

# 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 elitist 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 elitest, ascetic and regressive Frankfurt school. Beginning with the central first issue, it is hard to deny some justice to the elitest 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,"<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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..."<sup>6</sup> In his last work *Aesthetic Theory* (1969), he bitterly commented "Those clichés 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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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*."<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> (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.)<sup>11</sup> Adorno further argued that such phantasmagoric tableaux as the Venusberg or Magic Fire music "assumes the character of wares on display."<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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)<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

For Adorno the division between the best modernist works and those of the entertainment industry should neither be ossified into eternally separate, "taste cultures,"<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup>

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,<sup>19</sup> Adorno wrote: "outrage at the alleged mass era has become an article for mass consumption, for inciting masses against politically democratic forms."<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> 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 elitest 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"<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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 anti-thesis 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."<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> "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."<sup>27</sup> 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."<sup>28</sup>

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."<sup>29</sup> 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."<sup>30</sup>

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,"<sup>31</sup> 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."<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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*.<sup>34</sup> 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."<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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*.<sup>40</sup> 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 focused 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 preceded 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."<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> "The mass," Ortega wrote, "crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent: individual, qualified and select."<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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."<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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 elitest, 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,<sup>48</sup> 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,<sup>49</sup> a forum for what Russell Berman has recently called, in a study of the Weimar left modernists, a "vocalisation of the collective."<sup>50</sup> 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)..."<sup>51</sup>

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."<sup>52</sup>

Obviously this ingenious but wildly over-optimistic essay is open to many objections, some of which Adorno made in his often described criticisms.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

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 partisans 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.<sup>55</sup> 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,<sup>56</sup> 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

