern agrarian movement's defense of the cultural values of the Old South, for example, is a nostalgic expression of the desire to save the remaining vestiges of chivalry and the cavalier tradition from extinction in an urban-industrial age.¹³

Intellectuals look with longing and regret to the time in the history of the United States when a few centers of aristocratic values governed by a traditionalist elite flourished. The anti-bellum South, New England in the second half of the 19th century and the Hudson River valley were homes to a class of landed gentry conservatives portrayed as a native version of Burke's Christian gentlemen. The aristocracy was motivated by a sense of noblesse oblige and tried to live by the virtues of the best of the European nobility: honor, humanitarianism, self-control, humility, tolerance, generosity and ethical reasoning. Schooled in the classical tradition of service and Republican values, its decline and extinction deprived artists of the educated audience they need if high culture is to survive.

According to conservatives, the lowering of cultural standards was the result of replacing the gentry with the commercial classes and their cultural elitism with egalitarianism. With the passing of the elite, businessmen and the middle class became the arbiters of the standard of taste. The recurring cycle of populist hostility to something called by nativists the "establishment" is to conservatives a sign that the anti-intellectualism of the public is an indirect expression of the resentment the masses continue to feel for their cultural superiors.¹⁴

The failure of a democracy to sustain high culture and produce great works of art was foreseen, conservatives believe, by French aristocrat and observer of early 19th century American democracy Alexis De Tocqueville. His commentary on the consequences of the doctrine of equality for the fate of elitist culture in the United States is often quoted by conservatives. The beautiful, De Tocqueville thought, would be replaced in a democracy by the useful. Function, rather than aesthetically pleasing form, will come to dictate taste.

The disappearance of the aristocracy meant that the nation's artists would be denied a knowledgeable audience for their work. The business elite, ignorant of the great tradition and unschooled in the art of connoisseurship, would be unable to tell original works of genius from art produced by machines. Manufactured art meant the end of craftsmanship and the triumph of quantity over quality. According to De Tocqueville, the reduction of art to a commodity would result from the newly prosperous business class's desire to possess art for prestige. The arrival of mass produced art heralded the advent of the age of art for the sake of appearances and its exploitation as a status symbol.

As De Tocqueville approached the shores of the New World, he saw on the coast mansions that he thought were built of stone. He discovered on closer examination that they were made of wood painted to look like stone. These false front buildings became for him metaphors for the fate of art in America. In a society dedicated to egalitarian principles, art lost its historic function as teacher of the good and the beautiful. Democracy did not permit art to establish rules and standards. Art for the masses should not try to satisfy any transcendent impulse and neither should it stir the emotions nor charm the taste of its audience. Mass culture instead would divert and amuse not edify or delight. Art would be compelled to exalt the real over the ideal and the trivial and commonplace over the great and the unique. High culture in the United States would be leveled to entertainment for the masses. Art becomes inseparable from image making when it is compelled in a democratic society to continually reinforce the illusion of equality.¹⁵

The absence of an aristocracy in the United States and the rise of the idea of equality meant to De Tocqueville that high culture as understood by the Europeans would be replaced by art for the masses. With the disappearance of rank among a democratic public, the French aristocrat assumed that art would become an instrument of amusement and instruction. Art would concern itself with reinforcing images of equality. In a country without established canons of taste and discrimination, the quest for the sublime and beautiful would cease. Art that strove for the transcendental moment would be abandoned and the decorative, the practical and the ostentatious would become the symbols of democracy.

The conservative protest against mass culture has undergone little substantive change since De Tocqueville made his observations in the middle of the 19th century. This synthesis of Puritanism and conservatism in the criticism of mass culture has added a moral dimension to De Tocqueville's cultural observations and is undoubtedly responsible for the life denying, joyless image of American conservatism.

The essentially puritanical base of the conservative position is evident in the writings of neohumanists Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt. Babbitt criticizes democracy as a "standardized and commercialized melodrama . . ." that has bred in the masses an appetite for standardized mediocrity. From the neohumanists of the 1920s to the neoconservatives of the 1980s, mass culture is seen as satisfying the public's appetite for crime and lust. Whether it is the Hearst tabloid or the checkout

lane scandal sheet, jazz or rock and roll, film or television, conservatives assume popular culture always appeals to what Babbitt called the "emotions of the moment."

Neohumanists Babbitt and More thought art should teach restraint by advocating form over content. Babbitt hated Rousseau's emphasis on feeling, the populism of an Andrew Jackson and the democratic sensibility of Walt Whitman. He extols the superiority of Burke's Christian gentleman of moderation, humility and discipline over the primitivism, passion and spontaneity of natural man. This ascendancy of aristocratic over the democrat only occurs during those historical periods when reason contains instinct and form circumscribes content. The Rousseauian liberation of natural man has culminated in the degradation of the "great tradition" and the inevitable drift from plutocracy to democracy to dictatorship. The anarchy slowly building toward a period of authoritarianism is to Babbitt a result of the breakdown of habits of self-discipline and repression.

Like his fellow classicists, Babbitt thinks totalitarianism will evolve from democracy. He thinks, "A majority of the population may grow impatient with Republican limitations on direct implementation of its will and resort to direct action." Babbitt thinks the times could produce an imperial leader and he hopes that it is the fascist Mussolini and not the communist Lenin. Authoritarianism may be avoided by the substitution of the "doctrine of the right man for the rights of man." Under communism, Babbitt sees a continual lowering of standards until all qualitative differences between people cease to exist.

To place reason once more as the controlling force in the nation's intellectual life, Babbitt and More would force all words to pass the Burkean test of concreteness. Do the words correspond to the things they are supposed to describe or are they meaningless abstractions? The romantic quest for the absolute should be abandoned and education stress the need for establishing standards and discipline. An exposure to great literature will encourage moderation, common sense and common decency by training the college student's imagination "to grasp in a single vision . . . the long course of human history." The nation needs, More argues, the "inheritance of the past, the society of the noble dead . . ." as our teachers. The revived great tradition and the sense of reverence for the past the university teaches the student will save us from the dictatorship that will succeed the rule of the masses.¹⁶

A remarkable cross section of the intelligentsia has shared this revulsion for democracy and mass culture. H. L. Mencken dismissed Babbitt and More as puritans, yet was as outspoken in his hostility to egalitarianism. Ezra Pound was not specifically opposed to democracy but to the abuses of wealth and power it permitted. Pound has sympathy for the masses, for they too had been subjected to the same plutocratic interests he blamed for undermining and betraying the entire intellectual tradition of Western society. His solution to the problem of plutocracy was authoritarianism, anti-humanism, anti-relativism and anti-utilitarianism. Pound's sympathy for the masses did not prevent him from wanting to strip them of their political rights.¹⁷

Tradition was more important to T. S. Eliot than individual liberty and democracy, which he regarded as destroyers of family ties and cultural traditions. Eliot saw in the break-up of organic society the primary danger to the family and local traditions that existed within national civilizations. Local cultures in which members shared common beliefs would be havens from the rootlessness that afflicted the masses in the urban-industrial world. Culture and religion are the same to Eliot. Culture, as the modern form of religion, indeed, as its incarnation, has the obligation to give meaning to life and to protect the masses of humanity from boredom and despair. The intellectual elite should be secular priests who preserve traditional culture, establish standards of taste and manners, and above all, cultivate in home and community a reverence for the past. Eliot wished to see, as did Burke, a "piety for the dead and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote."

Democracy and socialism were the causes of anarchy and Eliot opposed all humanitarianism and romantic ideas. He thought the masses should be relieved of political responsibility and the electoral system replaced with a hereditary elite. For Eliot, order and authority in the state are synonymous with the beautiful in the arts. Beauty is identical with the idea of order since the traditions that bound humanity together in community were transmitted from generation to generation by what was beautiful and true in the arts. Faithful to the ideals of classical Greece, Eliot insisted that the doctrine of equality found in progressive ideologies violated the ideal of order and was responsible for the poor art and literature found in democratic societies.

Since a return to an agrarian society is no longer possible, the only recourse left to the classicists is a withdrawal from the modern world. To preserve the heritage of the great tradition in an age of

standardization and mechanization, of book clubs, films, advertising and radio, some kind of bulwark needed to be erected between the masses and the conservative guardians of the past. The university was one possible defense; the other the systematic purification of high art of all popular appeal.¹⁸

Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset advanced both possibilities. During the 30s and 40s Ortega enjoyed a wide popularity among intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic. His solution to the problem posed by mass culture for high culture was to make art aesthetically unappealing and intellectually inaccessible to the public. Ortega's call for the dehumanization of art challenged liberal and romantic notions about the purpose of culture.

Art, Ortega argued, should be purged of all content that evokes in the audience emotional responses. Artists should return to the 18th century aesthetic of form and style: a resurgent classicism would make art an object of intellectual delight free of any obligation to produce tears and laughter in the audience. To Ortega, the shift in musical style from Wagner to Debussy at the end of the 19th century was evidence of a successful aesthetic purification. The masses found Debussy incomprehensible. The ideal, not the material, was to Ortega the only subject of art. A revived classicism would turn art into an object of intellectual delight and free the artist from any obligation to evoke tears and laughter in this audience. Mass art is melodramatic: Madame Tussard's wax figures delighted the "mob" because they were "melodrama at its purest" and, of course, were not art. The true artist avoided the real and thereby alienated the masses who lack the intellect and the taste to appreciate the abstract and ideal.

Democracy for Ortega was the prelude to totalitarianism. Once power was handed to the normally docile and inert masses, its dictatorship was inevitable. Without either a sense of external authority or a need to justify its actions with either law or reason, the masses, fed cliches and pseudo beliefs on the superiority of democratic man to all others, try to impose their values and standards on others. Armed with the power of public opinion, the masses violate the privacy of the elite and prevent the development of the exceptional individual. Ortega called mass man a self-satisfied snob who saw himself as the center of the universe. Mass man honored no higher authority than himself, he was a beast and a barbarian devoid of any sense of the past. Uncultured and uneducated, mass man exists outside of history and tradition.¹⁹

Cultural conservatives in the 20th century have generally agreed with Ortega. The surrender of the intellectuals of the Enlightenment to the principles of democracy and equality, and the passing of feudal society, have made mass culture inevitable. There is no hope in a regeneration of agrarianism rooted in the religious values of the past and held together by common cultural and blood ties. The imagery of cultural conservatism reveals an omnipotent majority that threatens to overwhelm all obstacles in the fulfillment of its destiny. The conservative do not believe in some inevitable triumph of equality. The masses hold sway in the modern world by sheer bulk and threaten to spill over into all areas previously denied to them. The new barbarism swamps elite institutions and turns them into centers of mediocrity that reinforce the democratic dogma. The cultural conservatives have persisted in the face of nearly a century of losses in condemning egalitarianism and mass culture. Whether or not they have been successful will depend on one's interpretation of the present social scene.

To conservative elitists such as Allan Bloom the end is at hand. Mass culture has subverted the universities that were to have been the bastions of the great books. Others see the people the dupes of the mass media and the economic elite that control the content of popular culture. Yet a growing number of young intellectuals are starting to realize that American democracy has produced something fresh and vital in its mass culture. American popular culture, to the dismay of traditionalists and elites in every culture, has become a universal language everyone wants to and can understand.

The cultural conservative case against mass culture has persisted for an extraordinarily long time and it is unlikely to go away. The content of a great deal of mass culture is as vulgar, stupid and tasteless as the intelligentsia say it is. It does not necessarily follow that everyone interested in some aspect of popular culture is a fan of the base and mean. Nor does it necessarily hold that a democracy is a hostile environment to high culture or that authoritarianism encourages the production of great art.

In most totalitarian states art is merely a form of political propaganda in the service of the ruling elite. The cultural conservatives lack of sympathy and concern for the masses and their preoccupation with tradition seems inhumanly cold and remote. Art devoid of feeling for the life of ordinary people, or supporting a system of terror, is a perversion

of the idea of art in the great tradition the conservatives are determined to restore.

The conservative elite's dislike of democracy has blinded them to the international enthusiasm for American popular culture. It is ironic that at this moment in history, when the world's youth dance to our music and watch our films, the nation's conservative intellectuals find nothing of value in mass culture. The world is being shaped in the American image and the elite, trapped in their nostalgia for a lost past, ignore the revolution.

Notes

¹An excellent history of the "Bread and Circuses" debate is Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983). The liberal-conservative debate is presented in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Free Press, 1957). and in Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn and Edward Shils, *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication, V.I.: Culture and Mass Culture* (Cambridge, G.B.: Chadwyck-Healey, 1978). Leo Lowenthal, "Chapter Two: The Debate Over Art and Popular Culture: A Synopsis," in *Literature, Popular Culture and Society* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1961).

²There is a vast literature on and by conservatives on human nature and the delusion of secular perfectionism. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964). and Russell Kirk, ed. *The Portable Conservative Reader* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), Peter Viereck, *Conservatism: From John Adams to Churchill* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1956) and Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1986) are the most balanced and objective of the available texts.

³A fine discussion of the conservatism of the poets and novelists is John R. Harrison, *The Reactionaries* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966). Also insightful are George L. Mosse, "Fascism and the Intellectuals" and P. Vita-Finzi, "Italian Fascism and the Intellectuals" in *The Nature of Fascism*, ed. S.J. Woolf (New York: Vintage, 1969).

⁴Harrison, *The Reactionaries* and Mosse, "Fascism and the Intellectuals."

⁵Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; reprint ed., Glencoe: Free Press, 1965), W.W. Charters, *Motion Pictures and Youth: A Summary* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1934), Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962) and for a summary of the conservative intellectual's response to the findings of scientific racists, David Spitz, *Patterns of Anti-Democratic Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1965)

⁶The highbrow journals and periodicals of the late 40s and 50s publish numerous articles by the leading intellectuals of the day on the anti-intellectualism of the masses and the meaning of mass culture. *Partisan Review* published a

symposium from May to October of 1952 entitled "Our Country and Our Culture" on the plight of the literati in a mass culture society. The decline of individuality is discussed in David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven Yale Univ. Press, 1971) and William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957) the rise of the corporate, white collar class. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) sums up the majority position on the topic. Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1967) is the best study of the subject.

⁷T.W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford in collaboration with Betty Aron, Maria Hertz Levinson and William Morrow, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969) and Daniel Bell, ed. *The Radical Right: The New American Right* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963) delineate the anti-democratic arguments of the conservatives.

⁸Philip Chapman, "The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism v. Political Philosophy," *Political Science Quarterly*, 75 (1960) pp. 17-34.

⁹Hans Kelsen, "Absolutism and Relativism in Philosophy and Politics," *The American Political Science Review*, 42 (1948) pp. 906-14.

¹⁰For a fascinating comparison of Western and Chinese approaches to authority see Joseph Needham, "Human Law and the Laws of Nature in China and the West," Vol. VII of *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1954).

¹¹Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

¹²Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968). R.T. Allen, "The State and Civil Society as Objects of Aesthetic Appreciation," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 16 (1976) pp. 237-242. Neal Wood, "The Aesthetic Dimension of Burke's Political Thought," *The Journal of British Studies*, 4 (1964) pp.41-64.

¹³By Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Peter Smith, 1951).

¹⁴Merle Curti, *American Paradox: The Conflict of Thought and Action*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1956). and Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955) are two representative volumes from an extensive literature on the subject.

¹⁵Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in American*, translated by George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

¹⁶Irving Babbitt, "Part I: Outlook and Overview" and "Democracy and Standards," in *Representative Writings* ed. George A. Panichas, (Lincoln, NB: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1981) and Paul Elmer More, "Education and History," in *The Essential Paul Elmer More*, ed. Byron C. Lambert, (New Rochelle, NY Arlington House, 1972).

¹⁷Harrison, *The Reactionaries*. and Victor C. Ferkis, "Ezra Pound and American Fascism," *The Journal of Politics*, 17 (1955) pp. 173-197.

¹⁸T.S. Eliot, *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes*, No. 3 (Summer, 1953) pp.1-17. and Terry Eagleton, "The Idea of a Common Culture," in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication, Vol. I, Culture and Mass Culture*. ed. by Peter Davison, Rolf Meyersohn and Edward Shils, (Cambridge, G.B.: Chadwyck-Healey, 1978).

¹⁹Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956) and *The Revolt of the Masses* (New

York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1957). See also Manuel Maldonado-Denis, "Ortega y Gasset and the Theory of the Masses," *The Western Political Quarterly*, 14 (1961) pp. 676-90.

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