
CONTESTED

TERRAIN

Culture, Community, and Equality

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The intellectual left has long entertained the idea that if commercial popular culture were eliminated, workers could and would become intellectuals. Christopher Lasch revived this idea in the October 1981 issue of *democracy*, arguing that the capitalistic mass media continue to keep the masses in their "age-old intellectual torpor" and warning that America could not be a political democracy until and unless Americans were cultured.

I was a villain in his analysis because I had questioned a number of related beliefs in my *Popular Culture and High Culture*. I doubt that there are "masses," or that the people saddled with this term suffer from intellectual torpor. While commercial popular culture has always injured the aesthetic sensibilities of intellectuals, I also doubt that it stands in the way of political democracy.

My principal intent, however, is neither to debate with Lasch nor to present my program for culture and the left. Instead, I want to take off from a point he made in his first paragraph: "that the left has upheld a broader vision which embraces not only political democracy but economic democracy and the democratization of culture." I suggest that this vision actually consists of three quite different and partly opposing visions, which I call cultural, communitarian, and egalitarian. Since Lasch advocates a combination of the first two and I the third, I shall also argue with him where relevant.

The cultural vision of the left for a society of well-educated citizens with a common high culture is, like the other visions, an appealing ideal of long standing. Its most recent restatement, by Dwight Macdonald and others during the 1940s and 1950s, treated high culture as a prerequisite to socialism, although some cultural leftists were mainly concerned with obtaining a properly trained audience for their own work and destroying the hated commercial competition which then completely dominated the cultural marketplace. Others feared popular culture because the Stalinists and Nazis had used it and the mass media to secure their totalitarian rule.

Macdonald and his colleagues viewed high culture primarily as activities

and ideas which people develop in their leisure time, but Lasch objects strongly both to this view and that culture, because it, like commercial popular culture, accepts the separation of work and play. Bitterly critical of modernization, Lasch wants to end that separation, do away with mass production and consumption, and eliminate a good deal of technology as well.

Still, as a requirement for political democracy, Lasch's concept of culture is akin to the earlier view of high culture—and virtually synonymous with critical thought. To imbue people with the capacity for critical thought, Lasch calls for a drastic revisionism in American educational policy. If the citizenry can be taught high culture with a traditional liberal arts curriculum, and if conflicting pedagogic messages—and mass media temptations—can be turned off, Lasch suggests that Americans can become critical thinkers, democrats, and perhaps socialists.

Unfortunately, nobody knows how and why people become cultured or engage in critical thought. As I suggested in my book, the leisure-time culture in which people participate is strongly influenced by their parental and their own class position; and generally speaking, the better their education, the higher their culture. However, only a minority of people who obtain a high quality liberal arts education become cultured. Equally important, access to such an education still typically requires an affluent set of parents. Consequently, demanding that low- and middle-income people become cultured without first offering them the funds and educational access that goes with being upper or upper-middle class is in effect asking them to pull themselves up by their cultural bootstraps. In more topical language, it is a Reagan approach to culture. (So is Lasch's frequent reference to the democratization of culture without any discussion of how it and discussion about it should be democratized.)

Although Lasch appears to think that the failure of most Americans to receive the schooling necessary for critical thought can be blamed on the permissive policies of American educators, teachers are in fact limited in their ability to persuade or even inform students. For example, poor adolescents are difficult to educate, not because teachers have stopped imposing middle-class values on them as Lasch charges, but because these students are trying to learn the survival techniques of underclass life concurrently with their lessons and have difficulty connecting the two. To be sure, burned out, incompetent, and antagonistic teachers are also at fault, but even good teachers have trouble hooking the culture of their students up with the liberal arts. Nor is this problem limited to low-income students. The liberal arts curriculum still assumes too often that vocational concerns can be ignored, an assumption that even upper-middle-class youngsters can no longer make today.

While I share Lasch's belief in the value of critical thought—and teach in a liberal arts program—critical thought is, fortunately enough, not necessarily dependent on such a program. Having conducted several community studies, I

have met many working- and middle-class people who expressed the same critical thought found in journals of opinion, including this one, albeit in less systematic form and less elegant language. They had not been exposed to the liberal arts. Conversely, many liberal arts graduates are not given to critical thought and are often uncritically conservative, notably on economic issues. Perhaps they are the victims of inferior instruction, but more likely they are, like poor adolescents, expressing their immediate class interests.

If critical thought can exist without a traditional education, so can political democracy. Indeed, "the best that is known and thought in the world" is not always democratic in theme or purpose. Lasch does not spell out what he means by democracy, but if it is defined minimally as the incorporation of every citizen's interests in the political decision-making process, each citizen must know his or her own interests and be able and willing to participate in that process. Knowing one's interests can obviously be aided by the right training in critical thought, but most people have so far had to obtain the knowledge without the training. Actually, I believe that people know their interests more adequately than is often thought, although they may not care about interests which others, including intellectuals, would like them to know about. What citizens often do not know is how today's government or corporate decisions will affect their interests six or twelve months later—which is one reason why Reagan's economic program generated so little immediate opposition. I find it hard to imagine that a traditional liberal arts education can supply that kind of knowledge, for while it requires some critical thought, it also calls for technical information, and above all, the ability and willingness to predict the future and to act on that prediction.

Whether democracy should be more direct or representative (or a mixture of both), what is needed is not merely education and culture but a political structure which demands more participation by other than the economically powerful and the other now highly organized groups. This in turn requires a more decentralized polity in which people have, and feel that they can have, an effect on public decision making, as well as a more egalitarian economy. As long as economic power also means political power, participation and democracy, however it is defined, will be limited.

If a polity that encourages participation could be developed, people would need (and might therefore want) relevant political and other information, which could in turn evoke a heightened interest in education for critical thought.¹ Even so, citizens may still prefer TV sitcoms to Shakespeare in their spare time, which raises the question of whether the first priority of the cultural left is political democracy or upgrading popular culture and taste. Should the latter be the case,

¹ This argument is developed more fully in my *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), pp. 332-35.

the vision of the cultural left is not very different from that of the cultural right.

The communitarian left holds that the first purpose of socialism is the creation of the good community, or simply of "community," although communitarians differ on the crucial elements of both. R.H. Tawney and Richard Titmuss sought a society in which citizenship would be a kind of fellowship, giving people the opportunity to act on their altruistic impulses and realize community in the process. Other communitarians have viewed the good community very differently, ranging from William Morris's arts and crafts *Gemeinschaft* to Edward Bellamy's industrial army.

Lasch proposes two communitarian visions. As already noted, he envisages an economy in which work and play are reunited, mass production and consumption are abolished, and technology is permitted only in egalitarian forms of production. This is his version of the communitarianism of the early Marx, but Lasch has a second vision, based on his opposition to modernization and modernism, and on his belief that only the socially and culturally rooted can achieve intellectual and political freedom. "The left," he writes, "needs to ally itself not with the mass media . . . nor with the vision of a society without authority, without fathers and without a past, but with the forces in modern life that resist assimilation, uprooting, and 'forcible modernization.'" Among these forces he includes "ethnic ties, kinship networks, religious beliefs, and other forms of particularism."

Lasch is perfectly right to suggest that ethnicity, family, and religiosity are compatible with freedom, democracy, and socialism. Nevertheless, the intensity with which he inveighs against uprooting and modernization suggests that he is really not as interested in political and economic change as in a drastically different economy and society. (Although Lasch describes me as a supporter of modernization, I am interested only in the opportunities for and the limits of autonomy and choice, and have no quarrel with tradition. I am in favor of washing machines over washboards, and over riverbanks, however.) He does not spell out his ideas and refrains from a discussion of plans, but I am guessing that he would like America to become a patriarchal society of intellectual peasants and artisans. This is surely a possible vision for the communitarian left, even though few Americans seem to be interested in becoming peasants or family farmers; and in a high-wage society only the rich can afford to buy the products of artisans. In the Third World, peasants who have been politically free enough to express an interest in democracy and socialism have also sought the opportunity for consumer choice, leisure time, and other features of modernization which Lasch rejects. Once exposed to existing socialisms, however, many peasants have objected to collectivization and supported agrarian private-enterprise policies.

The third vision, which I label egalitarian, proposes that the highest priority for the left is the elimination of economic, political, racial, sexual, and other forms of inequality. My own belief is that if greater economic equality were possible—through full employment, some redistribution of income and wealth, and whatever government control over the economy is necessary to achieve the first two objectives—other but not all inequalities could be reduced, although by no means automatically. As I have already suggested, for example, eliminating undue concentrations of economic power would lessen political inequality and encourage the structural conditions under which democracy could be enhanced. Admittedly, increased government power that comes with taking responsibility for economic egalitarianism may be unavoidable, in which case greater economic and political equality are sufficiently incompatible to require a compromise—the invention of a system of economic and political checks and balances in which that compromise can be achieved.

Some egalitarians subscribe to the vision of the cultural left, hoping that income and wealth redistribution will somehow encourage universal high culture. I believe that in a democracy people must be able to decide how they should act and think—and to choose the culture they prefer, even one that may distress intellectuals. Lasch feels that choice of culture as of consumer goods is a spurious freedom which only replaces traditional autocracy with the “tyranny of fashion.” I see a significant difference between having to obey and being able to choose, even when the choices are limited by the market or by conformity pressures. Fashion is far less tyrannical than Lasch conceives it to be, but some conformity is unavoidable, even among intellectuals, in any society in which people are dependent on one another. Of course, Lasch appears to call for traditions which are so highly and universally respected that they need neither to be obeyed nor disobeyed, but I find it hard to believe that such traditions ever existed or that they could be created now.

My own egalitarian vision also leaves room for capitalist firms and the market, since both have virtues that even state socialist societies can no longer do without. Among other things, they treat consumers better than workers since they are dependent on the former but can usually replace the latter. (This is why I can “resort to a kind of free enterprise ideology in defending mass culture,” even while favoring government regulation of industry.) Consequently, I believe that the mass media are reasonably responsive to what many audience members want—or will accept within the limits of mass production—in entertainment and the arts. True, the audience must pay the capitalist’s price, but in a more egalitarian economy larger numbers would have the money.

During earlier attacks on “mass culture,” cultural leftists worried that under capitalism, high culture would eventually be eliminated because of the much

larger profits to be made in lowbrow and middlebrow culture. Today, high culture itself is often profitable, however; and when it is not it attracts subsidies from politicians, government agencies, and guilty oil companies. I do not want to exaggerate a miniscule trend, and subversive culture continues to lack support, but Lasch does not say enough about the alternative society he proposes to allow inferences about its treatment of subversives.

Increased economic equality could of course mean greater cultural homogeneity, a possibility which is an anathema to Lasch and others on the cultural left. However, even if egalitarian policies would sharply reduce the cultural variety now caused by class differences, other sources of cultural diversity remain to be tapped. Moreover, by the twenty-first century, when not enough jobs will be available for all who seek them and all modern economies will probably have to resort to job sharing, new culture will be invented in response to the proliferation of nonwork time.

The egalitarian vision also has communitarian consequences. Because greater economic equality would reduce conflicts of economic and political interest, perhaps enough people would agree on public goals and priorities to turn the public interest into a feasible political concept. In addition, incentives for altruistic acts would probably be more abundant. As a result, the egalitarian and communitarian lefts have some common concerns, even though the major communitarian of the twentieth century, R.H. Tawney, disparaged "equality by long division." Nevertheless, as long as people are diverse, some resources remain scarce, and complete equality is neither possible nor desirable, the total consensus of *Gemeinschaft*—which makes politics (and therefore democracy) superfluous—will thankfully not be realized.

The existence of three intellectual lefts has several implications. Not only is the left divided on some basic goals but it may be so divided that a single intellectual left is an illusion. The extent of the division has been underestimated—and masked—because left intellectuals have devoted themselves so assiduously to the critique of capitalism. As a result, too few have attempted to develop their own post-capitalist visions, much less put on paper plans for socialist societies based on these visions. Were they to do so, it might turn out that some cultural, communitarian, and egalitarian visions bear only a tenuous connection to socialism, however it is defined.

The failure to plan also masks the fact that all three visions are utopian. There is no likelihood that Lasch's culture, Tawney's community, or my egalitarian economy can be achieved. Sometimes, I wonder whether these utopias exist mainly to fuel arguments between intellectuals or to divert them from practical but controversial issues, although I prefer to believe that they also represent

widely-held ideals that can be approached, if never achieved, in the real world.

If left visions *are* ideals to be pursued in that world, I would oppose appeals for a universal high culture whether it is urged on society by fiat or by education. These appeals inevitably describe people who now learn from and enjoy popular culture as morally inferior and emotionally impaired, even if their deficiencies are attributed to capitalism. Not only is this description false but it insults the very people whose support is needed for economic and political change.

I also find Lasch's communitarian vision offensive because it proposes to do away with mass production and consumption only a generation or so since a large number of working- and middle-class Americans have had the chance to approach the comforts, conveniences, and pleasures heretofore limited to the rich and the *haute bourgeoisie*. Characterizing these same Americans as uprooted is simply inaccurate. While they are indeed pulling up some traditional and involuntary roots, including ethnic, religious, and familial ones, these are hardly as numerous or as basic as Lasch imagines. Alas, most middle- and working-class Americans are far more traditional, in every respect, than he indicates. At the same time, they are putting down new voluntary roots and establishing kinds of friendship, neighbor, and colleague relationships that serve them far better than some traditional obligations.

The process of uprooting and rerooting is still in transition, and while it is accompanied by new kinds of social, emotional, and political problems and its eventual outcome cannot yet be described, I see little cause for the alarm that Lasch clearly feels. If the American economy is not reformed, however, some of the people who have established new relationships may panic and embrace old—and novel—political and religious movements that offer them the fatalism and involuntary roots to help them cope with static or highly inegalitarian economies. At present, however, the people who best fit Lasch's portrait of the uprooted can be found in the Third World and among America's poor. Because they are driven off the farms but cannot find secure and decent jobs in the city, they surrender old roots and are unable to sink new ones.

I do not mean to reject Lasch's ideal of uniting work and play, particularly because some intellectuals have been fortunate enough to achieve it. If an alternative economy can be formulated which extends that ideal to as many other people as possible without requiring their giving up new freedoms and living standards they value, I wish Lasch would put his fertile mind to work on a model of that economy. Meanwhile, I keep thinking of labor-party intellectuals in several countries who bitterly opposed the introduction of television and had to be overridden by the worker members of their parties. America's much smaller and weaker intellectual left cannot set out on a quest for drastic economic and political reform by first demanding cultural purification from the people who are needed to make that quest real.