

The Mass Society Debate: View from the Right

The Mass Society debate view from the right/22/11/99/P.Covington

Folk Culture grew from below. It was spontaneous...expression of people, shared by themselves...to suit their own needs. Mass culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying...it is a debased, trivial culture that voids both the deep realities (sex, death, failure and tragedy) and also make the simple, spontaneous pleasures. **Macdonald, 1957**

Introduction: The Dangers of Mass Culture

The quote you have read from Paul Johnson sums up the view of the **New Right**. This view has dominated most thought about it. Writers include **Nietzsche**, and **T. S Eliot**. Poet and literary critic, in a famous essay *Notes Towards A Definition of Culture (1948)* argues that **culture is inevitably stratified**, with each social class, in society **making distinctive cultural contributions**, but he **implies that the more sophisticated cultures are developed by higher social classes**, rich in tradition and custom, which were associated with the era of rural and craft production. Folk cultures served an important function integrating communities. Now both the *Enlightenment* of the higher classes, and the *folk culture* of lower classes was in **danger of being washed away by the spread of cheap commercialised or mass culture**.

The arguments of two literary critics **F.R. Leavis** and **Q.D. Leavis** who wrote *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* and *Fiction and the Reading Public* respectively, develop these themes in even bolder terms. According to them, **only a small and educated cultural elite** was capable of **understanding and profiting** from the descriptions of the human experience **contained in the great works of art and culture**. Only this small cultural elite can **pass on this precious inheritance** to the next generation, but their position and authority is **threatened by the spread of commercialised 'mass culture'**, which panders to the **lowest common denominator** and undermines cultural standards. Folk songs and dances, the customs and traditions associated with the rural past, helped to **cement social bonds** and **maintain social integration**. The products of mass culture – popular fiction, detective stories, cinema, modern pop music – **all debased** or **coarsened the human experience** and **destabilised the social order**.

The Concerns about Hollywood

The in 1940's and the 1950's the **mass society debate** developed further in the USA. Given the size of the States, the power of American capitalism, and the **success of Hollywood** and other forms of American culture, **this was inevitable**. An important collection of articles *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* by **Rosenberg, Manning and White, 1957** set the terms of the debate. Supporters of the mass society thesis made the argument detailed at the top of this handout.

Many others in literature and journalism as well as some sociologists subscribe to this view. This view sees society being **divided** between an **elite** (who **possessed** and still possess **a superior form of culture**), and the **mass** of the **population**.

Pre-Industrial Times: Culture

In **pre-industrial times** the **later** had a **genuine**, of somewhat **rough**, sort of **culture** of their own this included.... These were **passed on** in a more or less unchanging way between the generations. **They** obviously **varied between region**. Workers were happy with their lot, with family life and this culture.

- ✓ folk culture
- ✓ music
- ✓ dancing styles (Morris, clog)
- ✓ medical remedies
- ✓ recipes
- ✓ folk tales
- ✓ nursery rhymes
- ✓ carnivals
- ✓ festivals

However, **capitalism** soon **polluted this culture** and **replaced it with a plastic commodity culture -mass culture**. With urbanisation came the creation of large aggregates of people – the masses. Concerns about the instability and irrationality of the masses, their propensity for disorder and unruly behaviour and the associated problems of how to ‘civilise’ or socially integrate them, is a pre-occupation with many earlier sociologists, such as **Durkheim** and **Tonnies**.

Big business and the **state** began to **replace the family** as the source of culture. The **old traditions** were quickly **wiped out** in most parts of the country. The working man and woman have become **passive recipients** of culture, **not active participants in it**. Today they sit in the cinema rather than take part in folk dance. They buy fast food rather than make food for themselves with traditional recipes. Advertising has given them the **constant desire for things, which they can’t have**. Their world is filled with characters from TV who they don’t really know, though they spend hours reading about them and talking about them as they might once have done about characters in the village. The mass media are particularly implicated in this, as it has been their role to transmit and propagate mass culture.

Exercise One

Mass Culture	Traditional Culture

Place the following under the correct heading...

- Genuine plastic regional active participants urban
 Generational passive recipients Big business

Exercise Two

Consider whether the following have they been wiped out by capitalism? What evidence have you to refute this, complete the following table.

Pursuit	Wiped Out by	Evidence Against This
Theatre	TV	West End still thrives, as does Broadway in the USA.
Carnivals		
Festivals		
Dancing	Pubs,	
Folk Tales		
Nursery rhymes	Cartoons, TV	
Recipes		Delia Smith's books sell by the crate....

All this has **made** the working class listless and alienated. They are **no longer content** with their **condition in life**. Many of the **problems of capitalism** (strikes, violence, riots, suicides, divorce, etc.) are partly due to the inauthentic nature of the culture created by the masses by the economic system. All this is the fault of the mass media. The effect has been....

A diffusion among the audience of a sense of apathy. The intense involvement of the masses with their culture at the turn of the century has given way to passive acquiescence. Handlin, 1964

The Work of Michael Medved

A more recent exponent of this is American film critic **Michael Medved**. For Medved the evidence of **restlessness** and **turbulence** is everywhere **in society**, largely as **a result of the entertainment industry's** contemptuous attitude towards **authority, the family and religion**. He approvingly quotes from a Hollywood insider who says that it is the

Failed family.... Which has produced our present millions of prison inmates, rapists, drug addicts, burglars, muggers, sexual psychopaths, non-professional whores of both sexes and general goofolas.

He adds

The 'general goofolas who shape most of popular culture, make a significant contribution to the ongoing confusion. Their anti-family messages - promoting promiscuity, maligning marriage, encouraging illegitimacy, and undermining parental authority - may not make it impossible to maintain a solid marriage or to raise decent kids, but they certainly make it harder than it has to be.

A programme called **Studs** on the Fox network is particularly criticised by Medved in this context.

Macho contestants go on steamy blind dates with each of three.... Mini-skirted young lovelies and then compete on the air for the title of 'king stud'. Just how 'steamy' the blind dates were is established by interrogating the women in various ways in front of the cameras and a 'snickering and hooting studio audience'

Exercise Three

Look at the following programmes/films do they support or reject the ideas of Medved

Eastenders
Blind Date
The Crying Game
Brookside
Our Friends in the North
Man O Man
Forrest Gump
Heartbeat
The full Monty
Casualty
You have been framed
Goodfellas

Lacking a long history, the hindsight of the American **right is slightly more restricted**. They tend to **romanticise the more recent past**, harking back to the **good old days** of the 50's and 60's, even thinking that the **mass media** itself were **not harmful then**. Medved quotes **Peter Tortorici**, senior vice president of programming for CBS quoting letters from parents saying that they want programmes **reflecting 'heartland values'**. Shows from the past like the **Waltons, Highway to Heaven** those shows have not been around for a long time'. Medved himself cites the Andy Hardy movies of the 1930's in which **Mickey Rooney** learned life lessons from this father, a kind but stern small town judge. The media is now out of step with what people want. Medved notes that the following disparities between the **people and the media**:

- ◆ our fellow citizens **cherish the institutions of marriage** and consider **religion** to be an important **priority in life**: but the entertainment industry promotes **every form of sexual adventurism** and regularly ridicules religious believers as crooks or crazies
- ◆ In our private lives, most of us **deplore violence** and feel little sympathy for the criminals who perpetrate it, but movies, TV and popular music **all revel in graphic brutality**, glorifying vicious and sadistic characters who treat killing as a joke.
- ◆ Nearly all parents who convey to their children the importance of **self-discipline, hard work, and decent manners**: but the entertainment media celebrate **vulgar behaviour**, contempt for authority and obscene language - which is inserted even in 'family fare' were it is least expected.

Exercise Four

Complete the following table.... Why were the following things less common in the past....

Promiscuity	
violent crime	
Divorce	
anti religious sentiment	

The slow but incessant drip of these media messages is changing the characters of American society for the worse, according to **Medved**. Chapter titles in his book *Hollywood vs. America* give some feel for his argument. They include the following....

- Comic Book Clergy
- Forgetting the Faithful
- Promoting Promiscuity
- Maligning Marriage
- Encouraging Illegitimacy
- Kids Know Best
- The Urge to Offend
- The Infatuation with Bad Language
- The Addiction to Violence
- Bashing America/UK

Exercise Five

Match present-day programmes to his headings.

Resources Used

Main text taken from

Investigating the Media: Paul Trowler, also used....
Sociology in Perspective: Mark Kirby et al

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Exercise Six

Write down two strengths and two criticisms of the new rights concept of culture and place them on the whiteboard.