THE POLARIZATION OF AMERICA: THE DECLINE OF MASS CULTURE

By Paul Jerome Croce

Pop culture is forever, but mass culture is only a few hundred years old and showing its age. Popular culture is just a big, loose term for things popular beyond the tastes and standards of small groups of elites. It's always been around. Mass culture, however, requires mass communication across long distances.

Before modern times, popular culture had little means for communication from one community to another. The vehicles available prior to the eighteenth century for reaching broader and more remote audiences—hand-copying of manuscripts, for example, and then early printing—were too slow and costly to be squandered on popular culture. They were reserved for elite culture—church pronouncements, for example, and intellectuals' essays. Pre-modern popular culture displayed enormous diversity. Because each community's popular culture was an island apart and a world away from the next, a robust variety of popular forms could and did emerge, although they often remained unrecorded for posterity.

The Rise of Mass Culture

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Western world, technological advances in printing, book publishing, telegraph, and transportation formed bridges among the islands of non-elite culture and made popular mass culture possible for the first time. Thanks to technology, popular forms from one geographic area could get followers in another, and as communication further speeded up, popular culture generated the broad audiences that have become the defining characteristic of modern mass culture. Meanwhile, the growth of democracy gave mass culture political legitimacy; not just enlightened elites, but even average citizens could be citizens of

the world through the miracles of technological contact. Mass communications, like mass production, made abundance — here, an abundance of cultural forms — available to the populace at large.

The great technological innovations in communications were more than gee-wiz gadgets (although they were that, too); by facilitating communication across the miles and between people who did not know each other and could not even see each other, mass communication changed the way people thought of themselves. Instead of being forced to think of ourselves in relation to people and things in our immediate vicinity, we could begin to define ourselves according to broad cultural standards. What mass culture gained in cosmopolitanism, though, it lost in personal relations. Pop culture *en masse* would no longer be intimate or spontaneous, but more and more carefully structured and planned. In recent years, these trends in mass culture have culminated in popular culture managed, to some extent even imposed, from above. Through their popularity, the mass culture's productions shaped taste, established goals and values, and defined the kind of people most people thought they should be.

The tendency for mass culture to bring diverse people together but to lose the small-town feeling of older popular culture accelerated in the twentieth century, as technology really did create the global village. Magazines with pictures, and especially movies and television, brought to ordinary people a new measure of familiarity with persons and things far away. The *attraction* was equally strong for fact or fiction — whether in news reports or the video fictions of theaters and TV. If mass culture in general brought distant people close, video made them up close and palpably—even if not truly —*real*.

Once mass culture graduated to the moving picture, its grip on our imaginations was as tight as Davy Crockett's handshake. Morse code and printed words could communicate information, which in turn could help establish cultural standards among an impressive variety of people, but video could make those standards come to life. The delicious allure of moving pictures clinched the trend in mass culture of encouraging people to define themselves in relation to distant standards. Styles and star personalities shaped taste as they always had, but with pictures, their distance was foreshortened by the illusion of intimacy. Here was mass communication that not only let us know about other worlds, but also made us feel as if we could know those distant people and things personally, in vivid, if artificial, relations. The seeming intimacy with celebrities seemed to re-create the familiarity of traditional, localist popular culture, but of course this intimacy was as thin as celluloid film. Without self-consciously trying, hosts of individuals, free to be themselves and choose their own styles, were imitating the compelling styles of distant stars; each person, ironically, acting like everyone else, collectively defined the phenomena of mass culture.

Enter "Post-Mass Culture"

The breakdown of mass culture has begun from the very forces that had built it up in the first place. "Post-mass culture" is not in defiance of mass culture, but it is that modern phenomenon metastasized, with individuals still pursuing distant styles, but doing so in clusters broken off from a single massive standard. The heyday for mass culture was the United States of the 1950s and 1960s. Advanced technology of mass communications combined with a maturing of institutions for their rapid dissemination.

The very success of mass culture planted the seeds for its erosion. In the 1960s, the technologies and institutions of mass culture allowed things like the counter-culture, rock music, national support for civil rights activism, and general malaise about the Vietnam War. The institutions of the "Hit Parade" and the mass reproduction of pop music let radical sentiments seep into the bedrooms of countless suburban youths, and video images sent more powerful messages about the conduct of the America's longest war than all political pronouncements combined. For all their differences, these trends depended on mass communications and the shaping of tastes and values across long distances. The ability of mass culture to produce these communities at a distance allowed more and more distinct flowerings of cultural styles. Why identify with those yahoos in your hometown when you could groove to the music and fight for the political causes of hip people like yourself scattered across the land?

This is where the clustering began, with the cultural divides that emerged most clearly during the 1960s. The cultural revolution of the 1960s defined camps and communities of distinct values. The "vital center" of mass culture in the 1950s which formed a common experience across the miles became a hollow center by the 1970s and 1980s, as more and more clusters of people wanted nothing to do with each other.

Recent political trends have cut the cultural trenches even deeper. A series of traditionally private questions have gone public in the last generation and tormented the body politic enough to make people run to their own cluster for cover. Questions about prayer in school, the Pledge of Allegiance, the proper role of women, and especially abortion, touch on such private fundamental values that they are very difficult to settle in the public arena. So, instead of being resolved, they are passionately fought over. This, of course, further encourages us to retreat to the sympathetic chunk of people with the same values we hold. Such political tensions have left their mark on popular culture: It's difficult to enjoy mass culture with people who have values from hell.

Technology Now Breaks Audiences Down

Further refinements in communications technology have in their turn further undercut the power of mass culture. A variety of cable channels, each targeted to different specific interests, have been pushing the big three TV networks from mainstream to margin in public attention. A dazzling array of different radio stations, music recordings, and films are now available to individual consumers, without their having to defer to the selective choices of media moguls. With polarized politics and technological variety, people can get their news and find entertainment—things that used to be the province of mass culture — all within the segregated clusters of their own subculture.

The breakup of mass culture has many hopeful features. Mass culture could be very conformist and monolithic. "Father Knows Best" tried to make the patriarchal family a genial standard for all, and virtually every other popular culture form from the great age of mass culture was indifferent, sometimes even hostile, to diverse racial, ethnic, and religious groups, and set bluntly complacent suburban standards for all. Moreover, standardization of values and institutionalization of popular culture severely limited personal choices. Nameless, faceless publishers and producers made choices for you.

In Praise of Mass Culture

But we have also lost something valuable with the demise of mass culture. For all its banality, it was one set of things — sometimes the only things — that most people had in common. It provided a common forum for asking questions and raising discussion across different subcultures, even if the answers from mass culture were often confiningly uniform. Now a culture of clusters, we have little common ground and even less motive for communication. The polarized clusters have little to do with each other and cannot even listen to each other's points of view.

The breakdown of mass culture is not the only cause of polarization, and in fact sometimes it is less a cause than a symptom. But no matter the ultimate source, the difficulties of a society of separate subcultures mount. An evangelical Christian can read Christian books and newspapers, watch Christian TV, and even go to a Christian theme park. A radical feminist can learn and have fun from another wholly separate set of institutions. Each feels comfortable in his or her setting, but each learns less and less from the other. They learn what they already know. More so on the extremes, but also throughout the society, Americans are rushing to the technologically enhanced comforts of cultural forms espousing their own values.

It's hard to get things done in this setting, which may help explain our current political stagflation. An inflation of political rhetoric and a depression of the public mood have made action on vital questions nearly impossible. In a polarized cultural setting, people increasingly confront questions about the environment, family life, abortion, and a host of other knotty issues as partisans of their subculture's values, without talking to or even listening to other values. This allows extreme positions to set the agendas and it poisons the well of sentiment for compromise. Underneath the next set of walkman headphones is likely to be a mind attuned to a more polarized America.

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