
THEME

NOTE

Previous issues of *democracy* have explored the increasingly hierarchical organization of economic and political life. The articles in this issue address themselves, in one way or another, to cultural developments that seem at first to contradict the movement toward centralization and to open up new possibilities for democratic initiative. As work and politics grow more undemocratic, our culture becomes superficially more popular and egalitarian. Radical ideologies, defeated in the political realm, take refuge in cultural programs that call for the destruction of a repressive sexual morality, of an "authoritarian" ethic of work and self-denial, of "elitist" standards of literary excellence and intellectual objectivity.

Spokesmen for the victims of "middle-class cultural imperialism," academic insurgents equipped with the latest revolutionary methodologies (structuralist, Lacanian, feminist, or psychoanalytic), advocates of "postmodernism" in the arts and architecture, fashion-setters and trend-spotters of all kinds unite in celebrating the demise of bourgeois culture and the rise of a liberated, revolutionary sensibility that promises to deliver mankind from its age-old submission to drudgery and duty. They unite also—whatever their other disagreements—in dismissing every criticism of the "cultural revolution" as reactionary and nostalgic in its inspiration. According to the ideologists of cultural emancipation, it is only a hankering for intellectual certainty and for the lost security of a patriarchal order that prevents us from experiencing the death of Western culture as a new birth—the emergence of a new and better world "beyond man and humanism," in the words of Jacques Derrida.

In an age of rhetorical inflation, such claims ought to be greeted with skepticism. They betray an underlying affinity with the aggressive hucksterism of the advertising industry, with the proclamation of revolutionary new breakthroughs in product design and technology, and with the marketing of old formulas in the guise of the new and improved. Indeed, it is precisely the incorporation of critical

traditions of discourse into the commodity market that most fully characterizes the contemporary cultural scene and explains the apparent contradiction between economic centralization and cultural democracy. What looks like a democratization of culture turns out on closer inspection to be the subordination of cultural life to the demands of the universal market. Thus the takeover of book publishing by conglomerates is accompanied by denunciation of the previously "elitist" basis of publishing and by the pretense of making books available to a wider audience. The transformation of journalism, art, social commentary and criticism, and intellectual discovery into mass entertainment ostensibly makes the most advanced thought of the age available to a popular audience, thereby fulfilling the old democratic dream of an enlightened, critical, and self-confident electorate.

In reality, these developments merely bring ideas under the sway of the fashion industry. They give rise to a traffic in quotable quotes, slogans, and intellectual formulas, valued for their capacity to shock or titillate and discarded as soon as their novelty begins to fade. What passes for cultural pluralism today amounts, at best, to an expansion of the range of consumer choice; but even here, the logic of the market demands the standardization of products and thus ends by restricting the range of available choices. In cultural life as in the provision of material goods and services, industrialization means the destruction of artisanal activity and craftsmanship, debasement of standards, erosion of popular culture, and the weakening of autonomous, informal agencies of cultural transmission like the kinship group, the neighborhood, and the voluntary association. In a society dominated by huge corporations, the democratization of culture is a delusion.

The contributions to this issue prompt the conclusion, among others, that cultural radicalism cannot take the place of a coherent strategy of political and economic change, designed to reverse the long-term drift toward financial consolidation and centralized decision making. This does not mean that cultural issues can be dismissed as unimportant or postponed until the achievement of political and economic democracy. One of the most important lessons the Left has learned in this century is that oppressive institutions perpetuate themselves by becoming embedded in everyday habits and awareness, and that revolutionary movements that fail to challenge established habits will unavoidably recreate older patterns of domination. But in its new appreciation of the importance of "consciousness," the Left seeks to substitute radical gestures and consciousness raising for political action, especially now that the prospects for political action are so discouraging. Such a retreat can only strengthen the enemies of democracy.

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