

THE MASSES, CULTURE AND LEISURE

In a society based on democratic principles and equipped with powerful techniques of dissemination, the participation of the masses in cultural life and the elaboration of works adapted to the needs of this new and vast public become imperative. This participation and elaboration are fairly extensive, and the quality of the cultural work disseminated or created is relatively high, but all modern societies, whatever their reigning ideology and their level of technical evolution, face this problem in their own fashion.¹

At every stage of economic development an industrial and democratic society seeks the content and the form of its popular culture. In the underdeveloped countries, in the process of industrialization, where the struggle against poverty, disease and

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¹ In a capitalist society, such as the USA, mass culture, even in the vulgar form of "Kitsch," appears to many sociologists as an index of a broad esthetic awakening among the classes, which before had to accept whatever was reserved for them, and which had practically no access to expression or esthetic comprehension. According to the leaders of a socialist society (the USSR), culture is solid and capable of unlimited, smooth development only when the entire mass of the population is integrated into the cultural structure.

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traditional fatalism takes first place, the development of a modern culture among the masses is fundamental, in order that they can actively participate in the economic and social transformation of their own life.²

In the advanced countries, which have attained the level of production and education of the majority of the nations of Europe, the development of a popular culture conditions the cultural cleavage between the artist and the general public, between the specialist and the ordinary person, between the educated classes and the others. This factor alone can prolongate and modify the work of the school, revive lively interests in the face of over-simplified propaganda or summary publicity, and inspire individuals to participate actively in social and cultural life. Without it the technocracies and oligarchies would have to reinforce their power.

Finally, in a post-industrial society,³ popular culture becomes an even greater necessity. Not only are all the social problems, mentioned earlier, posed, but new ones are added; when the need for food, clothing, comfort and amusement are satisfied among three-fourths of the population,⁴ the elevation of the cultural aspirations of the consumers is perhaps the basic condition in order to avoid the "affluent society" drawing man into a world ruled by material values alone. "Abundance for what?" sociologists such as Riesman ask. An increasing number of economists are following suit.⁵ Anarchical advertising, should it not be limited, perfected and guided by a powerful and permanent movement toward the cultural emancipation of the masses? This is the question that gives popular culture its central place in a society geared to consumption. Thus, in all industrial and democratic societies, popular culture appears as a possibility, a necessity, a value.

But all those who seek to diffuse information into the daily

² P. Lengrand and J. Rovin, in *La Calabre*, collective work directed by Jean Meyriat, A. Colin, 1960.

³ D. Riesman, "Work and Leisure in Post-Industrial Society," in *Mass Leisure*.

⁴ Department of Commerce, USA, Report 1960.

⁵ J. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*.

life of the working population rarely tie in the dissemination of culture with the leisure time of the masses. Yet, in the spare time of school or after school the problem of what takes up leisure time conditions and will condition more and more the culture lived by a mass society. A brief analysis of this relationship, which is often neglected, will not be without benefit.

For more than a century now it has frequently been demonstrated that access of the masses to culture requires a shortening of the working hours. Modern culture, whether it is technical, scientific, artistic or philosophical, cannot be acquired or developed only by means of meeting daily requirements. It entails efforts of acquisition and creation which require time. As school time becomes increasingly less sufficient to acquire the knowledge and aptitudes necessary in an increasingly complex world, which changes more and more rapidly, a time freed from professional and other obligations is necessary. This indispensable condition is nevertheless insufficient. We know that leisure is not only free time, time set aside, "a space for human development," it is a complex of ambiguous activities, to which are tied models and values that to some extent determine the content itself of popular culture.

For the working man, every form of active participation in cultural life, that is, every creative activity or effort made to comprehend cultural works of whatever nature, is leisure activity. It therefore enters into competition with all other leisure activities, especially with all forms of relaxation and recreation. In the cultural life of the masses, participation in a theatre performance, reading a literary work, or studying a work of popular science, are leisure-time activities of the same order as taking a walk, mechanical hobbies, a game, a dance or a tourist trip. These activities have the same attributes of having been lived. None of them corresponds to a basic obligation, such as work or the education of children. They are not conceived primarily to make money, but to give pleasure. They may be substituted one for the other according to the situation, or fancy. Even in a society that stimulates the maximum effort of personal growth, the gap is probably great between the intentions of the propagandists, or the educators of the people, and the real attitudes of the citizens. Thus, the Soviet state makes an enormous effort to disseminate

literary works among the people. Certain authors are weeded out, but a great number of works by Hugo, Balzac or Shakespeare are disseminated in an impressive number of copies.⁶ But how many read them and how? According to the satiric newspaper, *Krokodil*, the use of the books is most varied: many read them to learn something, but for others they serve various purposes—to jack up the legs of tables, to start the fire, etc. This is a sally of *Krokodil*. But statistics on the distribution of cultural works tells us very little about how they are used by the masses. One of the first sociological surveys on the leisure time of the Soviets shows that 25 to 100 per cent of leisure is devoted to pure and simple activity, a part is filled with entertaining guests, and that, despite a policy of instruction, leisure is far from being a means of cultural development for everyone.⁷ In the USA, the effects of leisure are even more complex. All the sociologists are of the opinion that in a context in which the freedom of choice is greater, but the pressure of commercial advertising of a mediocre level is so powerful, only a minority of citizens participate actively in cultural life; this is why the most important survey which is now being conducted on adult education has taken leisure as the focal point of the research.⁸

The incidence of leisure in the culture of the masses is not confined to this alone. Culture experienced is to some extent the way in which a society or an individual behaves; in the study of this process can be found the models, representations and values that constitute the points of departure of the cultural range. These points of departure are connected with types of practical, technical, artistic or philosophical knowledge. Their standards of quality are quite varied. These types and levels are developed more or less according to the individuals, classes and societies. All the activities of everyday life, real or fictitious, may constitute

⁶ Ministry of Culture, USSR, *Statistical Yearbook on Education and Culture*, 1960.

⁷ Prudensky, "Les loisirs dans la société socialiste," in *Kommunist*, Oct., 1960, commentary on a survey on leisure in the cities of Gorki, Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk.

⁸ J. London, *Survey on Leisure in Oakland*, 1960 (questionnaire).

the basis of such a cultural life. They may be the support of cultural development. But among them, the leisure activities, growing in number, tempting, enchanting, exert a particular pressure. We have seen that nearly one-fourth of the workers of the city of Annecy are engaged in work centered around them. According to D. Riesman and H. Wilensky,⁹ in an even more advanced phase of industrialization, the number of workers employed in connection with leisure-time activity will grow even more. Finally, if the Soviet leadership makes such a great effort to organize free-time activities and to tie in the interests in amusement with those of work, is it not because they recognize the special power of leisure in the personal life of the people, in the most spontaneous avenues of culture?¹⁰ Two recent anthologies of American sociology¹¹ make a distinction between mass leisure and culture on the level of the activities. This division, which is explained by the current confusion between leisure and amusement, is not justified. In both books it leads to bizarre singularities. The cultural association is classed with mass leisure and card playing with mass culture ... Why? Because at the level of activities it is impossible to find simple criteria of distinction. In reality all the activities studied in both works are leisure activities: card games or belonging to a club, reading a book or going to the movies. Every one of these leisure activities has a cultural nature, and a popular culture is confused in large part with popular leisure: "Tell me what you do in your leisure time, and I will tell you what your culture is."

Finally, there is perhaps no more difficult and also more important problem in popular culture than the level of quality. We reject the currently reigning, *a priori* contradistinction between humanist and popular culture. In fact, as Shils says, it is the whole problem of "culture in a mass society" that is in

⁹ H. Wilensky, "Travail, carrières et intégration sociale," in *Bulletin International des Sciences Sociales*, UNESCO, Dec., 1960.

¹⁰ C. Ossipov and N. Ignatiev, "Communisme et problème des loisirs," in *Esprit*, special issue on leisure, June 1959.

¹¹ B. Rosenberg and Whyte, in *Mass Culture*, 1952; Larrabee and Meyersohn, *Mass Leisure*, 1959, Free Press.

question.¹² Culture experienced in such a society is a *continuum* of different levels which often interpenetrate each other in all classes and environments. Thus, Marxist as well as liberal sociologists rightly consider popular culture as a notion "at the same time humanist and sociological."¹³ This allows the question that in our view is crucial to be posed: what is the degree of the penetration of old and new cultural works into the cultural norms of the masses? When culture reaches out to a broader public, is it not menaced by slick art, low-level science, conformist morality or simplistic philosophy, which may be sold or distributed with greater facility to a greater number of people? These fears are shared by most American sociologists who analyze "mass culture."¹⁴

In the socialist countries, despite the systematic effort for the education of a people, who crowd the museums¹⁵ (one inhabitant in three in a Polish town visits the museum), and who assure an enormous circulation to literary masterpieces, is art for the people not frequently accompanied by a lowering of the level of artistic and literary production? Since 1956, this abasement of culture has often been denounced by writers' congresses of the socialist countries.

In France, the fight against "degraded popular culture" is a continuing topic among all the groups associated with popular education. Thus, despite the diversity of social and ideological contexts, the problem of the levels of mass culture arises everywhere. If a concrete solution to this problem can be found, it is most likely in the norms themselves of leisure where it is actually experienced.

For this reason, in a given society, in order to ascertain not the ideal but the real and possible levels of popular culture, it

¹² E. Shils, "Mass Society and its Culture," in *Daedalus*, Spring 1959, and in *Culture for the Millions*, Van Nostrand, 1961.

¹³ L. Lowenthal, "Un concept à la fois humaniste et sociologique: la culture populaire," in *Bulletin International des Sciences Sociales*, Dec., 1960.

¹⁴ "Mass Culture and Mass Media," *Daedalus*, 89 (2), Spring 1960.

¹⁵ B. Suchodolsky, "La politique culturelle de la Pologne populaire," in *Le régime et les institutions de la République populaire de Pologne*, Solvay Institute, 1960.

seems important to us to analyze first the real and possible content of the principal leisure activities of the masses. Briefly, all the socialist or capitalist countries face major problems with the growth of leisure. The former are proceeding from a policy of development of the masses that is too authoritarian; the latter are proceeding in the absence of any policy, which allows aimless amusement to thrive on a commercial level. All countries on a different level of technical development and with different or opposing social structures are already coping with the central question of the civilization of leisure. This question could be formulated thus:

How can a society, in which leisure has become a right for everyone and tends to become more and more a mass phenomenon, give the chance to every man, of whatever birth, wealth or education, to attain an optimum balance, freely chosen, between the need for rest, amusement and participation in social and cultural life?

In our view there are no more important problems for the future of man in industrial and democratic societies. The stake is capital. The objectives of economic and social development are relatively clear. But what are the objectives of cultural development on the scale of a society in which the masses are little by little having access to leisure? One talks of the necessary institutions for the progress of economic, social, political or educational democracy, but such progress presupposes the participation of the citizens. This participation itself implies that they are interested in knowledge and corresponding values, that they use some of their leisure time to instruct themselves in the works on technique, science and the arts. The democratization of power, of organization, of decision is obviously inseparable from the permanent democratization of knowledge. It is not enough to maintain that the orientation of consumption and production by society is necessary in order to avoid a "civilization of gadgets." The post-Keynesian theses, following Galbraith, are necessary but insufficient to create a more humane civilization. It is equally necessary but insufficient to include within the social objectives the extension of education. In reality, we are being obliged to face the enormous problem of cultural democracy in this second half of the 20th century by the promotion of leisure for the

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masses. It is as important as economic, social and political democracy. It is conditioned by them and conditions them to a large degree. We are more helpless in confronting the problem, because it is newer, at least when taken in its entirety.

Today, the problem of the cultural development of our mass society is presented with incoherence and impotence. It is certainly desirable that there should be differences between the forms and the agents of cultural action (services, groups, associations or telecommunications). Democracy can only be pluralistic under pain of self denial. However, there should be no talk of "freedom" where there is only incoherence and impotence. This situation ends in the majority of cases in the most humiliating of all dictatorships, that which results from conformism, mediocrity, cultural products to be sold easily to the masses, adequately instructed to be interested in them and insufficiently educated to demand a higher cultural level in amusement or information.

The social sciences cannot as yet formulate and clarify the alternatives of the social decision in the face of these problems. But we have the right and the possibility of posing them in new terms, better adapted to the present-day situation. Only an alliance between creative imagination and scientific precision can help us to find a way out of the current crisis that affects cultural democracy. It would be vain to hope that an action, even planned, could resolve it, considering the present state of the thinking on this subject. A vigorous program of bold endeavors in cultural action applied to the entire population in every sector, allied with a rigorous effort in basic research, is indispensable. We know that this avenue is difficult. We do not see any other way to go beyond the current verbiage, in which it is affirmed that "every citizen of a democracy is entitled to culture, all the while acknowledging the fact that technical knowledge remains the privilege only of technicians, administrative knowledge, of the administrators, artistic and intellectual knowledge, of the artists and intellectuals, who are isolated from the masses. For us, it is not only a question of describing the most outstanding characteristics of a "mass culture," produced more or less by certain commercial dispensaries. The actualized cultural situations must be studied, and also those that can be actualized, not only the behaviors but also the needs. Cultural sociology should prepare

a conversion of attitude similar to that which political economy made recently, in becoming more tendential and conjectural. As the study of economic development, that of cultural development should revive in all the large modern countries the strict creativity of research institutes, which work in close cooperation with organizations concerned with prevision and planification and every agent of cultural action: the school, the organs of mass formation and information, institutions and associations of leisure, etc.

The results of this research on cultural action should be widely disseminated among the general public through various agents. Diffusion is the democratic tie between the creators, the specialists and the masses. It is the fundamental condition of cultural democracy. It is therefore normal that democracy pay the necessary price for this active research and the continuing dissemination of its results. There has been talk of the social cost of democracy. One must speak equally of its cultural cost. The increase of school credits, as we have said, is necessary, but insufficient. The cost of all kinds of dissemination, curricular and extracurricular, necessary for the cultural development of a mass society, which would be at the level of the values of democracy and the powers of technical civilization, must be envisaged.

We have stressed "values" of democracy. This most miraculous progress of the social sciences will never replace the necessity for the choice of values. The social sciences can and must illuminate this choice. They can and must free action from a systematic and dogmatic mind, which associates these values with questionable mystics, antiquated myths or techniques of doubtful efficiency. But they never replace the philosophy of values. It is right to fear that cultural action could be inspired by totalitarian values incompatible with the freedom of individual conscience. The pluralism of great currents of thought is consubstantial to every complete democracy. But, on the other hand, it is recognized that a society must share a minimum of common values in order to live and progress instead of destroying itself. It can be determined through the most cursory analysis of the substance of cultural action, public or private, that a common cultural minimum exists between institutions and groups, however far

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away from each other they might be ideologically. In order to see the problem more clearly, to better define the criteria of cultural development in connection with the realization of a cultural democracy, which would respect the differences of all, it seems to us to be indispensable to gather together those responsible for cultural action, private and public, in a *cultural council*, which would play the role for the different cultural forces of a country comparable to the one an economic and social council would play for the different social and economic forces. This continuing interchange between the ideological forces of each society on the subject of the conditions of cultural development, corresponding to the leisure of the masses, both literate and illiterate, would it not constitute at the same time the best bulwark against both totalitarian propaganda and liberal incoherence, the best basis for the construction of a cultural democracy? All societies, Western or Eastern, American, European or African, rich or poor, capitalist or socialist, do they not face in their own way the same problems of the ambiguous role of leisure in the cultural development of mass societies?¹⁶

¹⁶ The author has developed these topics in *Vers une civilisation du loisir?*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1962.