

Mass society and mass culture: interdependence or independence?

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Theories of mass society and the functions of the mass media

Traditional theorists of 'urbanism' or of the 'mass society' tend to be pessimistic in ideology and macroscopic in sociology; their empirical critics tend to be optimistic - some would say fatuous - in ideology and microscopic in sociology. Both seek to interpret the impact of industrialism and urbanism on social structure and culture. Together they have given us most of the imagery with which we construct our picture of the affluent society.

From Tocqueville to Mannheim¹ the traditional theorists have been concerned with one or both of two problems: (1) the debilitation of culture-bearing elites (and of the core values they sustain) brought on by their diminishing insulation from popular pressures; (2) the rise of the masses, who, for various reasons, are increasingly susceptible to demagogues and extremist movements.² These scholars are said to believe that the mobility, heterogeneity, and centralization of modern society destroy or weaken the ties that bind men to the common life, rendering the mass manipulatable, leaving mass organizations and the mass media in control. Although they vary in their depiction of the generating forces, they tend to accent either the atrophy of primary and informal relations or the atrophy of self-governing secondary groups and associations.³

Now the empirically-minded critics – a later generation studying a more industrialized society – have countered with these propositions: primary groups survive, even flourish. Urban-industrial populations have not stopped participating in voluntary associations, which in America and perhaps in other pluralist systems, continue to multiply. Moreover, in every industrial society, whether pluralist or totalitarian, there are potent limits to the powers of the mass media, the big organizations, and the centralized state.

I count myself as one of the critics,⁴ but I am restive about the way the debate has progressed.⁵ The parties talk past one another and ideological blinders obstruct the vision far more than in other areas of sociological investigation. Nowhere is this more true than in the sketchy treatment of mass culture in theories of the mass society and in the almost ritualistic recital of the 'two-step flow' slogan by the students of media ineffectiveness.

The main theme of the theorists is this: the mass society develops a mass culture, in which cultural and political values and beliefs tend to be homogeneous and fluid. In the middle and at the bottom - in the atomized mass - people think and feel alike; but thoughts and feelings, not being firmly anchored anywhere, are susceptible to fads and fashions. At the top, poorly-organized elites, themselves mass-oriented, become political and managerial manipulators, responding to short-run pressures; they fail to maintain standards and thereby encourage the spread of populism in politics, mass tastes in culture - in short, a 'sovereignty of the unqualified'.⁶

The empirically-minded critics of such theories are impressed by the diversity of modern life. Concerning the levelling and fluidity of culture, they point to an extraordinary variety of cultural products, assert that it is easier to prove that mass tastes have been upgraded than that such tastes have been vulgarized, and protest that high culture has not declined but merely become more widely available. Concerning the role of the mass media in politics and culture, the critics cite considerable diversity of media content as well as persistence in habits of exposure. And where diversity of content falls short, they argue, there is everywhere enormous diversity in response. While the optimists are well aware of the limits of their studies, they seem always to come to the same punch line: the burden of evidence indicates that the media are not omnipotent; they are absorbed into local cultures via the two-step flow from media to local group to person; and this absorption involves a self-selection of exposure corresponding to previous attitude.⁷

It is a pity that these students of the media who know mass communications best are not more ideologically sensitive and not more concerned with general characterizations of society; equally unfortunate is it that the theorists, at home in the world of ideologies and Utopias, are not more sophisticated in the handling of data. For systematic observation and theoretical problems must be brought together if we are to understand the interplay of social structure, high culture, and mass culture.

Mass culture and high culture

For my purposes here the most useful definition that distinguishes high culture from mass culture is one that emphasizes the social context of production. 'High culture' will refer to two characteristics of the product:

(1) it is created by or under the supervision of a cultural elite operating within some aesthetic, literary, or scientific tradition (these elite are the top men in the sphere of education, aesthetics, and entertainment who carry the core values and standards of that sphere and serve as models for those working in it); (2) critical standards independent of the consumer of the product are systematically applied to it. The quality of thought or expression of the cultural object and the social milieu which it is produced define high culture. This definition has the advantage of leaving open questions about the organization and recruitment of cultural elites, the social controls to which they are subject (e.g. pressures from patron, market, or mass), the conditions under which a high quality product - a Shakespearian play, a Mozart symphony - can become popular, the ways in which the product is or is not absorbed into the culture of the consumer.

'Mass culture' will refer to cultural *products manufactured solely for a mass market*. Associated characteristics, not intrinsic to the definition, are *standardization* of product and *mass behaviour* in its use. Mass culture tends to be standardized because it aims to please the average taste of an undifferentiated audience. Common tastes shape mass culture; critical standards sustained by autonomous producing groups shape high culture. Another frequent but not inevitable correlate of mass culture is a high rate of mass behaviour - a uniform and direct response to remote symbols.⁸ It is expressed in strong attachment to and dependence on distant public objects and concerns, e.g. acts, thoughts, and feelings regarding the nation (hyper-patriotism and xenophobia), class (Marxian class consciousness), race (racism). The definition leaves open questions about the relation of mass culture to high culture; the conditions under which a product of mass culture can meet the standards of high culture; the degree to which mass culture is fluid or, like folk culture, stable (characterized by little original creation in each generation); whether traditions of expression and performance develop in it; the extent to which the impact of the mass media is mediated by audience standards and the extent to which those very standards are themselves anchored in the media.

In short, these concepts permit sociological analysis of cultural products in the social contexts in which they are created and used. They have the disadvantage of being difficult (but not impossible) to apply in empirical research.

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Implications for sociological theory

In applying the larger debate about the shape of modern society to the mass media and mass entertainment in America, I have brought systematic survey data to bear on the problem of the interplay of social structure, mass culture, and high culture. I have tried to resolve the paradox of a simultaneous growth of structural differentiation and cultural uniformity by re-examining the structural roots of media exposure and response. These data point up the need for a merger of the main characterizations of modern society - mass, 'industrial' and 'urban.' Specifically, three lessons can be learned.

1. The sketchy treatment of mass culture in theories of the mass society and the very limited idea of the two-step flow of mass communications, which accents the healthy absorption of the media into local cultures, demand more sophisticated treatment of the social structures in which the media are received. My data suggest that we need to slice up social structure in ways that capture both the persistence of older divisions (age, religion, occupation) and the emergence of newer ones (the quality and content of education) and to do it more precisely than usual. To say 'white collar' or 'working class' is to obscure most of what is central to the experience of the person and the structure of society. To say 'professional, technical, and kindred' captures more of social life but not much more. 'Lawyer' and 'engineer' move us closer to social reality, for these men develop quite different styles of life, rooted in diverse professional schools, tasks, work schedules, and organizational contexts. To say 'independent practitioner'

is to say even more, and finally, to particularize the matter with 'solo lawyer' vs 'firm lawyer' is to take account of the sharp contrasts in recruitment base (social origins, religion, quality of professional training), career pattern and rewards which divide the two.

In general, data both here and in other studies suggest that as predictors of life style variables especially cultural tastes and ideology - sex, age, and social-economic stratum are far weaker than religion, type of education, work and career - variables that represent positions in established groups. The implication is clear: return to the study of group life.

2. Television, the most 'massified' of the mass media, the one with the largest and most heterogeneous audience, has become central to the leisure routine of majorities at every level. The usual differences in media exposure and response among age, sex, and class categories - easy to exaggerate in any case - have virtually disappeared in the case of television. Even here, however, where we pinpoint social groups - an occupation supported by an occupational community, a religion buttressed by a religious community - some differences do remain. And among the printed media, where most competition prevails, the chances of such groups to stylize their uses of mass communications remains strong.

3. The paradox of the simultaneous growth of structural differentiation and cultural uniformity is thus partly a matter of our weak concepts and measures of social structure and our consequent failure to spot group-linked variations in life style. But it may also reflect the state of an affluent society in transition. In order to pin down the cultural impact of continued economic growth, we require data not now in hand. For countries at similar levels of economic development, having diverse cultural traditions and systems of education and communications, we need data on levels of mass taste, organization and self-conceptions of cultural elites, distance between educated and less educated in exposure to mass culture and high culture. Until we have such systematic comparisons, I will assume that structure and culture are congruent and massified in rapidly developing new nations and that they become increasingly incongruent at levels of development thus far achieved. Finally, as rich countries grow richer, homogenizing structures in politics, education, and mass communications combine with an already high level of cultural uniformity to reduce the hold of differentiating structures of age, religion, work, and locality, and bring about greater consistency of structure and culture - a new combination of 'mass' society and 'industrial' society, mass culture and high culture.

4. Many leads in my data point to the need for synthesis not only of ideas about industrial society and mass society but also of ideas about pluralism and totalitarianism. I can here merely indicate the direction of these findings. Briefly, what takes place in the economy and the locality - work, consumption, and participation in formal associations - forms coherent styles of life, one of which I have come to label 'Happy Good Citizen-Consumer'. The style includes these pluralist-industrial traits: strong attachment to the community (supporting increased school taxes, contributing generously to churches and charity, thinking of the neighbourhood as one's 'real home', voting in elections); consumer enthusiasm (planning to buy or to replace many luxury possessions); optimism about national crises; a strong belief

that distributive justice prevails (feeling that jobs are distributed fairly). It also involves long hours at gratifying work, little or no leisure malaise; wide-ranging, stable secondary ties and, to some extent, wide ranging, stable primary ties - the very model of a modern pluralist citizen. But this benign pattern of work, consumption, and participation is independent of participation in and feelings about mass culture. And both happy good citizenry and the uses of the mass media are more or less independent of approaches to national politics - or at least go together in ways not anticipated in received theory. Thus, the good citizen-consumers tend to be unusually prone to personality voting (party-switching, ticket splitting), dependent on the media for opinions on issues, susceptible to advertising and to mass behaviour generally (e.g. they score high on a measure of susceptibility to manipulation by the media in politics and consumption). Men who have confidence in the major institutions of American society distrust TV and radio networks'; men who trust the media distrust other institutions. Finally, men whose social relations are stable tend to have fluid party loyalties. To be socially integrated in America is to accept propaganda, advertising, and speedy obsolescence in consumption. The fact is that those who fit the image of pluralist man in the pluralist society also fit the image of mass man in the mass society. Any accurate picture of the shape of modern society must accommodate these ambiguities.

Notes

1. De Tocqueville, Alexis (1948) *Democracy in America*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2 vols; Mannheim, Karl (1940) *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
2. Cf. William Kornhauser's treatment of 'accessible elites' and 'available masses' in (1959) *The Politics of Mass Society*, The Free Press, Glencoe, III.
3. Cooley, Mayo, and their students emphasize the functions of primary groups in the maintenance of social order, and cite reasons for their declining functions and authority. Since the primary group is the training ground for good citizenship, its decline, they felt, would produce mass men who would produce a 'mass society', 'anomie', or 'social disorganization'. Cooley, Charles H. (1927) *Social Organisation*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York; Mayo, Elton (1933) *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, esp. pp. 122 and (1945) *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Chapters 2 and 5.
4. See Wilensky, Harold L. and Lebeaux, Charles N. (1958) *Industrial Society and Social Welfare*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, Chapter 5.
5. For an assessment of the evidence on the vitality of **social** participation see Wilensky, Harold L. (1961) Life cycle, work situation, and participation in formal associations, in Kleemeier, R. W. (ed.) *Aging and Leisure*, Oxford University Press, New York; and Social Structure ..., op. cit.; for an empirical study of the integrative potential of various types of social relations see Wilensky, Harold L. (1961) Orderly careers and social participation. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 26, August, pp.521-39.
6. Cf. Selznick, Philip (1951) Institutional vulnerability in mass society. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 56, January, pp. 320-31; Rosenberg, Bernard and White, David Manning (eds) (1957) *Mass Culture*, The Free Press, Glencoe, III; and Kornhauser, op. cit.
7. See for example, Klapper, op. cit.; and Bauer, Raymond, A. and Bauer, Alice H. (1960) America, 'mass society' and mass media. *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 16, pp. 3-56.

8. Following Blumer and Wirth, the 'mass' is a collectivity which is big, heterogeneous (dispersed geographically and cross-cutting many groups and sub-cultures), and socially-unstructured (comprised of individuals who do not share norms and values relevant to the situation - individuals who are unattached for a time, not in role, and can therefore behave in a uniform, undifferentiated way). Blumer, Herbert (1946) Elementary collective behavior, in McClung Lee, Alfred (ed.) *New Outline of the Principles of Sociology*, Barnes & Noble, New York, pp. 185; and Wirth, Louis (1938) Urbanism as a way of life. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44, July, pp. 1-24. On the public, see also Park, Robert E. (1904) Masse und Publikum: Eine Methodologische und Soziologische Untersuchung, Inaugural-dissertation der Hohenphilosophischen Fakultät der Ruprecht-Karls-Universität zu Heidelberg, Lack & Grunau, Bern.

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