
CULTURE VS.
DEMOCRACY

Mass Culture Reconsidered

CHRISTOPHER LASCH

Everyone on the Left would probably agree that representative political institutions do not in themselves assure a democratic way of life. Against a minimalist conception of democracy—which seeks merely to free competitive enterprise from state interference, defines democracy as the abolition of special privilege, and demands impartial enforcement of rules designed to give all citizens an equal start in the race of life—the Left has upheld a broader vision, which embraces not only political democracy but economic democracy and the democratization of culture.

The Left's critique of free enterprise begins with the understanding that formal rules of competition do not in fact give everyone an equal start. Indeed, the ease with which class advantages perpetuate themselves under a system of political democracy has sometimes led radicals into the mistake of thinking that political democracy is a sham and that "bourgeois civil liberties" serve merely as instruments of class domination. But even those who regard free speech, universal suffrage, and representative institutions as absolutely essential conditions of democracy (and it would be comforting to think that they are now a majority on the Left) agree that these political safeguards represent no more than a beginning.¹ Democracy, they believe, also requires—at the very least—strong trade

¹ Rotarians, heads of Chambers of Commerce, members of corporate boards of directors, and other defenders of the American way of life take democracy as an established fact. What distinguishes the Left is a belief that democracy in the fullest sense does not yet exist.

unions, a progressive income tax, and government regulation of industry. Many would insist that it also requires the socialization of the means of production.

Even socialism, however, clearly does not guarantee democracy; and the authoritarianism of existing socialist regimes has encouraged on the Left not only a renewed appreciation of political democracy but a growing belief that a "cultural revolution" may be the most important element in the effort to establish a truly democratic society. This elusive idea has meant different things to different people. In general, it implies that old habits of submission to authority tend to reassert themselves even in movements committed to democratic goals, and that unless these habits are torn out by the roots, revolutionary movements will continue to recreate the very conditions they seek to abolish. Proponents of cultural revolution point to the reappearance of older patterns of authoritarianism in the Soviet Union and other socialist regimes, or again, to the reappearance of male supremacy in the ostensibly liberated New Left; and they argue that until these patterns of domination are destroyed, democratic movements will always fall short of their original goals.

The idea of a cultural revolution is not new. In one form or another, it has been a part of democratic ideology from the beginning. Leaders of the eighteenth-century democratic revolutions insisted that democracy requires enlightened citizens. The establishment of universal manhood suffrage in the nineteenth century added urgency to the belief that if democratic institutions were to prosper, the masses would have to be roused from their age-old intellectual torpor and equipped with the tools of critical thought.² In the twentieth century, the democratization of culture has become a central preoccupation of thinkers in the progressive tradition. Some progressives have followed John Dewey in thinking that antiauthoritarian educational reforms would encourage critical, scientific habits of mind. Others, like Thorstein Veblen, have put more faith in the intellectually

² According to Michael Chevalier, the French Positivist (1806-1879), the "initiation" of the masses into the intellectual discoveries of modernity had already taken place in the United States, whereas in France, popular ignorance held back political and economic progress. His contrast between the enterprising American farmer and the priest-ridden European peasant remains a classic statement of the democratic faith:

Examine the population of our rural districts, sound the brains of our peasants, and you will find that the spring of all their actions is a confused medley of biblical parables with the legends of gross superstition. Try the same operation on an American farmer and you will find that the great scriptural traditions are harmoniously combined in his mind with the principles of modern science as taught by Bacon and Descartes, with the doctrines of moral and religious independence proclaimed by Luther, and with the still more recent notions of political freedom. He is one of the initiated. (Michael Chevalier, *Society, Manners, and Politics in the United States: Letters on North America* [New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961 (1838)], ch. 34.)

emancipating effects of industrial routine.³ Some have stressed the self-education of the masses; others, the directing role of a tutelary elite. All these positions, however, have rested on a central set of premises concerning the dissolving effects of modernity on "traditional" modes of thought. The democratization of culture, it has appeared, presupposes either a program of education or a social process (or both) that tears people out of familiar contexts and weakens kinship ties, local and regional traditions, and attachments to the soil. Especially in the United States, the cutting of roots has been seen as the essential condition of growth and freedom. The dominant symbols of American life, the frontier and the melting pot, embody among other things the belief that only the uprooted can achieve intellectual and political freedom.

This underlying model of enlightenment needs to be reconsidered. In many respects it is deeply misleading. It underestimates the tenacity and value of old attachments. It gives rise to a false impression of the intellectual and technological stagnation of "traditional" societies, and at the same time it encourages an inflated estimate of the achievements of the unfettered modern mind. It views the sense of place and the sense of the past as completely reactionary in their political implications, ignoring the important role they have played in democratic movements and popular revolutions. Not only does it exaggerate the liberating effects of uprootedness, it upholds an impoverished concept of freedom. It confuses freedom with the absence of constraints.

Criticism of the prevailing conception of enlightenment—of the prevailing understanding of the "modernization" process—needs to proceed along two lines. The first uncovers the persistence of allegedly outmoded forms of particularism—family ties, religion, ethnicity, black nationalism—that have not only proved resistant to the melting pot but continue to provide people with the psychological and spiritual resources essential for democratic citizenship and for a truly cosmopolitan outlook, as opposed to the deracinated, disoriented outlook that is so often confused, nowadays, with intellectual liberation. The second line of inquiry tries to explain why the homogenized mass culture of modern societies gives rise not to enlightenment and independent thinking but to intellectual passivity, confusion, and collective amnesia. This essay follows the second path. It tries to lift the discussion of "mass culture" out of the ruts in which it has been bogged down since the forties and fifties, when Dwight Macdonald, Irving Howe, T.W. Adorno,

³ For different versions of the argument that equates popular enlightenment with the spread of a "scientific habit of mind," as Dewey called it—a habit of mind that understands the "kind of evidence required to substantiate given types of belief"—see John Dewey, "Science as Subject-Matter and as Method," *Science*, new series 31 (January 28, 1910): 121-27; Thorstein Veblen, "The Place of Science in Modern Civilization," *American Journal of Sociology* 11 (1906): 585-609; Karl Mannheim, "The Democratization of Culture" (1933), in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *From Karl Mannheim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 271-346.

Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, and others began to argue that the masses had thrown off ancient folkways only to fall victim to modern advertising and propaganda.⁴ The critique of mass culture contained many serious flaws, which made it easy for writers in the sixties and seventies to dismiss it instead of attempting to refine and restate it. Those who attacked mass culture often showed little understanding of popular art, as when Adorno wrote of jazz that the “plaintiveness of its sound expresses the longing for . . . submission.”⁵ Many of these critics based their argument on the shaky notion that class structures had broken down in “mass society.” They minimized popular or public resistance to psychological “manipulation” by the mass media. They assumed that the mass media had destroyed every lingering trace of a real popular culture and therefore that the only opposition to mass culture came from the small minority of adherents to “high culture.” Their own commitment to cultural modernism was uncritical and unexamined, and carried with it a commitment to vanguard or elitist movements not only in culture but sometimes in politics as well—the most disturbing feature of their position.⁶

Still, the critique of mass culture, in spite of these grave defects, contained an important historical insight, which can be restated as follows. Ever since the eighteenth century, the assault on cultural particularism and patriarchal authority, which encouraged self-reliance and critical thought—in the beginning at least

4 Some of the principal expositions of this critique of mass culture, in the order of their appearance, are Max Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 290–304; Dwight Macdonald, “A Theory of Popular Culture,” *Politics* 1 (February 1944): 20–23; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, originally published in 1947 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 120–67; Irving Howe, “Notes on Mass Culture,” *Politics* 5 (spring 1948): 120–23; Leo Lowenthal, “Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture,” *American Journal of Sociology* 55 (1950): 323–32; Dwight Macdonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture,” *Diogenes* 3 (summer 1953): 1–17; Dwight Macdonald, “Masscult and Midcult,” *Partisan Review* 27 (1960): 203–33, reprinted in his *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 3–75. Some of these essays are collected, together with many others on both sides of the debate, in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

All of these attacks on mass culture come from the Left. Mass culture has also been attacked from the Right; but the conservative critique is less interesting than the radical one, partly because it is ideologically predictable, partly because it starts from the premise that the masses have actually overthrown established elites and gained political power for themselves. The best example of this kind of argument is José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1932).

5 Review of two books on jazz, *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 170.

6 I have analyzed this uncritical celebration of modernism in “Modernism, Politics, and Philip Rahv,” *Partisan Review* 47 (1980): 183–94.

—has gone together with the creation of a universal market in commodities, which has had the opposite effect. These two developments are inseparably part of the same historical sequence. The growth of a mass market that destroys privacy, discourages self-reliance, and makes people dependent on consumption for the satisfaction of their needs vitiates the liberating possibilities opened up by the destruction of older constraints on the imagination and the intellect. As a result, freedom from those constraints often comes in practice to mean merely the freedom to choose among more or less indistinguishable commodities. The enlightened, emancipated modern man or woman turns out on closer inspection to be the not-so-sovereign consumer. Instead of the democratization of culture, we seem to be witnessing its complete assimilation to the requirements of the market.

Yet the confusion of democracy with the free flow of consumer goods runs so deep that protests against this industrialization of culture are automatically dismissed as protests against democracy itself, while mass culture is defended, on the other hand, on the grounds that it makes available to everybody an array of choices formerly restricted to the rich. In reality, mass marketing—in cultural life as in every other area—narrows the range even of consumer choices. Ostensibly competing products become indistinguishable; hence the need to create the illusion of variety by advertising them as revolutionary breakthroughs, breathtaking advances of modern science and engineering, or in the case of the products of the mind, as intellectual discoveries the consumption of which will bring instantaneous insight, success, or peace of mind. But when it comes to discussions of mass culture, the familiar effects of mass marketing—consolidation of financial power, standardization of products, declining craftsmanship—disappear in a cloud of populist rhetoric. The most remarkable feature of the mass-culture debate is that so many people on the Left, eager to acquit themselves of the suspicion of elitism, resort to a kind of free-enterprise ideology in defending mass culture that they would quickly repudiate if others advanced it as an argument, say, against government regulation of industry. Thus Herbert Gans rejects criticism of mass culture on the grounds that it attributes a “Pavlovian impact” to the mass media, whereas in fact, he argues, audiences “respond” to media “in a number of ways” and even “help to create” media content “through the feedback they exert on the mass media in the first place.”⁷ This is the same line of rea-

⁷ Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 32. The quotations in this paragraph and the two following paragraphs come from pp. 126, 125, 130–31, and 134.

A much more subtle and nuanced version of this type of argument appears in Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975). New technologies of communication, according to Williams, often have effects unintended and unforeseen by those who design them, including a “desire to use the technology for oneself.” Consumers of mass culture are not passive victims of manipulation; on the contrary, they use the new media for their own purposes. Unfortunately Williams gives no examples of this “complicated interaction” between those who control mass media and those who “use” them.

soning used by defenders of corporate capitalism to prove that corporate policy is dictated by the decisions of the "sovereign consumer" and that any attempt to regulate corporate practices will interfere with the consumer's "freedom of choice." According to Gans, the critique of mass culture "ignores the characteristics and wants of the people who choose culture." It not only impugns their judgment but attacks their right of free choice. It therefore cannot serve as a guide to public policy. "In a democratic society, a policy-relevant judgment must begin with the notion that cultures are chosen by people and cannot exist without them."

Not only does Gans exaggerate the range of available choices, he trivializes the issues at stake in the debate about mass culture by reducing them to questions of taste. The critics of mass culture, he thinks, want to impose their own high-brow tastes on less affluent and educated members of society who have a right to their lowbrow preferences and to a culture that "relates to their own experiences." Apostles of high culture claim that it provides "greater and perhaps more lasting aesthetic gratification," but this "assumption," Gans argues, with what he imagines to be scientific objectivity, "still requires empirical testing." Nor have the critics of mass culture shown that "choice of taste culture affects people's ability to function in the polity" or that "creators of a given taste culture act so as to consciously impair people in their ability to function." In other words, mass culture can become a "policy-relevant" issue only if the Surgeon General certifies not only that consumption of trash destroys the mind but that those who manufacture this trash deliberately design it to have lethal effects.

Blind to all but the grossest connections between culture and politics, Gans argues that "egalitarian economic policies have a far higher priority than cultural mobility." Culture, after all, serves largely to prevent boredom—"to enhance leisure time." Neither the improvement of leisure nor "self-realization"—the other, rather nebulous function Gans assigns to culture—depends on a "high taste level." "If people are able to strike for their own aesthetic standards and find cultural content that meets them, self-realization and a satisfying leisure life—that is, one marked by a minimum of boredom [!]
—are possible at all levels." Such a defense of "aesthetic pluralism," as Gans characterizes his own program, takes for granted the debased conception of culture that the critics of mass culture tried to challenge in the first place, which in their view derives from the separation of work and play, the organization of "leisure" by the same market forces that have already invaded the workplace, and the consequent reduction of culture to a time-killing diversionary routine designed to while away leisure hours that have become as vacuous as the hours spent at work.

It is not only defenders of "cultural pluralism" who trivialize the concept of culture and ignore the links between intellectual freedom and political freedom—or define intellectual freedom so narrowly that it no longer matters. The

critique of mass culture itself degenerated from an analysis of commodity production to a satire against popular taste. By 1960, the issues at stake in this debate had become so obscure that Dwight Macdonald could brush aside the objection that his defense of high culture was undemocratic as "beside the point." "The great cultures of the past have all been elite affairs," Macdonald decided; and the hope that elite cultures would ever find a popular audience had become untenable. Whitman's "noble vision" of a democratic culture shaped by intellectuals "at once so sublime and so popular that they can swing elections" had come to seem "absurd." The best that could be hoped for, in advanced industrial societies, was a cultural policy that would keep the "two cultures" separate and encourage the emergence of "a number of smaller, more specialized audiences."⁸

Defenders of high culture thus wound up in the same position as its critics. Neither party retained much faith in the possibility of a genuine democratization of culture. Just as political scientists in the fifties and sixties had begun to argue, on behalf of a similarly debased conception of pluralism, that democracies work through organized interest groups rather than through popular participation, and that democratic societies can therefore continue to operate (maybe operate better than ever) even if half the electorate does not bother to vote, so the advocates of cultural "pluralism" now demand a policy that "would create for every taste public," as Gans puts it, "the specific taste culture which expresses its aesthetic standards." Gans explicitly rejects a policy of mass education designed to raise the level of popular taste. "Poor people," he declares condescendingly, "are as entitled to their own culture as anyone else," and in any case, "high culture requires an extraordinary amount of emotional involvement with ideas and symbols" unattainable except by a tiny minority. "Democratic theory still assumes that all citizens must be educated on all issues," he concludes. "Nevertheless, democracies must and do function even when citizens are not educated."⁹

If these were the opinions of a single sociologist, they could be dismissed as merely superficial and ill-informed. But the same arguments have been advanced by many other people on the Left, and their prevalence suggests deep confusion about the nature of democracy and freedom. Our educational system, moreover, increasingly works on the unspoken assumption that democracies can "function even when citizens are not educated." Under the pretense of respecting the right of minorities to "their own culture" and the pretense, more generally, of respecting the rights of the young, the schools have abandoned any serious attempt to pass on the "best that is known and thought in the world." They operate on the assumption that high culture, so-called, is inherently elitist, that nobody should

8 Macdonald, *Against the American Grain*, pp. 55-56, 72-73.

9 Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*, pp. 133-35.

be asked to learn anything difficult, and that middle-class values should by no means be "imposed" on the poor.¹⁰ Like Gans, American educators invoke democratic slogans to excuse policies that condemn most of our countrymen to semi-illiteracy. They appeal to the dogma of cultural pluralism in order to justify the massive failure of public education.

A comparison of current conceptions of cultural pluralism with the very different conception advanced by Randolph Bourne—a writer often cited as a precursor of present-day spokesmen for ethnicity and cultural diversity—provides an excellent index of the degradation of democratic dogma. In his essay "Trans-National America," published in 1916, Bourne advanced a pluralistic conception of American culture, but he did not take the position that "high culture" requires too much effort and education to commend itself to the masses, that poor people are "entitled" to a third-rate culture, that "everyone needs escape at some time," or that in any case the "cultural level of a society" is less important than a "decent standard of living."¹¹ Such arguments would probably have struck him as just as undemocratic in their implications as the attempt to inflict Anglo-Saxon uniformity on the immigrant population—the immediate target of his attack. He objected to the predominance of "English snobberies, English religion, English literary styles, English literary reverences and canons, English ethics, English superiorities," not because he thought it was unfair to ask the children of immigrants to learn the English language or to study the masterpieces of English literature, but because the "Anglo-Saxon attempt to fuse," in his view, would "only create enmity and distrust." Bourne's defense of diversity did not deny the need for an "impelling integrating force." It was precisely because the parochial, "colonial" culture of the Anglo-American elite failed to provide such a unifying force, according to Bourne, that American society had begun to dissolve into "detached fragments of people" who became the "flotsam and jetsam of American life, the downward undertow of our civilization with its leering cheapness and falseness of taste and spiritual outlook, the absence of mind and sincere feeling which we see in our slovenly towns, our vapid moving pictures, our popular novels, and in the vacuous faces of the crowds on the city street."

¹⁰ In liberal rhetoric, moral values are no longer taught or transmitted through example and persuasion, they are always "imposed" on unwilling victims. Any attempt to win someone to your own point of view, or even to expose him to a point of view different from his own, becomes an infringement of his freedom of choice. These assumptions obviously preclude any public discussion of values at all.

¹¹ Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*, pp. 172–73, 137. Bourne's essay, which originally appeared in the *Atlantic*, is reprinted in Olaf Hansen, ed., *The Radical Will: Selected Writings of Randolph Bourne* (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), pp. 248–64.

Bourne's essay remains a standard by which to measure not only the debased pluralism that informs recent educational policy and recent debates about mass culture, but also the debased conception of cultural liberation according to which the historic movement toward "autonomy and inclusion" requires the dissolution of "traditional" cultures. The equation of freedom with the absence of external compulsion and with the ability to choose among ostensibly competing products derives in part from a simplistic idea of the "modernization" process, one that stresses the "positive contribution of . . . movements toward autonomy" in "separating the individual from authority," in bringing about a "relaxation of external controls" and a new "flexibility of social mandates," thus making it possible for the individual to "choose his personal goals from a wide scope of *legitimate* ends."¹² According to sociologists who adopt this view of modernization, the critique of mass culture, like the Marxist critique of capitalism from which it descends, romanticizes "traditional" society, ignores its stifling effect on the mind, and takes no account of improvements in living conditions or popular taste. "The new society is a mass society," writes Edward Shils, "precisely in the sense that the mass of the population has become incorporated *into* society."¹³ For the first time, the common people are emerging "from an immemorially old, clod-like existence" and achieving at least the "possibility of becoming full members of their society, of living a human life with some exercise of cultural taste."¹⁴ According to this view of things, it is the very abundance of choices to which people are now exposed—not capitalist exploitation or the iron cage of bureaucratic rationality—that underlies the much-discussed malaise of modern man. "Where complex alternatives are available in a society it becomes necessary for the individual to direct his own existence without traditional supports, i.e. without class, ethnic, or kinship ties. This need to make choices [gives rise to] persistent feelings of discontent."¹⁵

The melting-pot metaphor may have dropped out of favor, but the broader idea behind it lives on: the idea that people have to pull up their cultural roots before they can become citizens of the modern world. Gans's clinching argument against exponents of "high culture" is that they themselves, as uprooted intellectuals, have already made the arduous journey from tradition to modernity and

12 Fred Weinstein and Gerald M. Platt, *The Wish to Be Free: Society, Psyche, and Value Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 214-15, 219.

13 Edward Shils, "Mass Society and Its Culture," in Norman Jacobs, *Culture for the Millions* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961), p. 1. Gans cites this remark with approval.

14 Edward Shils, "Daydreams and Nightmares: Reflections on the Criticism of Mass Culture," *Sewanee Review* 65 (1957): 608.

15 Weinstein and Platt, *The Wish to Be Free*, pp. 215, 219.

now expect everyone else to share their own standards of "creativity and self-expression" and their own ethic of "individualism and individual problem-solving." Rather patronizingly once again, he maintains that "many working- and even middle-class Americans are still in the process of liberating themselves from traditional parental cultures and learning how to be individuals with their own needs and values." In other words, they are beginning to approach the lofty standards set by the enlightened elite; and the mass media, according to Gans, play a "progressive" role in breaking down the restrictive, patriarchal, "traditional" culture from which the working class is just beginning to free itself. Thus the mass media liberate the working-class housewife from parental dictation, enabling her to make her own decisions and to act on her own judgment and taste. "For a housewife who has decided that she wants to decorate her home in her own way, rather than in the way her parents and neighbors have always done," the media "provide not only a legitimation of her own striving toward individual self-expression but an array of solutions from various taste cultures from which she can begin to develop her own." Furthermore, the "spate of women's liberation articles in popular women's magazines helps a woman still deeply immersed in a male-dominated society to find ideas and feelings that allow her to start to struggle for her own freedom."¹⁶

Like most commentators on "modernization," Gans misses the irony that the housewife's liberation from "traditional" attitudes lies almost exclusively in the exercise of consumer choices. She frees herself from tradition only to bow to the tyranny of fashion. Individuation and "inclusion" in our culture have meant integration not into a community of equals but into the market in consumer goods. Freedom has amounted in practice to the freedom to choose between Brand X and Brand Y. Nor do the "ideas and feelings" among which the liberated housewife is invited to choose grow out of her own needs or experience. Insofar as she relies on the mass media for images of personal liberation, she finds herself confined to a choice among prefabricated opinions and ideologies designed by opinion-makers and marketed, like any other commodity, with an eye to their exchange value rather than their use value. The best a housewife can do with such materials is to construct not a life but a "life-style."

The classic case for the democratizing effect of modern mass communications was made by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." With Veblen and Dewey, Benjamin held that modern technology by its very nature uproots the masses from traditional sur-

¹⁶ Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*, p. 59.

roundings and superstitions and thus promotes a critical, scientific, iconoclastic cast of mind. Applied to the reproduction of art, modern technology demystifies the work of art, makes it generally accessible, and encourages a "mode of participation" in cultural life that is closer to the habitual use of old buildings by those who live in them than to the worshipful attention of the tourist. Benjamin, unlike American sociologists of modernization, understood very well that the immediate effect of mass communication is to enhance the "phony spell of a commodity," but he insisted that in the long run, deracination would create the conditions for a new kind of brotherhood. He shared with Bertolt Brecht the belief that art has "to go through this [industrial capitalist] phase without mental reservation," in order to achieve a socialist form in which the advantages of modern technology serve the needs of the entire community instead of serving only the capitalist. The unattractive side of modern mass culture—its phony glamour, its banality, its "cult of the movie star"—arise not from the technology of mass communication itself but from its control by the bourgeoisie, in other words from the "discrepancy between the tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization in the process of production."¹⁷

The Marxist theory of technology—of the technology of mass communications in particular—shares with liberal sociology the assumption that ethnic ties, kinship networks, religious beliefs, and other forms of particularism inhibit independent thought and keep the masses passive and inert. On this Marxist reading of the modernization process, mass culture, even if its existing organization, reflects capitalist priorities, dissolves ancient faiths and folkways and thus lays the groundwork for an intellectual awakening of the masses and for a higher stage of social organization. Where liberal sociologists stress the immediate achievements of mass culture in promoting individualism and free choice, Marxists look to the future, when socialism will dissolve the contradiction between the "forces of production" and the "social relations of production"—between the potentially liberating effects of mass communications and their control by the bourgeoisie. In spite of the difference between these positions, however, Marxists and liberal sociologists subscribe to the same myth of historical progress, and therefore both

17 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 231, 239-40, 242, 246 n. 9. Similar arguments have more recently been advanced by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974). For penetrating criticisms of the Benjamin-Brecht-Enzensberger position, see Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), especially the essay "Requiem for the Media," pp. 164-84. "This tradition," Baudrillard writes (p. 175), "has yet to renounce the bourgeois Enlightenment. It has inherited all its ideas about the democratic (here revolutionary) virtues of spreading light (broadcasting). The pedagogical illusion of this position overlooks that—in aiming its own political acts at the media, and awaiting the moment to assume the media's mantle of power—the media themselves are in deliberate pursuit of the political act, in order to depoliticize it."

dismiss criticism of modern technology and mass culture as the product of “nostalgia”—or as Edward Shils once put it, of “disappointed political prejudices, vague aspiration for an unrealizable ideal, resentment against American society, and at bottom, romanticism dressed up in the language of sociology, psychoanalysis and existentialism.”¹⁸

One of the most important advances in recent social theory is the discovery that modern technology reflects in its very design the need to assert managerial control over the labor force.¹⁹ A society in which political and economic power is concentrated in a small class of capitalists, managers, and professionals has invented appropriate forms of technology that perpetuate a hierarchical division of labor and weaken older patterns of mutuality and collective self-help. Under these conditions, “individuation” entails the erosion of apprenticeship, of workers’ informal understanding of the content of a “fair day’s work,” of informal agencies of welfare and mutual security, of autonomous popular agencies of cultural transmission—the erosion, in short, of autonomous forms of popular culture. Modern technology embodies by design (in both senses of the term) a one-way system of management and communication. It concentrates economic and political control—and increasingly, cultural control as well—in a small elite of corporate planners, market analysts, and social engineers. It invites popular “input” or “feedback” only in the form of suggestion boxes, market surveys, and public opinion polls.²⁰ Technology thus comes to serve as an effective instrument of social control in its own right—in the case of mass media, by short-circuiting the electoral process through opinion surveys that help to shape opinion instead of merely recording it, by selecting political leaders and “spokesmen,” and by treating the choice of leaders and parties as one more consumer decision. The mass media maintain a “permanent preventive counter-revolution,” as Régis Debray has said without exaggeration.²¹

18 Shils, “Daydreams and Nightmares,” p. 596.

19 See, e.g., Stephen Marglin, “What Do Bosses Do?” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 6 (1974): 60–112, and 7 (1975): 20–37; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); David F. Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); David Montgomery, “Workers’ Control of Machine Production in the 19th Century,” *Labor History* 17 (1976): 485–509.

20 The term *feedback* speaks eloquently of the real nature of this interchange. It refers to the electronic static that results from improper adjustment of a microphone. Thus popular “feedback” to the decisions of policy-makers arises not from autonomous popular initiatives but from minor disturbances in the machinery of one-way communication, to be eliminated as quickly as possible.

21 Régis Debray, *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*, trans. David Macey (London: New Left Books, 1981), p. 195.

From this point of view, mass media have to be seen not as a conduit for bourgeois ideology or even as the means through which bourgeois propagandists and advertisers manipulate public opinion but as a system of communication that systematically undermines the very possibility of communication and makes the concept of public opinion itself increasingly anachronistic. Here is the core of truth in Marshall McLuhan's dictum that the medium is the message. Not that certain technologies automatically determine the content of communication or that television has put an end to "linear" thinking. The point is not that technology governs social change or that every social revolution originates in a revolution in the means of communication, but that mass communication, like the assembly line, by its very nature reinforces the concentration of power and the hierarchical structure of industrial society. It does so not by disseminating an authoritarian ideology of patriotism, militarism, and submission, as so many left-wing critics assume, but by destroying collective memory, by replacing accountable authority with a new kind of star system, and by treating all ideas, all political programs, all controversies and disagreements as equally newsworthy, equally deserving of fitful attention, and therefore equally inconsequential and forgettable.

On the surface, advanced technologies of communication seem merely to facilitate the dissemination of information on a wider scale than was possible before, without in any way predetermining the content of that information. If the mechanical reproduction of culture enables advertisers to reach millions of customers with a thirty-second commercial or gives established politicians access to a mass constituency, it ought to lend itself almost as easily, it would seem, to the transmission of messages that subvert the status quo. Recent experience calls this expectation into question. During the sixties, radicals attempted to use the "public attention we now have for all it's worth," as an SDS leader put it, but they discovered instead that media attention transformed the very character of the movement.²² Hoping to manipulate the media for its own purposes, SDS found itself obliged to serve the media's purposes instead. Todd Gitlin has documented this process in detail. He shows how the "media selected for celebrity" those movement leaders "who most closely matched prefabricated images of what an opposition leader should look like." He shows how the media's inherent bias in favor of dramatic confrontation and violence began to dictate the movement's own tactics and strategy, encouraging the replacement of radicalism with

²² Paul Booth, quoted in Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 91.

militancy, an ever-increasing escalation of theatrical gestures, and a “self-mystified turn toward revolution.” He shows how the media’s search for histrionic and highly “visible” left-wing leaders influenced not only the tactics of the movement but its structure, by promoting to stardom figures like Mark Rudd, Jerry Rubin, and Abbie Hoffman—thespians of the counterculture who had no accountability to any constituency yet came to be treated as spokesmen for the Left. Not only in their coverage of the Left but in their coverage of politics in general, the mass media, in Gitlin’s words, replace “authentic authority based on excellence of character, experience, knowledge, and skill” with a new kind of pseudo-authority based on celebrity.²³

The same patterns can be seen in the impact of mass communications on the world of ideas. Here again, a superficial view would suggest that new forms of communication make it possible for artists and intellectuals to reach a wider audience than they ever dreamed of. On the contrary, the new media merely universalize the influence of the market, reducing ideas to commodities. Just as they transform the selection and certification of political leadership by substituting their own judgments of newsworthiness for popular accountability, so they transform the certification of literary or artistic excellence. Their insatiable appetite for novelty (that is, for old formulas in new packages), their reliance on immediate recognition of the product, and their need for “annual ideological revolutions,” as Debray puts it, make “visibility” the sole test of intellectual merit. The first judgment of a book or an idea becomes the last; a book either becomes a best-seller or drops out of sight; and the book in any case takes a back seat to the article or interview it occasions. Here as elsewhere, journalism no longer reports events, it creates them. It refers less and less to actual events and more and more to a circular and self-validating process of publicity. It no longer presupposes a world that exists independently of the images made about it. The intellectual, like the political activist, thus finds that “he has to pay tribute to a new type of medium which, not content with transmitting influence, superimposes its own code on it.”²⁴

The studies by Gitlin and Debray should help to discourage abstract theorizing about the mass media and to ground discussion, not to be sure in the “empirical” sociological investigations of “taste cultures” called for by Herbert Gans, but in the concrete historical experience of those who have tried to use mass media for critical, subversive, and revolutionary purposes. The practical conclusion to be drawn from these books is that such efforts are likely to prove self-defeating.

23 Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, pp. 149, 155, 160.

24 Debray, *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities*, pp. 84–85, 87, 110, 112–13, 117, 140.

Political activists who seek to change society would do better to stick to the patient work of political organizing instead of trying to organize a movement, as Rennie Davis put it, "with mirrors."²⁵ Writers and intellectuals, for their part, need to learn that the mass media provide access to a broader audience strictly on their own terms. It is tempting for people on the Left to think that by transmitting images of political rebellion or radical ideas, the communications industry can be turned into an agency of counterpropaganda. Instead of subverting the status quo, however, the mass media subvert radical movements and ideas in the very act of giving them "equal time."

In his study of SDS, Gitlin argues that the student movement played into the media's hands, not only because its leaders allowed themselves to be co-opted for celebrity, but because the movement as a whole refused to set up a structure of responsible leadership that would have prevented the appointment of "spokesmen" by CBS and the *New York Times*. The Left regarded any form of leadership as inherently elitist and preferred the comfortable delusion that a movement can get along without leaders if its members are committed to irreproachably democratic goals. The emergence of media stars on the Left only strengthened these suspicions of leadership. But the problem for the Left is to make its leaders accountable to their constituents, not to get rid of leaders altogether. Failure to establish a structure of accountable leadership makes it more difficult than ever, as Gitlin puts it, "to build up an infrastructure of self-generated cultural institutions, outside the dominant culture."²⁶

These observations point to a broader conclusion. The Left needs to ally itself not with the mass media and other agencies of cultural homogenization, 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." It needs to revise its idea of what makes men modern in the first place. Now that modern history is itself beginning to recede into the past, we can see that modernism in the arts depended much more heavily on tradition than the pioneers of modernism believed; and the same point extends to modern culture as a whole. It has never represented a simple repudiation of "traditional" patterns; indeed, it has drawn much of its strength from their persistence. Randolph Bourne was right when he said that true cosmopolitanism has to be rooted in particularism. The experience of uprootedness, on the other hand, leads not to cultural pluralism but to aggressive nationalism, centralization, and the con-

²⁵ Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, p. 167. "This apt phrase," Gitlin writes, describes the "process of making a project real by creating a reputation for it."

²⁶ Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*, p. 3.

solidation of state and corporate power. After America's entrance into World War II, when the hope of cultural renewal in the United States began to fade, Bourne turned with good reason to an analysis of that war machine, the modern state. Another writer who understood these matters more clearly than sociological students of mass culture (even those whose sympathies lie with the Left), after expressing amazement that "certain periods almost without material means of communication surpassed ours in the wealth, variety, fertility, and vitality of their exchanges of thought over the very widest expanses," proposed a similar view of the link between uprootedness and the higher provincialism underlying modern national consolidation. "Men feel that there is something hideous about a human existence devoid of loyalty," wrote Simone Weil; but in the modern world, "there exists nothing, apart from the State, to which loyalty can cling."²⁷

The weakening of almost every form of spontaneous popular association does not destroy the desire for association. Uprootedness uproots everything except the need for roots.

²⁷ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Putnam, 1952), pp. 123, 127.