

The Frankfurt School in the Development of the Mass-Culture Debate

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Now that the Frankfurt school's critique of the "Culture industry" has been widely discussed and debated, its outlines generally well known, it is worth posing again the question of its historical meaning. One indispensable way to approach this would be to ask : what is the relation of the "culture industry" analysis to the history of the mass culture debate as a whole, the politically freighted, seemingly endless stream of evaluative writings on the subject which originated in the late eighteenth century and have proliferated especially since the 1920s ? In this essay I will assess the validity of previous, generally implicit, historical patterns which have been suggested – in particular, one that is based on an analogy between conservative elitest and Frankfurt school attacks upon mass culture. After that, I will present an alternative reading which seems to make more sense of the Frankfurt school's relation to Nietzsche, Arnold, Ortega and Eliot while at the same time showing the shared historical ground and discursive bonds which link Adorno and his colleagues to the various mid-twentieth-century liberal *defenders* of mass media or consumer culture.

Most serious writing on the Frankfurt school, when it has engaged the mass culture debate, has concentrated upon conflicts within the orbit of the Institute (most notably, between Adorno and Benjamin), or between various figures or groups within the development of western Marxism since Lukacs and Gramsci.¹ This has been important and has helped to clarify the rich diversity and complexity of twentieth-century Marxist cultural theory. All the same, a broader focus which traced left intellectuals' responses to popular culture since the late eighteenth century would enable us to understand the historical significance of what Brecht, Gramsci, Benjamin or Adorno had to say on the subject. It might illuminate

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for example, how twentieth century Marxist cultural theory has tended to unravel and polarize the inter-woven popular and elite strands in Marx's own ambiguous and multi-valent synthesis. Even more valuable, however, would be to break out of left-wing parochialism, which the Frankfurt school had done, and investigate the relation of the "culture industry" analysis to the wide variety of historically shifting and nationally diverse conservative or liberal approaches to folk, popular consumer, or mass culture. This would involve, of course, careful attention to the specific ways in which "popular" and "elite" culture are seen to inter-act.

There has, of course, been one persistent manner in which Frankfurt school aesthetic theory has been compared to social and cultural analyses originating outside the left. Many liberal, and some left-wing, writers have focused on the fact that Adorno and his colleagues (with the exception of Benjamin in his Brechtian moments) share with conservative or reactionary writers like Nietzsche, Arnold, Spengler, Ortega, Leavis and Eliot a common disgust with mass culture.² Such a comparison is usually framed as a wideranging indictment. The usual charges are that both the Frankfurt school and conservative cultural critics are ascetic-minded puritans disdainful of the hedonistic fun most people seek and generally find in mass culture entertainment; that they share a regressive longing for a society before the rise of industry and mechanical means of reproduction (press: cinema, radio, television, etc.) and before the full entry of the middle and lower classes into political and cultural life; and that their common aesthetic reliance on a pristine model of high culture, available only to select initiates and untainted by vulgar mass enjoyment which suffer by comparison, is rooted in an elitest desire for a hierarchical society culturally and socially dominated by privileged people such as themselves.

Such a critique forms the major part of what is the most common historical patterning of the mass culture debate. In what is a kind of cultural whiggism, the nineteenth-century aristocratic attack on cultural democracy is said to be absorbed by the disillusioned Marxist left (after the debacle of European socialism in the inter-war years and the rise of fascism) and is then corrected after the 1940s by an empirically-grounded defense of a democratic, pluralist leisure industry. (But the regressive elitests still persist, according to this scenario, and need correcting, so the debate continues). In Marxist or left-populist versions of this historical scheme the conservative and disillusioned, elitest-left phases are succeeded by an

understanding of sub-cultural class, ethnic or gendered forms of resistance instead of mere "consumption" of cultural commodities.

How much validity is there in this historical discourse which includes pivotal claims of an elitist, ascetic and regressive Frankfurt school? Beginning with the central first issue, it is hard to deny some justice to the elitist charge, *especially* if aesthetic and cultural matters are isolated in the analysis. Most writings of Frankfurt school members, and especially those of Adorno and Horkheimer, do invoke high-cultural aesthetic models when judging the merit of culture-industry products. In Adorno's notorious 1930s writing on jazz, for example, which are generally regarded as his most biased and Euro-centric (in a mandarin sense), rhythmic syncopation in Beethoven's music, "which rises up against existing law until it produces out of it a new one,"³ is contrasted with the illusory subjective power, arbitrarily revoked and purposeless, of pseudo spontaneous jazz syncopation. Whereas a Beethoven sonata encourages active listening, he writes, jazz is often received as background music or used for mentally inactive dancing.⁴ When reading Adorno—who, of course, set the tone for much of the Frankfurt school's analysis of the culture industry, and who will therefore be emphasized in this essay—it is difficult to avoid the impression that we are confronting another transplanted, highly cultivated, *haute bourgeois* European who simply cannot fathom what is, on occasion, vital, fun, sometimes healthily rebellious and even aesthetically appealing (Chaplin, Astaire, Duke Ellington, for example) in commercial film and popular music. At the very least one would expect a more nuanced sense of the contradictory aspects of audience reception.

It is difficult to avoid such a reading, but it is necessary to see that it is true to only a limited extent. In general, the obvious abuse of the term "elitism" in recent decades should put us on guard against its over-extended deployment. More specifically, as a guide to the reading of Adorno's Horkheimer's and Lowenthal's writings on culture the epithet is often misleading, a fact which becomes apparent once close attention is paid to what is actually being said. This should not be surprising, for the purpose of such sweeping and unqualified polemical formulae as "elitism" is often to cut off further study and thought.

For one thing, Adorno and his colleagues, unlike most of the traditionalist cultural critics to whose work the term applies, pointedly

refused to privilege culture as a higher realm which is said to rise above material reality; in their view such idealist aesthetics served to obscure and obscenely compensate for otherwise more visible social injustices and suffering. The Frankfurt school followed Marcuse's analysis of the "affirmative" tendencies of such conservative notions of culture,⁵ and strenuously sought to show how *all* cultural life is tainted by its inevitable complicity, in class societies, with forces of political domination and social oppression. In his essay "Cultural Criticism and Society," a trenchant critique of idealist aesthetics. Adorno wrote: "...all culture shares the guilt of society... It ekes out its existence only by virtue of injustice already perpetrated in the sphere of production..."⁶ In his last work *Aesthetic Theory* (1969), he bitterly commented "Those cliches about art casting a glow of happiness and harmony over an unhappy and divided real world are loathsome because they make a mockery of any emphatic concept of art by looking only at perverse bourgeois practices such as the employment of art as a dispenser of solace."⁷ Insisting that high culture as well as popular culture be treated as the part of the shifting constellations of material life, Adorno further charged (anticipating, in effect, Bourdieu's recent studies of "cultural capital"): "If cultural criticism...sides with conservatism, it is because of its unconscious adherence to a notion of culture, which during the era of late capitalism, aims at a form of property which is stable and independent of stock-market fluctuations."⁸ Without wanting to theoretically collapse mental into manual labor (as did Brecht in his "production aesthetics"), or to deny the invaluable critical and utopian moments in artistic works, Adorno refused, then, to isolate cultural life as a higher pursuit, the premise upon which conservatives become alarmed at the extrinsic invasion of barbarous masses. Since it is often liberal pluralist who develop the Adorno-T. S. Eliot analogy, it is worth mentioning that their own approach to mass culture often makes it difficult to appreciate what the Frankfurt school figure was doing. When a separable category called "leisure activities" is isolated from questions of work and power, social scientists breathe new life into consolatory approaches to cultural life and are in an unfavorable position to understand Adorno's strictures upon the material sources of mass-cultural reception – for example, in boring, exhausting and powerless labor, which is ostensibly "compensated" by consumer purchasing power.

The analogy between the Frankfurt school and high culture conservatives includes the claim that both regard aesthetically cultivated

production as threatened in the twentieth century by the inroads of mass or "middle-brow" culture. Such a characterization fits the conservatives, no doubt, but its imputing of a hierarchical, binary opposition between "high" and "low" does little justice to the actual writings of the Frankfurt school on the relations between avant-garde modernist and mass culture in the era 1850-1940, that is during the "heroic" phase of adversarial modernism which the Frankfurt school did, in fact, champion. As Andreas Huyssen has written recently, for Adorno "modernism and mass culture have, ever since their simultaneous emergence in mid-nineteenth century, been engaged in a compulsive *pass de deux*."⁹ Even if Adorno may have viewed the most valuable modernist works as those which embodied some resistance to a commodified and administered society (Schoenberg's and Kafka's art, for example), he saw most avant-garde activity, to say nothing of the contemporary functioning of earlier classical or romantic culture, as suffering from the degradation of art in consumer capitalism. One example would be his analysis of Wagner's contributions to the emerging culture industry. According to Adorno, Wagner's leitmotifs operate as advertisements, designed for the forgetful to be remembered, instead of serving as constituents of true musical development.¹⁰ (That Adorno's basis of criticism is an invidious contrast with the earlier Viennese art of motivic development shows, it is quite true, that there is an aesthetic standard operating here, although it is an ultimately cognitive one. Beethoven had the historical good fortune to live when a self-constituting subjectivity was possible, the age of bourgeois revolution.)¹¹ Adorno further argued that such phantasmagoric tableaux as the Venusberg or Magic Fire music "assumes the character of wares on display."¹²

It was not democracy, the masses, or so-called "mass culture" which, according to Adorno, posed the threat to high culture, the danger was posed, instead, by the reduction of virtually *all* cultural life to exchange value or the effects upon art of the return of a repressed and now brutalized nature in an instrumentally rationalised industrial society. "Thus the lack of breadth and generosity which is so striking in Adorno's canon of modernism," Huyssen has written, "is not simple the result of personal, 'elitist' taste, but it flows from his vigorous and relentless analysis of the cultural effects of commodification."

It is unnecessary here to catalogue all of the innumerable ways in which Adorno saw *both* modernist high culture and twentieth

century popular culture as driven by a logic of commodity fetishism, the cult of *nouveauté* (as a cover for mythic repetition and standardization), false immediacy (which camouflages the alienated world of an administered society), shock as a consumer good, sadomasochistic obeisance before repressive collectivities, etc. While it is quite true that Adorno viewed avant-grade as *more* autonomous than the direct products of the commercial culture industry, he found that art either readily usable by the latter (Wagner, Stravinsky, musical or pictorial impressionism, *art nouveau*, symbolist decadence, surrealism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, neo-classicism etc.), or – and these were rare cases indeed—revealing in its formal structures a dialectical interplay between moments of emancipatory protest and the mirroring of contemporary forms of domination (Schoenberg, Karfa, Trakl, Beckett, etc.). As for the contemporary performance and reception of high culture, Adorno was unsparing in his attacks upon the regression of musical listening and the fetishizing of musical material, for example, in the much heralded Toscanini radio broadcasts of the late 1930s.¹⁴ In sum, then, it may be said that Adorno drew a line not so much between an alleged high and a debased mass culture as *within* high culture itself, but even here it was by no means an impermeable boundary.

One of the problems of the Adorno-conservative elitist analogy is that it fails to grasp the political implications of sharply diverging aesthetic postures. It rests, in fact, upon a highly abstract and even reified notion of "high culture." For one thing, there is often a failure to distinguish between "official" culture, say, the monumentalist pseudo-classicism of Wilhelmian Germany, and the multiplicities of genuinely high-cultural activity. Within the latter, and especially germane to the question at hand, Adorno's specific aesthetic and historical judgments are not taken into account and he is simply assimilated to more traditionalist readings of the crisis of modern culture. Unlike Arnold, Eliot or Ortega, Adorno did not see embattled cultural elites struggling to preserve continuity with classical tradition, a posture which underpinned fears of rupture and anarchic "chaos" brought on by rising massness, instead he saw that rupture as a result of social processes of capitalist rationalization which a few selected modernist works managed to defy, while at the same time they also reflected its domination. Instead of images of classical wholeness and beauty—whose untroubled appearance in the twentieth century Adorno regarded as an affront to the experience of all human beings in this age, not merely

any elites—Adorno's modernist aesthetic selected out works of anguished expressionist protest and a strong dissonance which, he felt, alone lived up to the cognitive—historical demands made upon art. Anyone who has read Adorno's discussion of Schoenberg's wrenching "The Survivor of Warsaw" (1944)¹⁵ for example, will understand a major reason why Adorno concerned himself so much with aesthetic: not because something called "culture" must survive, if by that we understand a myopic "sweetness and light," or "organic harmony," but to register the deeper experiences of ordinary human beings in the process of their degradations. Critics of high-cultural "elitism" would do well to understand the plebian value in such contestatory notions of art.¹⁶

For Adorno the division between the best modernist works and those of the entertainment industry should neither be ossified into eternally separate, "taste cultures,"¹⁷ or evaded by a harmonizing logic which obscured continuing social and cultural conflicts and injustices. "Both Schoenberg and the Hollywood film," he wrote to Walter Benjamin, "are torn halves of an integral freedom to which however they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other."¹⁸

The Frankfurt school's critique of the culture industry drew often upon the Institute's studies of the social psychology of contemporary "administered capitalist" society. This need not be discussed here at length. What needs to be said, however, is that instead of objecting to assaults on hierarchical authority—as when conservatives are alarmed at the decline of deference and the "rise of the masses," from Burke to Eliot and Ortega—Adorno and his colleagues were troubled over sado-masochistic *submission* to authority in present society. This is how they adapted Freudian arguments for largely democratic ends. However much one may rightfully object to Adorno's attacks on jazz, they are aimed not at the art's rebellious "freedoms," which Adorno regarded as spurious but its ostensibly regressive forms of authoritarian compliance, which revealed the masochistic frailty of contemporary egos.

After returning to Germany in the 1950s, once he had gained a greater appreciation for formal democratic institutions in the United States,¹⁹ Adorno wrote: "outrage at the alleged mass era has become an article for mass consumption, for inciting masses against politically democratic forms."²⁰ Connecting such tendencies with aesthetic questions, he commented; "Ever since Baudelaire's day, aesthetic nobility has made

common cause with political conservatism, as though democracy, *per se*, the quantitative notion of a mass, rather than the continued repression in democracy were to blame for vulgarity."²¹ Thus when Adorno and his associates read politically conservative thinkers such as Nietzsche or Spengler, they did not "consume" them in the manner of reception which the "culture-industry" model ascribed to average film-goers or music-listeners, they played tricks with elite thinkers "using" their writings for their own purposes, just as, we have been told by current reception analysts, all readers, viewers and listeners do.

Apart from the charge of anti-democratic elitism, the Frankfurt school's views of mass culture have been often compared, as we have seen, to the puritan asceticism of conservative moralists. Here once, again, there is some point to the claim, but it becomes a very thin one indeed once we pass beyond surface appearances. The following key passage shows the eudaemonist, if not hedonist, bases of Adorno's and Horkheimer's defence of artistic sublimations as against the frustration of desire in contemporary popular entertainments: "The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which...it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged...The secret of aesthetic sublimation is its representation of fulfillment as a broken promise. The culture industry does not sublimate, it represses... Works of art are ascetic and unashamed, the culture industry is pornographic and prudish"²² It is significant that the drawing some inspiration from Nietzsche's writings it was the latter's path-breaking assaults upon masochistic asceticism in mass culture which the Frankfurt school admired, but not his radical-aristocratic readings of the situation.

The purposeful purposelessness of art; its potential as a source of resistance to draconian utility, Adorno liked to compare to forms of entertainment, such as the circus, which have survived from the early industrial era. "The much maligned circus, act is repeated at the highest level of form where art seems poised to overcome the force of gravity. Similarly, the glaring absurdity of the circus - why waste all the energy? - is actually the absurdity of art itself, more precisely of its enigmatic quality."²³ But the value of such "light art," in contrast with present "distractions" is that by making a mockery of seriousness it revealed the social divisions and tainted social premises of "serious art." "The division itself is the truth," he wrote, "it does at least express the negativity of the

culture which the different spheres constitute. Least of all can the antithesis be reconciled by absorbing light into serious art, or vice versa. But that is what the culture industry attempts. The eccentricity of the circus, peepshow and brothel is as embarrassing to it as that of Schoenberg and Karl Kraus."²⁴ Far from regarding most products of the culture industry as "escapist," a common, often puritan (or at least harshly utilitarian) charge, Adorno argued that they are not escapist enough; they reinforce the governing performance principle of a society geared to alienated production. "Escape in earnest," he wrote in typical dialectical fashion, "could become a message just because of its unbending asceticism towards practical proposals."²⁵

One of the key differences between Adorno's treatment of pleasure and that of conservative, or any other kind of puritans, is that his critique of mass-cultural "distractions" was rooted in a well-placed concern for the effects of debilitating *labour* upon the quality of leisure activities, an issue that is all too often neglected in writings on the subject. It is here above all, perhaps, that the Frankfurt school distinguished itself from moralist critics and pluralist defenders of mass "leisure." While real pleasure in cultural activity requires concentration and effort, the work process is usually so enervating, tedious and exhausting that such capacities are drained. What results is that although "people want to have fun," they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously," making it impossible to break out of the cycle of frustration.²⁶ "Pleasure hardens into boredom because, if it is to remain pleasure, it must not demand any effort and therefore moves rigorously in the worn grooves of association."²⁷ Instead of attacking allegedly "escapist" entertainment then, Adorno was arguing that "distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject."²⁸

Adorno's attack on the degradation of labor in industrial societies conveniently leads us to the third major point of comparison which is often made between the Frankfurt school and conservative critics of mass culture: that both share a regressive nostalgia for pre-industrial; hierarchically organized, communities or for nineteenth-century, aesthetically cultivated, forms of bourgeois individualism. Here once again it is easy to see why such charges are frequently made. Adorno and Horkheimer, especially, were given to making invidious contrasts between current forms

of pseudo-individuated, but repressively collective culture and the relative "autonomy" of the bourgeois "subject" in the nineteenth-century liberal phase of industrial capitalism. All the same, the latter was not actually being used as a model in terms of which recommended cultural and social changes were being advanced. Such contrasts were more on the order of polemical devices intended to undermine evolutionary-progressive notions of linear improvement. Adorno and Horkheimer never failed to emphasize the class injustices upon which the aesthetic and psychological forms of an earlier bourgeois "subjectivity" rested, and the utopian moments they found in authentic art looked forward to an historically unprecedented society beyond economic anxieties and class exploitation. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the two philosophers wrote: "The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past."²⁹ As for alleged nostalgia concerning pre-industrial folk culture, this is a singularly misplaced criticism. Adorno and Horkheimer frequently argued that all attempts to appeal to ostensibly lively folk collectives were unrealistic, given their advanced state of liquidation by an homogenizing culture industry. Moreover, the two thinkers emphasized the material scarcities and social deminations upon which pre-industrial *Gemeinschaft* was based. "That there is no longer a folk does not mean,...as the Romantics propagated, that the masses are worse," Adorno wrote. "Rather it is precisely in the new, radically alienated form of society that the untruth of the old is first being revealed."³⁰

Admittedly, the issue of industry and mechanical forms of cultural reproduction (press, film, etc.) cannot be so easily disposed of. Although one can readily find passages in which Adorno and Horkheimer viewed the power which technology seems to hold over contemporary society as resulting from "the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest,"³¹ much of their writing contains an almost ontological critique of industrial technology as such, "whose integrating tendencies," Adorno wrote, "are a constant invitation for false poetic paeans and lyrical peace—making with an agonal world."³² Often Adorno spoke of radio or cinema as *intrinsically* serving the purposes of social domination and cultural debasement, pre-occupied as he was with Nazi uses of such instruments.³³

The theoretical framework of such hypostatizing was the critique of instrumental rationality in which the "culture-industry" analysis

was conceived. For this critique tended to obscure historically specific social relations of technology beneath the enormous weight of the "domination of nature" category. It is significant that in defending avant-grade art against technically reproduced "mass" entertainment, Adorno privileged the development of aesthetic *technique* over any use that might be made of machine *technology*.³⁴ All the same, these tendencies were less regressive than they might appear. While a more flexible approach to questions of mechanical reproduction was undoubtedly needed, Adorno and Horkheimer were not attacking what is often called "progress" so much as the return of a mythic, brutalized nature through the very workings of advanced industrial society. The problem was not modernity but *modern* barbarism, the return of the repressed *within* the functionally ascetic culture and society made by technical progress.

The charge of regressive nostalgia, it is worth pointing out, has usually been made from within a more-or-less-explicit "modernization" theory in which the romantic caricature of a creative, communal folk is countered through an equally caricatured image of the pre-industrial past. In Edward Shils' influential 1957 attack on the Frankfurt school, for example, in which the various charges we are analyzing were first brought together, a picture of dignified modern consumer choice is contrasted with an image of early modern lower-class culture as one, simply, of "bear-baiting, cock-fighting, drunkenness, tales of witches, gossip about the sexual malpractices of priests, monks and nuns, stories of murders and mutilations."³⁵ While being well aware of the often degrading material and social conditions in which peasants, artisans and early industrial workers lived, contemporary historians of popular culture have begun to rescue these groups from such forms of whiggish historical condescension.³⁶

The charge of regressive nostalgia, then, is almost as riddled with problems as are those of "asceticism" and "elitism." Clearly, in the American 1950s, when the conservative analogy was first developed, the Frankfurt schools' writings were not widely known and the complex arguments of Adorno and his Institute colleagues were often assimilated to the more influential and easier to follow attacks on mass culture of Dwight McDonald and Clement Greenberg. Here, perhaps, there was some real substance to the left-right analogy,

except that Greenberg's and McDonald's previously Trotskyist politics were abandoned before, or in the course of, their polemics against mass culture. Greenberg, for example, saw kitsch art, and not its functions within a commodity society, as the major threat to an otherwise thriving high culture; unlike Adorno, who never tired of attacking the frustrations and merely pseudosatisfactions of culture-industry audiences, Greenberg viewed kitsch as fatally attractive and satisfying to the aesthetically untutored masses.³⁷ On the other hand, given Greenberg's influential espousal of post-war New York abstract expressionism, it is significant that Adorno (in his relentless search for commodity fetishism within high culture) regarded the "non-representational" as "perfectly compatible with the ideas affluent members of society have about decorating their walls."³⁸ As for McDonald, after abandoning the elements of social radicalism in his first, 1944, version of the "theory of popular culture," his later essays on the subject were often hard to distinguish from the writings of Eliot or Ortega, for they included mass-society perspectives, cultural nostalgia for stratified folk-elite communities, and attacks upon mass culture as if it were a direct product of a democratic order.³⁹

This contrast between Adorno on the one hand, and Greenberg and McDonald on the other, suggests the inadequacy of an often-made claim: that mid-century critics of mass culture were deploying cultural criticism of the middle classes to compensate for their own political de-radicalization. This interpretive strategy is central, for example, to Richard Pells' chapter on the subject in his recent *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*.⁴⁰ As we have seen, the Frankfurt school was still very much on the political left in the 1940s and early 1950s, whatever revisions it may have made in Marx's work. Although it did not pursue detailed studies of the political economy of the culture industry, Adorno and his colleagues still held the view that class divisions and injustices were quite alive in spite of the attenuations of working-class consciousness. Mass culture, in short, helped to camouflage, but did not eliminate, class society. (The same view could also be found in the circle around *Dissent* after 1954.) Greenberg and McDonald, on the other hand, were comparable to conservative mass-society theorists. But there is another important problem in Pells' argument. Defining political or economic criticism very narrowly,

basically in terms of the classic concerns of the American old left of the 1930s, Pells often slights the political weight of new forms of "cultural" criticism developing in mid century consumer society, such as those which cited middle-class conformity or frustrations with climbing the proverbial ladder, or the pacifying functions of the entertainment industry. Though in some cases this "cultural" turn might substitute for political-economic criticism (as in McDonald's and Greenberg's work), it often valuably extended what had been an overly narrow concept of politics.



Once the writings of the Frankfurt school are disentangled from those of elitest conservatives, or culturally despairing ex-leftists, it is easier to develop more theoretically adequate and more historically focussed readings of the mass culture debate in this century. In the second half of this article I should like to offer a new way of approaching the matter. Instead of tracing the development of the debate within one political perspective, say western Marxism, or, more commonly, structuring the narrative around shared general approval or disapproval of "mass culture," as in the right-left "elitest" analogy, it might be more revealing to construct pairings based on shared historical space and perceptions of contemporary life. Adorno and his "pluralist" critics, for example, develop similar diagnostic premises concerning how the "masses" are absorbed, neutralized or otherwise domesticated in capitalist democracies, however they may differ concerning the political and cultural evaluation of such putative trends. Having unravelled some of the Adorno-Eliot weavings, it might be heuristically valuable to see what connections existed in the mid-twentieth century between the Frankfurt school and its liberal adversaries. What I propose, then, is to situate contending schools of thought on the question of mass culture in the same contentious bed, as *rival contemporaneous versions* of a shared discourse on the political and cultural state of the "masses. In doing so it may well be possible not only to understand better the common historical pressures which make for "strange bedfellows," but to evaluate more adequately than in other procedures the intellectuals' own historically conditioned "politics of the mass culture."

The mid-century discourse on "domesticated masses" was preceeded by a long history of lament concerning, or hope for, a "rise of the masses." This is a familiar topic and was, of course, a staple of

modern political and cultural thought from Burke and Paine to the 1930s. I want here merely to suggest the state of this long-standing perception in the inter-war discussion of mass culture. For discourse on the "rise of the masses," thrived in the year 1918-35, following upon the Bolshevik revolution and the severe blows to aristocratic economic and political power brought on by World War One; seeing the expansion of radical mass movements in the great depression; and, at the same time, experiencing an enormous extension of mass communications such as the press, cinema and radio. Fevered discussion of the "age of the masses," and the inter-related political and cultural effects of the "machine," was now far more widespread than in the decades before the war, with the added expectation that the key to the future lay in either, or both, American or Soviet civilization. In this historical conjuncture, conservative and left-wing evaluations of growing popular sovereignty were rival assessments of a commonly held diagnosis. Selecting out some of the most influential (at least in the long run) theories of mass culture from the inter-war years, it is worth briefly discussing what Ortega, Eliot and Leavis shared with their political opponents and German contemporaries, Brecht and Benjamin.

Ortega Y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* was well named, for in this familiar jeremiad the patrician alarmist tirelessly condemned the alleged "accession of the masses to complete social power."⁴¹ The average man, in Ortega's view, was fast becoming a barbarian who "imposes his opinions" and refuses to defer to his intellectual superiors in matters of cultural taste.⁴² "The mass," Ortega wrote, "crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent: individual, qualified and select."⁴³ Such rebellious indocility in the age of mass-democracy took the form either of widespread refusals to submit to direction of any kind, or fanatical and violent support of Bolshevik or fascist tyrannies headed by mediocrities who show no respect for the worthy traditions of civilization.⁴⁴ Modern political dictatorship was pictured as a manipulative mass-state which resulted from the discarding of rational patrician elites. Mob rule and manipulation in culture and politics were not opposites but related features of the rise of the masses.

T. S. Eliot's writings on culture were similar to Ortega's except for their defense of a Christian-centered and highly stratified, essentially aristocratic society. Eliot inveighed against the lowering of standards which resulted from attempting to educate the middle classes

and the masses. Such misguided egalitarian assaults upon cultural life were said to be "destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanical caravans."⁴⁶ Somewhat more ambiguous and perhaps more influential than Eliot's position, was that of F.R. Leavis, who had an enormous impact for four decades on teachers and critics of English literature. One can read Leavis's writings of the 1930s on cultural decline as either an attack upon machine civilization; the domination of business values or the spread of a "levelled-down" education and literacy.⁴⁶ What perhaps was most alarming to Leavis was the rise of a newly expanded, poorly trained, and mediocre journalist intelligentsia, whose writings were gobbled up by metropolitan masses, and, in a kind of cultural "Gresham's law," who were marginalizing the proper arbiters of aesthetic judgement.⁴⁷ Although the critic's "creative minority" was more a professional strata than a social class (as in Eliot's case), and there were significant ambiguities in Leavis's critiques, there is no denying the generally elitist, ascetic and regressive tenor of his thought on mass culture.

In the German Weimar Republic of 1918-33 there was an enormous amount written by professors, imaginative writers and journalists which resembled these conservative theses. The ideas of Nietzsche, Le Bon and Spengler resonated widely and were given particular urgency by the impact of American mass culture in the German 1920s, the threats to academic mandarin and aristocratic power posed by a new parliamentary democracy with strong trade union support, and the existence of Europe's largest Soviet-inspired communist movement. But the more permanently influential response to mass culture which developed out of the Weimar Republic came from the left: first, in the period 1924-36, in the optimistic "production aesthetics" of numerous left-liberal and Marxist figures of whom the most important are Brecht's and Benjamin's which included hopes for a new mass culture based upon democratically-controlled technical media; and the deeply pessimistic writing on mass culture by Adorno and Horkheimer during their American exile, 1938-1950.

Whereas the term "masses" is more commonly associated with conservative or patrician liberal alarm,⁴⁸ the word had since the late-nineteenth century been increasingly adopted by socialists in a positive sense to describe the collective agent which was expected to bring a new

political and cultural millenium, namely the industrial proletariat. Brecht and especially Benjamin could no longer be so sure, and yet the former, despite his Leninist politics, never forswore his trust in the capacity of the masses to completely re-make cultural life, and the latter strongly entertained such notions at least until 1936. Brecht and Benjamin favored the "revolt of the masses," unlike conservatives, but they shared with their adversaries a sense of the immense threat to the traditional culture of *Bildung und Besitz*, as well as to aristocratic and bourgeois power, posed by popular insurgencies, even though they were also well aware that fascists might outdo communists in mobilizing them.

Hoping to counter the pacifying effects of bourgeois ethics, Brecht tried in his plays to denaturalize what he saw as the economic effects of capitalist society so as to galvanize his audiences into political action. Where conservatives bemoaned the decline of deference and the fragility in the 1920s and 30s of the traditional social and cultural order, Brecht, agreeing with their perceptions of the situation, sought to revive the carnivalesque culture of plebian insubordination in order to further the process of lower-class emancipation. Further, inspired by Russian constructivism and American mass culture, he sought to channel the demystifying potentials of the new mass media in an anti-authoritarian direction. Radio, he contended, for example, could be made the vehicle of a multi-centered questioning of the authorities,⁴⁹ a forum for what Russell Berman has recently called, in a study of the Weimar left modernists, a "vocalisation of the collective."⁵⁰ Differing strongly with conservatives' evaluation of the "rise of the masses," yet sharing scenarios of change with his traditionalist rivals, Brecht wrote: "The way of out...is shown by the rising class. There is no way back. It's a matter not of the good old, but the bad new. Not the dismantling of technology, but its build-up. Man won't be man again by leaving the masses, but as he goes into them. The masses overthrow their dehumanization, and with that man becomes human again (but not as he was earlier)..."⁵¹

Walter Benjamin, as is well known, was less sanguine than Brecht, and quite ambivalent about the decline of traditional "aura" when works of art are made in the current age of mechanical reproduction. Yet, when developing the more Brechtian side of his multiple tendencies, Benjamin claimed not merely that revolutionary political and cultural

possibilities flowed from media such as cinema and the press, but he also extolled the aesthetic effects of the "rise of the masses." This side of his analysis is often missed in the much-discussed "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" essay.

Instead of developing a unicausal technological view of cultural change, as is often alleged, Benjamin consistently inter-related the historical emergence of the masses since the mid-nineteenth century with the development, use and perceptual changes brought about by new means of cultural reproduction. In his initial discussion of the decline of aura attendant upon multiple reproducibility of artworks, Benjamin speaks quite clearly of film--the central subject of the essay--as a "powerful agent" of "contemporary mass movements," and later emphasizes how photography emerged "simultaneously with the rise of socialism." In the aesthetic and political desacralizing of the art object in the modern age, new mass media work in tandem with the "desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction... To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction."

This championing of an "eclipse of distance," one of the features of contemporary life which has deeply worried many diverse critics of mass culture from Nietzsche and Leavis to Adorno and Daniel Bell, is quite central to much of Benjamin's aesthetics. The unmediated juxtapositions of his historical essays, whose montage effects Adorno criticized as undialectical, as well as his surrealist-inspired hopes for the integration of art and life--evident in Benjamin's interweavings of politics and aesthetics--drew their historical meaning from a perception of contemporary masses as desirous of bringing things "'closer' spatially and humanly." Benjamin wrote enthusiastically that everyone can now be part of a work of art, for with the growing ascendancy of the masses and the spread of new media the distance between author and public radically declines. Citing experiments of newspaper reporting by Soviet workers on their daily labor, Benjamin welcomed here the expanded definition of literature which this might entail. "Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than

specialized training and thus becomes common property." Another from of the "eclipse of distance" Benjamin claimed to find was that traditional behaviour toward works of art was eroding in a way which helped to further empower contemporary masses who are able now 'to organize and control themselves in their reception.' Instead of being absorbed by it, as in private concentration before a painting, today's "distracted" mass absorbs the cinematic artwork. Under the guidance of tactile appropriation in a distracted state of mind, critical and receptive functions are combined, facilitating the "democratization of expertise."⁵²

Obviously this ingenious but wildly over-optimistic essay is open to many objections, some of which Adorno made in his often described criticisms.⁵³ It was especially vulnerable to attack by the 1936 date of its composition, after the Soviet and American sources of Benjamin's optimism, drawn from the 1920s, were gone in the age of Stalin and Disney; at the same time, the equally evident Nazi uses of mechanical reproduction and mobilized masses only partly disturbed the bouyant tenor of the piece, and these disturbances were relegated to concluding suggestions (now, of course, well known) concerning fascist "aestheticization of politics." Clearly the mid-1930s saw mounting historical pressures on the "rise of the masses" historical paradigm, even though it continued to appear in increasingly dated conservative and orthodox Marxist writings. Whatever else one might say about the word or reality of "masses," it was becoming more dubious to suggest that the human beings referred to here were acceding, or would be soon able to accede, to "complete social power." The time was ripe, especially after the emergence of seemingly consensual, welfare-state consumer societies after 1945 for a new historical diagnosis and mass-culture analysis. This was the "moment" of Adorno and Horkheimer, but also of their "pluralist" critics, Lazarsfeld, Shils and Riesman.

The "new" historical constellations of the 1940s and the 1950s had not, of course, appeared all at once. But whereas hyper-nationalist appeals had mobilized masses since the late nineteenth century for radical conservative and then fascist causes, after World War Two European conservative politics made its peace with parliamentary democracy and an accomodating organized labor movement; if peasants, lower middle classes and non-socialist workers voted right, it was for a

"modernized" and tamed version of conservatism. In addition, while the sources of a truly mass-production consumer society lay again in the late nineteenth century, and the 1920s was a major period of its expansion, depression and war had intervened: it was only in the two decades after 1945 that the promises of high-mass consumption (at least for about two-thirds of the population) was to materialize, aided by a Keynesian consensus among business, trade-union and government leaders in favor of an administered or managed capitalism.⁵⁴

The mid century discourse of "domesticated masses" was stronger, however, in the United States than in western Europe. Although the new framework was also developing in post-war Europe, traditional aristocratic and conservative alarm at cultural democracy was still alive there, and Marxist pratisans of a militant working-class culture were also in evidence, at least in France, England and Italy. On the other hand, the historical weaknesses of "feudal" and "proletarian" cultural traditions are often noted by students of American exceptionalism. In the United States, intellectual conservatism had also traditionally included political and cultural suspicion of "masses," but this did not preclude support of parliamentary government, meritocratic laws and growth-oriented capitalism.⁵⁵ The liberal-conservative economic and political harmonies of post-war America were facilitated by such historical tendencies, as well as by mid-century liberal concern for smooth-functioning political stability and efficient technocratic policies. Perhaps even more important, the deep sources and contemporary reality of a stabilized, prosperous consumer society (with an enormous, internationally extended "culture industry") were greater in the United States in the post-war decades. When we add the lack of an independent labor politics and the bipartisan, anti-communist fervor of the cold war and the general rallying around traditional nativist values - it is not surprising that it was in mid-century United States that rival accounts of the containment of radical change, happily consuming and depoliticized publics and a functionally conservative popular culture were most fully articulated,

When seen in this light, the American discussion of mass culture in the 1940s and 1950s looks less like an all-but-uniform picture of alienated intellectuals defending an allegedly embattled high culture

as it is often depicted than an encounter between contending evaluations of what was understandably (if too monolithically) seen as a depoliticized consumer society. What was new and historically significant about the American discussion was not feverish concern by intellectuals about mass culture, and not even the appearance of culturally-focused alarm by ex-leftists like Dwight McDonald or Clement Greenberg, whose analyses were pallid and undistinguished when compared to Frankfurt school accounts. The significance of writings in mid-century America on mass culture is that a new, left critique was rivaled by a new, conservatively-oriented, liberal defense of it, and that both shared a diagnostic paradigm against which much of the subsequent discussion of mass culture has had to react. How, then, were masses domesticated in Frankfurt school and liberal-pluralist discourse?

Ever since the mid-1930s Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse had been arguing that the working class was largely integrated in administered capitalist societies. Instead of class insurgency amid the perception of injustice, the contemporary world produced ego-weak, debased and submissive psyches in its consumer citizens, whose complaint behavior toward inter-locking administrative and economic powers was anchored by such ideological reinforcements as the products of the pseudo-democratic culture industry. Occasionally, Adorno or Horkheimer suggested that the manipulation of consciousness was not complete,⁵⁶ but the thrust of their arguments appeared to make it virtually so. This was not the kind of "manipulation" which frightened "crowd" psychologists and conservative critics of Caesarian democracy from De Tocqueville and Le Bon to Ortega. In this manipulation it was not any growing ascendancy of the masses which eventuated in tyranny; it was new psychological and cultural forms of elite control which forestalled collective desires for real, structural change. Instead of the masses who are explicitly threatening in Ortega's scenario or implicitly so in Leavis's fear of expanded literacy and resultant pandering to the least common denominator, we have a picture of manipulated and pacified consumers.

The culture-industry model is vulnerable to a wide variety of criticisms and not merely those we examined earlier. David Held has written, for example, that the Frankfurt school maintained "an

exaggerated notion of the cohesion of capitalism"; society appears in its writings" as steered from above rather than as the outcome...of a continuous struggle over rules and resources." At the same time, "a homology is often assumed, quite unjustifiably, between the form and content of the culture industry and the actual consciousness of working people."⁵⁷ One could also argue that it is pragmatic considerations, and not ideological "false consciousness," which most often makes powerless or relatively powerless people conform to the rules, especially if such behavior leads to immediate, tangible benefits. Such criticisms are, in fact, far more compelling and just than those of elitism, puritanism and historical nostalgia. But whatever its inadequacies, the culture industry theory needs to be seen as an embittered left response to a situation which was shared by the earliest of its critics, the various groups of liberal pluralists whose relation to Adorno's historical premises need now to be explored.

The first group, which influenced all others on the subject of mass culture, were behaviorist audience-researchers headed by Paul Lazarsfeld, with whom Adorno had unsuccessfully tried to work in the late 1930s. From this quarter come attacks upon the "hyperdemic needle" approach to mass media, which Adorno and Horkheimer seemed to share with early media sociologists in the 1930s--the view that values, choices and the like were introjected into the audience by manipulating press, radio programs and advertisements. Lazarsfeld and others showed that audiences received messages through a "two-step-flow" in which local opinion leaders, or social groups to which an individual reader or listener was attached, mediated the reception of press or radio content. They further demonstrated that the precise choice of products or political candidates was little influenced by media messages. Yet the first point, however true it might be, failed to show how consumers were any more powerful as a result of such mediated responses, especially as the receiver was approached as a "chooser" of goods which had been made because they were profitable to its manufacturers; such consumers might not be able, for example, to "choose" neighborhood public parks or good and inexpensive mass transit, housing or health care. (At the same time, it is quite true that "two-step-flow" research effectively damaged mass society theories which suggested the disappearance of "intermediate groups" in an atomized, homogeneous world). As for the second point, the concept of media impact was conceived in so circumscribed and behaviorist a manner--as an isolable "choice" of this or that particular consumer good, whether

it be for brand x or y, or political candidate x or y – as to preclude from the start addressing harder questions. Neither the researchers or their corporate or government sponsors were interested in learning about the possible role of mass media in social control and containment and as a means through which established structures of economic and political power were perpetuated.⁵⁹ “How was one to find hard data for *that*?” would be the predictable response to such criticisms. Occasionally, Lazarsfeld made critical comments like the following, though not in his large and influential empirical studies: “Mass communications may be inadvertently transforming the energies of men from active participation into passive knowledge.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the burden of his research findings suggested that the United States was a highly stable society of diverse and healthily competing social groups and institutions in which mass communications exerted only minimal influence over public opinion.

On the face of it this benign vision would seem to be light years away from that of Adorno and his colleagues. But what separated the two accounts was less their descriptive treatments of mass media and audience response than what Adorno critically added and Lazarsfeld did not: a focus on questions of power and of hegemonic ideologies, broadly conceived. The diagnostic paradigms, though not the political valences, strongly overlapped. Adorno saw mass-culture consumers as reduced to Pavlovian twitches,⁶¹ while the notion of introjected “false needs” did little to counter a behaviorist approach to human actions.⁶² Even if this was for Adorno a woeful substantive reality and not, as it was for Lazarsfeld a methodological requirement, the descriptive similarity remains.

Adorno and Lazarsfeld were, in addition, far closer on the effects of the media than is often supposed. When Lazarsfeld did address the question of media impact on basic audience attitudes, he emphasized that its power to change consciousness was very limited and that the press or radio usually “only” reinforced pre-existing values, beliefs, etc.⁶³ But this is how the Frankfurt school viewed ideology as transmitted through the culture industry, as an anchoring of mental structures which were introjected by the social totality as a whole; they did not look at the media as an isolable malevolent force. If interpreted as ideological reinforcement, then, the effect imputed to the media is not so minimal. As for Lazarsfeld’s findings on the limited impact of the media on consumer product choice, it is worth pointing out that the whole purpose of such research, from the

point of view of its corporate sponsors, was to determine existing obstacles to the penetration of advertising messages in the interest of countering such obstacles, and all in the name of "consumer sovereignty." Thus Lazarsfeld's conception of mass communications inquiry as market research dovetailed nicely with that of his financial backers.⁶⁴ As Daniel Czitron has written, Lazarsfeld argued to business groups that his analyses 'offered the most rational strategy...for improving the knowledge needed to forecast and control consumer behavior.'⁶⁵

Finally, the Frankfurt school and the media sociologists shared a tendency to explore mass media and its reception in isolation from their history. The Frankfurt school never studied the complex historical dynamics involved in the process of conversion to mass culture and the erosion of local, ethnic or class cultures, an inquiry which might have revealed some active agency (however mediated) in the lives of working people. Moreover, Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry shared with Lazarsfeld's media research, as well as with pluralist descriptions of what Herbert Gans was to call "taste cultures,"⁶⁶ a failure to account for real changes in popular cultural form and content in the twentieth century.⁶⁷ Once again, the interpretations which led to this historical treatment differed widely. In the case of Lazarsfeld and the pluralists such disregard for history was part of a social-science tendency in the mid-century decades to universalize from the contemporary American present as part of a valorizing and stabilizing effort; the Frankfurt school, on the other hand, saw mythic repetition in culture-industry products as symptoms of a "modern archaic", functions of a pathological historical impasse in a seemingly unalterable "administered society." All the same the diagnoses similarly domesticated mid-century masses in depicting them as more pacified than they were—Adorno, for example, neglected critical elements in under-class consciousness, in black culture or in 1950s adolescent revolts—and in implying that forces of structural change in the population had been effectively stilled, thus justifying the treatment of contemporary life as an historically immobile, endless present.

Whatever connections existed between Adorno and Lazarsfeld it was with the architects of political and cultural pluralism that the Frankfurt thinkers were most clearly in intimate competition, both schools constructing rival accounts of an allegedly harmonious society governed by technocratic elites and strongly supported by functionally passive consumer "citizens." In the pluralist theories developed in the 1950s by American

social scientists such as Parsons, Shils, Bell, Lipset, Schlesinger, and Riesman, and European ones such as Aron, Duménil and Lévy, and Dahrendorf, "a pluralist social structure performs a dual function," as Peter Bachrach has described. "First, in keeping people absorbed in proximate concerns of everyday life, it minimizes their availability for mobilization by counter-elites; and, secondly, in performing this task, it greatly mitigates mass pressure and demands that would otherwise hobble the independence of elites essential to their maintaining the system."⁶⁸ Here, of course, was the social scientists' validation of what the Frankfurt school strenuously deplored. But both premised their arguments on the descriptive validity of this paradigm. Moreover, as both Frankfurt school and pluralist theory grew in response to the apparent mass appeals of fascism and Stalinism, or the supposed populist sources of McCarthyism, each was deeply suspicious of allegedly authoritarian proclivities of contemporary workers or lower middle classes, even though, of course, Adorno and his associates saw this as effected from above.⁶⁹ In the case of the pluralist, mass politics was explicitly attached. Their sanguine views rested on the assumption of continued governance through "rational" bargaining among technically qualified, diverse elites, and the further growth of a healthy dose of political apathy on the part of the average citizen-consumer. Adorno and the associates, on the other hand, bitterly criticized such an administered society but also could not abide a politics which would be based on the activation of populations whom they deemed to have "false needs," and a craven love of authority. Thus both perspectives coalesced not only around a technocratic "end of ideology" description of contemporary rule, but contained a deep suspicion of collective action, however differently they evaluated the significance of these developments.

As for the specific tenor of mass culture theory amongst the pluralists, the first thing to be said is that they too rejected the term, though not in favor of the critical "culture industry," but the affirmative claims of cultural diversity and consumer choice. We need to distinguish, though, among three different groups of cultural pluralist writers :

- 1) *Mandarin optimists*, like Bernard Berelson, Edward Shils and Daniel Bell, who were quite hopeful about the continued strength of high culture, which they sanitized and denuded of its contestatory elements. These pluralists pointed to the ostensible expansion of that culture in an economically abundant society able to educate well its ablest citizens and

provide them with cultivated entertainment through the mass media.⁷⁰ At the same time, they were patronizingly indulgent toward the "lesser" enjoyments of what Shils called "brutal" or "mediocre" culture, tending to softpedal their actual disdain for it by attacking those who ascetically denied the right of all people to fun, and regressively failed to note how much more brutal and mediocre pre-and early industrial culture was. For the mandarin optimists, cultural stratifications are eternal; there is only improvement *within*, say, "mediocre" culture. While retaining the notion of cultural levels, they stressed that what was different about contemporary capitalist democracies, in contrast to those ruled by self-perpetuating elites, is that in basing themselves upon legal equality and democratic suffrage they overcame the exclusion of lower social classes from the centers of power and opportunity; such societies, therefore, represent the first in history in which "the mass of the population has been incorporated into society."⁷¹ Here, of course, differently stated, was the Frankfurt school's nightmare of the virtual invisibility of continued social contradictions and injustices; Adorno and Shils both stressed the cohesive integration of mid-twentieth century capitalist societies.

2) *Cultural Relativists*, such as Lyman Bryson, Russell Lynes, Riesman and later Herbert Gans, who saw merit in many diverse "leisure" activities while stressing the values of consumer choice for personal development.⁷² Whereas Gans was to make this very clear, it is usually missed that Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* did not criticize the media or consumer culture when lamenting middle-class conformity (the notion of "other-directed" compliance was much influenced by Fromm's deradicalized version of his own earlier Frankfurt school thought).⁷³ Instead, he stressed the value of competent cultural choice amongst consumer goods and mass-media products as a source of resistance to group pressures (inverting the valuation of the "two-step flow" which media researchers had discovered), and as an alleged vehicle for developing individual autonomy. To this end, Riesman emphasized, professional "leisure counselors" might be needed. As a fine example of the domesticating rhetoric of pluralist cultural politics, one finds the following central argument in *The Lonely Crowd*, one which anticipated the puerility of current consumerist jargon about easily exchangeable "lifestyles." "Surely the great mass-media artists...make an important contribution to autonomy. The entertainers...exert a constant pressure on the accepted peer-groups and suggest new modes of escape from them...the movies have multiplied the choices in styles of life and leisure.

available to millions."⁷⁴ While Riesman and Adorno shared an abiding concern for individual autonomy, and there were many points of contact between their critiques of "other-directed" conformity and ego-weak dependencies, Adorno had nothing but scorn for such ideas of liberation *within* the present system of technocratic rule and commodity production.

3) *Aesthetic Populists* like Gilbert Seldes (In his hopeful moods), John Kouwenhoven or Reuel Denney, who were early developers of a formalist appreciation of many mass cultural products.⁷⁵ While some of this writing was a valuable anti-dote to the usual aesthetic snobbery of intellectuals, it too presented a pacified version of cultural life. Such critics isolated the forms of Hollywood films, popular music or literature from the matrices of economic and political power within which they were created and received. Theirs was a highly depoliticized analysis of the kind which later facilitated the adoption of McLuhanite mass communications theory among executives in the advertising industry and in media conglomerates. McLuhan's own aesthetic populism, it may be noted, drew upon his training as a formalist critic.⁷⁶

It was from the pluralists—especially of the Shils and Bell variety—that the attacks upon the Frankfurt school as elitist, ascetic regressive often derived in the 1950s. Of course, we can now see that the elitist charge could at least as well be made against their own redefinitions of democracy in technocratic and consumerist terms as against Adorno's scathing critique of such hollowed versions of popular sovereignty. But instead of making counter charges I would prefer to see each group as contenders for the label of good democrats (despite my own particularly strong criticisms of the conservative liberals) at a time when older hierarchical and stratified notions of society no longer held away amongst most intellectuals. The same could be said about the "ascetic" label, for Shils and Adorno, as well as Riesman, each recognized the shift within capitalist society from a producer-work to a hedonist-consumer culture. Although pluralists (apart from Daniel Bell) sought to validate this trend, while the Frankfurt school saw in it what Marcuse was to call "repressive desublimation," here too there was a mid-century rivalry: who is the real defender of pleasure now that ascetic values are discredited?

In different ways, then, Adorno, Lazarsfeld, Shils, Riesman and Denney each further domesticated relatively pacified consumer publics, exaggerating the consensual cohesiveness of mid-century industrial societies

while implying that the flow of history had stopped. In closing this re-interpretation of the mass-culture debate since 1920 we need to consider briefly what new paradigms have developed since the 1950s, both within the orbit of "culture industry" analyses and elsewhere. After the masses are loudly "ascending" or quietly "consuming," what do "they" (which also means "we") do then ?

Only a few comments can be made here about patterns in a vast body of writing on mass culture since the late 1950s. If we search again for discursive models extending across political and methodological divisions, perhaps what is most striking are the various ways in which earlier paradigms of "ascendant" or "domesticated" masses have been seriously questioned and a new focus upon mass culture as "contested terrain" has emerged. In a period where powerful, but not entirely stable, forms of technocratic and class rule and class, ethnic or gendered resistance movements seem to have settled down to protracted skirmishes, it is not surprising that mass culture is often seen, especially since the mid-1960s, as a force-field in which struggles over meaning contend. The first and most obvious development to mention here is the emergence of new social movements (racial and ethnic civil rights, students', womens', anti-war, etc. since the mid-1950s), and the forms of popular culture (critical, conformist, or both) which have followed in their wake. In addition, one could cite the trouble that have beset the Keynesian consensus since the mid-1960s, the decline of American international power, the enormous expansion of the university intelligentsia, and the weakening of adversarial modernist culture as each playing a role in recasting the discussion of mass culture away from the mid-century face-off we have analyzed between the left pessimists and conservative-liberal optimists.

Examples of "contested terrain" models may be found in new left writings within the British "cultural studies" movement or within debates around the "culture-industry" thesis which have raged since the mid-1960s. In Britain a neo-populist treatment of workers as expressive, collective creators of their own culture life emerged in the 1960s, influenced by the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, though after 1970 the emphasis shifted

toward systemic constraints (political, ideological, and linguistic) upon class, or other sub-culture, expression. Here the influence of Althusserian structuralism tempered earlier left-humanist assumptions and a mixture of compliant and resisting modes were now regularly found in forms of contemporary working-class and youth sub-cultures.⁷⁷

In the recent history of the "culture-industry" model there have been determined searches for utopian or otherwise critical elements, and not just ideologically reinforcing ones, in mass culture; theorizing of working-class counter-public spheres; or perhaps most significant, a stress on how culture industry products give expression to, or help develop, legitimate, *real* (and not simply manipulated) needs in more-than-passive consumers, only to deflect, neutralize or frustrate them.⁷⁸ In the 1960s even Adorno himself extended somewhat the rare moments of hope contained in his earlier writings and suggested that there might well be gaps between the ideological intentions of, say, a film, and its actual effects, in part because the appeals may be internally inconsistent (consumerism, for example, raises the desire for real sensual pleasure) or the audience's consciousness is not fully controlled.⁷⁹ (In the neoconservative reading of struggles within consumer capitalism the terms, of course, are reversed and it is the spread of "permissive hedonist" culture which threatens an otherwise efficient and morally restraining productive economy, as in Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.)

Of course the cultural present need not be seen as explicitly contentious, and films, press, books or music have been interpreted, in less political but analogous fashion, as points of intersection in which the purposes, experiences or sign-systems of "producers" and "consumers" criss-cross and deflect each other, but in which meanings are not fixed but said to be endlessly disseminated or deferred. In this interpretive situation the very dichotomies between high and popular culture or production and consumption have been called into serious question, in part because of a desire to undercut any privileging of the first terms in these binary oppositions, but also because such dichotomies obscure the complexities of active re-use and re-definition of materials which are said to characterize popular "consumption." While mid-century liberal political and cultural

theory has been forcefully criticized by neo-Marxist, feminist, readerreception, semiological, post-structuralist and neo-conservative writings, to mention a few of the most influential currents since the mid-1960s, important aspects of pluralist work have been widely (if variously.) absorbed, especially the stress upon differential and group-mediated reception of mass-cultural products.

The 1960s saw revitalized and differentiated blocks within the "masses" (the word itself lost favor, not surprisingly) who in becoming politically and culturally assertive blacks, student activists, ethnics, workers or women helped to undermine the rhetoric of domestication, without, however (except in the most naive responses) bringing back that of imminent revolution. Since then culturally-focussed academics in sociology, anthropology and history, as well as literary critics—many of whom came of age in the 1960s—have been re-thinking how people (whether modern or not) actually process and re-define cultural goods in the act of "reception." While established authority is pictured neither as fragile as Ortega or Brecht perceived, or as uncontested as Shils or Adorno viewed it, audiences who "read" political and cultural messages, or process aesthetic forms, are now seen to be just as manipulative as the authorities are in producing them.⁸⁰ Perhaps such new claims of "user" power have been exaggerated, even if it is relatively modest "tricks" and "games" which readers, viewers and listeners are said to play on the continuing dominant modes, and not the gathering of forces for collectively "seizing" centralized authority. Be that as it may, it is possible to see the crystallizing of a new diagnostic paradigm in the history of the mass-culture debate-beyond those of Eliot and Brecht on the one hand, and Shils and Adorno on the other—when Michel De Certeau writes in 1980: "Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others ... To rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds *another* production, called 'consumption'. The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* products imposed by a dominant economic order."⁸¹

Notes and References

1. See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), ch. 6; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), chs. 9-11; Philip Slater, *The Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School: A Marxist Perspective* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), ch. 5; Andrew Arato, "Aesthetic Theory and Cultural Criticism," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1979), pp. 185-224; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), chs. 5 and 6; and Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 1982).
2. Amongst numerous possible examples, see Edward Shils, "Daydreams and Nightmares: Reflections on the Criticism of Mass Culture" *"Sewanee Review"*, 65: 4 (Autumn, 1957); Leon Bramson, *The Political Context of Sociology* (Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 37-43, 123-5; Helmut Lethen, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1924-1932: Studien zur Literatur des "Weissen Sozialismus"* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1970), pp. 25-7; Salvador Giner, *Mass Society* (London: Martin Robertson, 1976), pp. 166, 179; C. W. E. Bigsby, "The Politics of Popular Culture," in *Approaches to Popular Culture*, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby, pp. 11-15; Alan Swingewood, *The Myth of Mass Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 11-16; Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Harper, 1974), pp. 52-56; James Gilbert, "The Intellectuals and Mass Culture," in *Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 111-113; and, in the first attempt to study the whole range of mass-culture critiques, Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 23, 84, 222-248.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, "Über Jazz," in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5: 2 (1936), p. 225. In the following treatment of the Frankfurt school-conservative analogy I have been

- influenced, in part, by some briefer comments by Martin Jay in "The Frankfurt School in Exile," *Perspectives in American History*, 6 (1972), pp. 371-73.
4., 'aber Jazz ' *Moments Musicaux* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1964), which includes a 1937 supplement, pp. 119-120. A similar contrast appears in "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1940), pp. 17-21.
 5. Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," first published in 1937 and contained in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 88-133.
 6. Adorno, *Prisms* (London: Spearman, 1967 , p. 26.
 7., *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), P. 2.
 8., *Prisms*, p. 22. Bourdieu's rich analysis of "cultural capital" may be found in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1984).
 9. Andreas Huyssen, "Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner," *New German Critique* 29 (Spring-Summer, 1983), p. 17. This essay is republished in Huyssen's *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987).
 10. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London: New Left Books, 1981), p. 90.
 11. See my *Marxism and Modernism*, pp. 258-60.
 12. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, p. 31.
 13. Huyssen, "Adorno in Reverse," p. 18.
 14. See Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, pp. 270-99.
 15. Adorno, "On Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Perry Anderson et al. (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 189.
 16. Adorno's enormous *Aesthetic Theory*, cited in n. 7, is particularly revealing on this issue, for it is often concerned to show the contemporary "truth value" of "ugliness" and "dissonance" in modernist art. See, for example, pp. 19-21.
 17. This is the procedure followed by Gans in *High Culture and Popular Culture*, pp. 65-118.
 18. Adorno to Benjamin, 18 March 1936, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 123-5.
 19. On this and other aspects of Adorno's response to American life, see Martin Jay, "Adorno in America," *New German Critique*,

- 31 (Winter, 1984), pp. 157-182.
20. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 132.
21., *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 341.
22., and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 139-40.
23., *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 265-66.
24., and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 135-6.
25., *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 203.
26., "On Popular Music," p. 38
27., and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 137.
28., "On Popular Music," p. 37.
29., and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xv
30., *Minima Moralia*, p. 204.
31., and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 121.
32., *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 34.
33. See, for example, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 159. On this point see the analysis in Diane Waldman, "Critical Theory and Film," *New German Critique*, 12 (Fall, 1975), pp. 39-60.
34. See, for example, Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Seabury, 1973), pp. 113-13.
35. Shils, "Daydreams and Nightmares," p. 604.
36. Amongst the most widely influential in this regard are Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper, 1978); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford University Press, 1975); and Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and The Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (New York: Peenguin, 1982).
37. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, ill.: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 101-5.
38. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 325.
39. See, for example, Dwight McDougal, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in *Mass Culture*, pp. 59-73, which was written in 1953.
40. See ch. 4 of Pell's book which was published by Harper and Row in 1985.
41. Jose Ortega Y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: New American Library, 1952), p. 7.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-52.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-70, 87-88.

45. T. S. Eliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," in *Christianity and Culture* (New York : Harvest, n.d.), p. 185. Although the essay was written in the years 1943-38, it gave the clearest expression to ideas which Eliot had entertained for two decades.
46. See especially, F. R. Leavis *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (Cambridge, Engl.: The Minority press, 1930); F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson *Culture and Environment* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1933); and, the pivotal work for the whole *Scrutiny* movement which was led by Leavis, Q. D. Leavis (his wife), *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London : Chatto and Windus, 1932).
47. In *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* Leavis directed his fire against philistine book reviewers in the popular press, who in endangering the english language were threatening the sinews of civilization. On the historical sources of Leavis's concern about the expanded intelligentsia, as well as his other worries, see Francis Mulhern *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London : New Left Books, 1979), p. 4-19.
48. On the semantic history, and cultural uses, of the term "masses" in elite discourse, see Salvador Giner, *Mass Society*; Asa Briggs, "The Language of Mass and Masses in Nineteenth Century England," in *Ideology and the Labor Movement*, eds. David E. Martin and David Rubenstein (London : Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 62-83; Wilhelm Vleugel, *Die Masse: Ein Beitrag Zur Lehre von den Sozialen Gebilde* (Munich: Duncker and Humbolt, 1930); and Serge Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd: A Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).
49. Bertolt Brecht, "Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat," *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt a. M: Suhrkamp, 1967), 18 pp. 129-131.
50. Russell Berman, *The Rise of the Modern German Novel*(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 234-5.
51. Brecht, "Die Essays von Georg Lukacs," *Gesammelte Werke*, 19, p. 298.

52. The discussion in these two paragraphs is based upon 'Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 217-52.
53. On the Benjamin-Adorno conflict, including Adorno's response to the "Work of Art" essay, see Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, and Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*.
54. Amongst many accounts, see Maurice Crouzet, *The European Renaissance since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970) and Stephen R. Graubard, ed., *A New Europe?* (Boston: Beacon, 1967)
55. See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) and Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York: Vintage, 1955).
56. Example include Adorno, "On Popular Music," pp. 47-8, Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 161 and Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. 290.
57. David Held. *An Introduction to Critical Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 365-9.
58. On this episode see the articles by Adorno and Lazarsfeld in Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn, eds., *The Intellectual Migration; Europe and America, 1930-60* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969) and the contrasting accounts in Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, pp. 189-93 and David E. Morrison, "Kultur and Culture: The Case of Theodor W. Adorno and Paul F. Lazarsfeld," *Social Research* 45:2 (Summer, 1978).
59. Todd Gitlin, "Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm," *Theory and Society* 6:2 (1978), pp. 205-54.
60. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organised Social Action," in Lyman Bryson, ed., *The Communication of Ideas* (New York: Harper, 1948), p. 106.
61. Adorno, "On Popular Music," pp. 27, 45; *Minima Moralia*, p. 23; Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 166.

62. William Leiss: *The Limits of Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities* (University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp: 59-63.
63. Lazarsfeld and Merton, "Mass Communication"; Razarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton: eds. *Communications Research, 1948-49* (New York: Harper, 1949), pp. 218, 243.
64. Daniel Czitron, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 128.
65. *Ibid*; and Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), pp. 505-6.
66. Gans, *High Culture and Popular Culture*, pp. 65-118.
67. Waldman, "Critical Theory and Film," p. 53 and Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, pp. 22-3.
68. Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967, p. 64.
- 69 Michael Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Spectre* (Cambridge Mass.: The M. I. T. Press, 1967), p. 18.
70. Bernard Berelson, "Who Reads What Books and Why," in *Mass Culture*, pp. 119-25; Edward Shils, "Mass Society and its Culture," in Norman Jacobs, ed., *Culture for the Millions ? Mass Media in Modern Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1961), pp. 1-27; Daniel Bell, "The Theory of Mass Society," *Commentary*, July, 1956. Of course after the 1960s Bell discovered adversarial forms of modernism with a vengeance. In *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) he saw their spread as a major source of cultural, moral and social decline. One source of Bell's neo-conservative views were the post-1955 writings of Lionel Trilling on modernism. In the early 1950s, Trilling, along with his Columbia colleague Jacques Barzun, had also been a kind of mandarin optimist, although far more knowledgeable about the complexities and disturbing sides of high culture. See, for example, Trilling's and Barzun's responses to the symposium "Our Country and Our Culture," in *Partisan Review*, 1952, pp. 318-26 and 426-31.

71. Shils, "Mass Society and its Culture," p. 1.

72. Lyman Bryson, *The Next America: prophecy and faith* (New York: Harper, 1952); Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Harper, 1954); David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950) and *Individualism Reconsidered* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press; 1954), and Gans, *High Culture and Popular Culture*, whose central argument was stated as early as 1961 in "Pluralist Aesthetics and Subcultural Programming: A Proposal for Cultural Democracy in the Media," *Studies in Public Communication* 3 (Summer, 1961).

73. See *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 22n.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

75. In *The Seven Lively Arts*, first published in 1924 and reprinted by A. S. Barnes in New York in 1957, Seldes pioneered the aesthetic appreciation of selected figures and forms in mass culture—Krazy Kat cartoons, vaudeville, musical

comedy, the Keystone cops, etc. By the 1950s, however, he was often quite ambivalent about the situation. See *The Great Audience* (New York: Viking, 1951) and *The Public Arts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), the latter of which held out great hope, however, for improvements in mass media through the exertion of grass-roots pressures upon producers. John Kouwenhoven celebrated the American "vernacular" style in architecture, jazz, radio serials and journalism in *Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization* (1948), while Reuel Denney explored aesthetics of ritual and myth in *The Astonished Muse: Popular Culture in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1957).

76. Czitron, *The Media and the American Mind*, pp. 181-2.

77. I am referring in this paragraph mainly to the work of the Birmingham Centre for the Contemporary Cultural Studies. On its theoretical trajectory since the early 1960s, see Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," in *Media Culture and Society*, 2 (1980), pp. 57-72,

and "Cultural Studies and the Centre: some problematics and problems," in *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

78. As examples of the first, see Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), Douglas Kellner, "TV Ideology and Emancipatory Popular Culture," in Horace Newcomb, ed., *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1:1 (Winter, 1979); the second approach is developed in Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Oeffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von buergerlicher und proletarischer Oeffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973); the third tendency may be sampled in Leiss, *The Limits of Satisfaction*,

Gitlin, "Media Sociology" and "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in TV Entertainment," *Television: The Critical View*, and Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Paladin, 1984).

79. Adorno, "The Culture Industry Reconsidered," *New German Critique*, 6 (Fall, 1975), "Transparencies on Film," *New German Critique*, 24-25 (Fall-Winter, 1981-2) and "Freizeit," *Stichworte* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1969).
80. This is cited in n. 70.
81. Michel De Certeau, *The Practise of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. xii-xiii. The book was published in France in 1980.

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