

## Dwight Macdonald on Raymond Williams and the “Question of the Masses”

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### Abstract

In his essays “A theory of mass culture” (1953) and “Masscult and midcult” (1960), critic Dwight Macdonald argued that the collective taste of the “masses” was reflected in the degraded mass culture they consumed. Consequently, they should be cut off from the realm of high culture. In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Raymond Williams made a different argument, maintaining that the culture of the working classes possessed aesthetic and moral value, while simultaneously deriding the condescension of elite culture and insisting on a distinction between commercialized mass culture and those who consumed it. In addition, Williams contended that the incursion of the masses into the cultural scene during the preceding two centuries had been culturally beneficial, and should be extended as the best hope for the cultural future. Macdonald took him to task for such views in his essay “Looking backward” (1961), instead stating: “our aim should be to restore the cultural distinctions that have increasingly blurred since the industrial revolution”. Central to the disagreement was the question of whether the masses were responsible for what both Williams and Macdonald deemed the corrupt nature of mass culture. Macdonald saw them as complicit, while Williams labeled them victims. This paper explores Macdonald’s exposition of the question of the masses *contra* Williams, shedding light on a crucial junction in the transformation of theoretical frameworks for the study of popular culture.

In his essays “A theory of mass culture” (1953) and “Masscult and midcult” (1960) (Macdonald 1983b), American critic Dwight Macdonald (1906–1982) argued that the collective taste of the “masses” was reflected in the degraded nature of mass culture. In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Welsh critic Raymond Williams (1921–1988) made a different argument, maintaining that the culture of the working classes possessed aesthetic and moral value, while insisting on a division between commercialized culture and those who consumed it. In a little-known essay entitled “Looking backward” –published in *Encounter* in June 1961– Macdonald took Williams to task, arguing for clear distinctions of value between high culture and low culture, and addressing the “question of the masses”. Despite its obscurity, the article was a significant one in the field of cultural studies, as it pitted the old guard’s mid-century mass culture critique against Williams, whose ideas would radically alter the way scholars viewed the study of popular culture. Central to the disagreement was the question of whether the masses were responsible for what both Williams and Macdonald deemed the corrupt status of mass culture. Also at stake was the value of mass influence in the realm of culture. Williams applauded

what he saw as the beneficial intrusion of the masses onto the cultural scene during the previous two centuries, dubbing it “cultural expansion” (1961: 173). Macdonald, meanwhile, openly deplored it, holding the masses responsible for cultural decline. As such, Macdonald’s exposition of the question of the masses *contra* Williams exposes a crucial junction in the transformation of the twentieth century’s theoretical frameworks for the study of popular culture.

In the early 1960s Macdonald was the reigning cultural arbiter in the United States, known as “the high priest of culture snobs” (Wreszin 1994: 353). Over the span of twenty years, he had offered a wide-ranging critique of contemporary society’s use and abuse of commercialized entertainment, helping to forge a comprehensive critique that stretched back to, and encompassed the thought of Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955), T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), and the Frankfurt School. Together with Macdonald, these intellectuals designated “the revolt of the masses” (in the words of Ortega y Gasset) as the primary threat to elite culture. In more specific terms, class distinctions had been banished by mass participation in public life, bringing about the demise of “the best which has been thought and said in the world”, as Arnold defined “culture” (2003: viii). It was Ortega y Gasset who provided the first full description of the masses:

The mass is the average man. In this way what is mere quantity the multitude— is converted to qualitative determination: it becomes the common social equality, man as undifferentiated from other men, but as repeating in himself a generic type [...] the mass is all that which sets no value on itself —good or ill— based on specific grounds, but which feels itself “just like everybody,” and nevertheless is unconcerned about it [...].  
(Ortega y Gasset 1932: 14-15).

This menacing formulation would remain the standard vision of the lower orders into the 1960s. Hence Eliot, later thinking along the same lines, rejected the idea of high culture’s extension to the majority, declaring that “it is an essential condition of the preservation of the quality of the culture of the minority, that it should be a minority culture” (1948: 107). The Frankfurt School, meanwhile, added a Marxist paradigm to such philosophies, contending that the insensate masses were caught up in a totalitarian system in which the “pre-digested” opiate of mass culture, marked by the “pseudo-individualism” of standardization, brainwashed them into accepting the capitalist system (Adorno 1990: 308). True art, meanwhile, was oppositional.

All the above ideas found ultimate conjunction in Macdonald’s critiques of American mass culture. In his essays he deemed the masses complicit in their exploitation by cultural producers

or, as he termed them, “Lords of Kitsch”, and forcefully decried the corruption and demise of high art in an increasingly commercialized cultural environment. Macdonald wrote of mass culture as “a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste, and dissolving all cultural distinctions” to produce “a homogenized culture” (1953: 4-5). Such a tragedy might be avoided if there was “a clearly defined elite in the United States” but, given its absence, mass-produced culture “threaten[ed] to engulf everything in its spreading ooze” (4, 7). This “ooze” was the milk of the woefully indiscriminating masses, characterized by Macdonald as:

[...] [I]n historical time what a crowd is in space: a large quantity of people unable to express themselves as human beings because they are related to one another neither as individuals nor as members of communities –indeed, they are not related to each other at all, but only to something distant, abstract, nonhuman: a football game or bargain sale in the case of a crowd, a system of industrial production, a party or State, in the case of the masses.  
(1953: 14)

The “mass man”, therefore, “is a solitary atom, uniform with and undifferentiated from thousands and millions of other atoms” (Macdonald 1953: 14). The sad result is a “mass society” whose values cohere at the lowest common denominator, and whose morality “sinks to that of its most brutal and primitive members, its taste to that of the least sensitive and most ignorant” (14). Accordingly, the quality of mass culture will only worsen with further “massification”, and high culture will suffer an ignominious death.

While Macdonald saw the twentieth century as engaged in precipitous cultural decline, Williams took a drastically dissimilar view. *The Long Revolution* debuted in 1961, a year after Macdonald’s highly pessimistic seventy-page mega-essay on cultural matters, “Masscult and midcult”, appeared in *Partisan Review*. Popular culture historians have described Williams’ book as “a seminal event in English post-war intellectual life”, which laid the foundations of modern cultural studies and overturned the focus of intellectuals’ approach to the subject of culture in general (Storey 2006: 37). The book’s fundamental thesis was that a “long revolution” was occurring, which encompassed relations among technology, democracy, and culture over the past four centuries, and centered around the questioning of authority in these realms. Williams argued that the inception of the free press, the rise of literacy, and finally the emergence of radio and television had created systems of communication governed not by autocrats, but “the emergence of various active, material forces that create a sense of culture that is external to individuals and

groups, but which arise from the countless willed actions of individuals and groups” (Rojek 2007: 36). In other words, the whole way of life of the working class had become deeply connected to modern institutions of communication and education, forming a new cultural arena. Even prior to the publication of *The Long Revolution*, Williams had expressed a radically new perspective on the working classes’ relationship with popular culture. Though he admitted that most commercial entertainment was of baleful quality, he protested

[...] [T]he extremely damaging and quite untrue identification of “popular culture” (commercial newspapers, magazines, entertainments, etc.) with “working-class culture.” In fact the main source of this “popular culture” lies outside the working class altogether, for it is instituted, financed and operated by the commercial bourgeoisie, and remains typically capitalist in its methods of production and distribution. That working class people form perhaps a majority of the consumers of this material [...] does not, as a fact, justify this facile identification.  
(Storey 2006: 37)

Here Williams exonerates the mass audience of guilt for mass culture’s content, decisively breaking the direct link between the two. In *The Long Revolution* he took this line of thought a step further, arguing that the incursion of the working classes into the cultural scene during the preceding two centuries had been beneficial, and its furtherance should be encouraged through education as the best hope for Great Britain’s cultural future. Questioning the very concept of the masses, he aimed at exposing its problematic and discriminatory nature. Williams writes:

[I]t is always other people who are inferior, the practical identification is never with oneself. While no significant version of other people is there as an alternative, the degrading version makes easy headway. But this version of ordinary people is, precisely, a social expectation. The version of ordinary people as masses.  
(1961: 350-51)

*The Long Revolution* also rejected the idea that “the extension of industry, democracy and communications leads only to what is called the massification of society”, and the seemingly logical conclusion that “society is doomed, or in any event damned” (348). Such notions would foment a revolution in the study of popular culture, overthrowing many decades of inherited wisdom from Arnold, Gasset, Eliot, the Frankfurt School, and Dwight Macdonald himself. Macdonald took exception, expressing his mighty disdain in “Looking backward”.

Macdonald’s review takes umbrage at several of Williams’ contentions. First is the idea that the masses have any place in influencing the realm of high culture. To Macdonald, such calls for cultural democracy signal nothing but peril for the high arts. He instead opines that “our aim

should be to restore the cultural distinctions that have increasingly blurred since the industrial revolution, and that out of such attempts to do this as the 1890–1930 avant-garde movement of Joyce-Eliot-Picasso-Stravinsky has come whatever is alive in our culture today” (1983a: 229-30). He also attacks Williams’ quasi-Marxist perspective, which “sees history as an escalator” on which humanity rides to greater and greater progress. Though Macdonald admits he would love to share this quixotic analysis, doubts intrude. “If history is in fact an escalator”, he writes, “then I think the interests of culture, and of human values generally, demand that we step off it” (1983a: 230). At the heart of the matter is Williams’ naïve view of the common folk, which Macdonald characterizes as “the mystic cult of The Masses, who always feel the right way and always act the wrong way” (234). He further points out that Williams had addressed the question of the masses in another work, *Culture and Society*, in which he likened the phrase to “the mob”, a term of abuse. In doing so, Macdonald charges that Williams has wrongly jettisoned the long history of using “masses” as a “favorable term of Marxist polemics” in lieu of its exclusively derogatory use “by culture snobs [...] and as a condescending formulation which press lords and movie tycoons use to describe their audiences: „We give the masses what they want”” (234). But while Macdonald concedes that Williams is correct in stating that “no one thinks of himself as part of the „masses,”” he nonetheless charges that Williams “goes too far” in claiming that the masses do not really exist, other than as a category for viewing other “inferior” people (234). The rejoinder is such:

But of course the fact that one is not conscious of being such-and-such does not mean that one is not such-and-such; a leopard is a leopard whether he thinks he is or not, and Hitler was a mass-man whether he thought he was Siegfried or Napoleon or just Adolf Schickelgruber. Williams objects to the whole concept of “masses,” arguing that it is false (because it implies that human beings are automata) and reactionary (because it is “a way of seeing other people which has [...] been capitalized for the purpose of political or cultural exploitation”). (Macdonald 1983a: 234)

Agreeing that human beings are not automata, Macdonald however insists that people “behave like such in certain situations which have been brought about by our mass-industrial society, as when they are polarized by parties like the Nazi or the Communist ones or by cultural media like American television” (234-35). He asserts this as an “obvious fact of modern life” rather than reactionary stance, and excoriates Williams for making the identical criticisms of mass culture’s tawdry machinations while eschewing the “six-letter word” (235). *The Long Revolution*, Macdonald notes, is full of the same disappointed chagrin, citing Williams’

omnipresent denunciations of “bad art, bad entertainment, bad journalism”, and “the „cheapjacks“ who exploit popular ignorance to make money” (235).

Despite the sameness of the two men’s positions on the quality of commercial entertainment, Macdonald explains that a large difference remains. Williams blames the tasteless exploiters for the shoddiness of their products and lets the people remain pure, while Macdonald sees mass culture as “a reciprocal process, in which the ignorance and vulgarity of the mass public meshes in an endless cat’s-cradle with the same qualities –plus rapacity– in the *Lords of Kitsch*” (1983a: 235; emphasis in original). For the likes of Williams, herein lay an “awkward question” (certainly much less so for Macdonald) as to “why the masses prefer adulteration to the real thing, why the vast majority of [...] people [in Great Britain] go to see [the sex comedy] *Carry On, Nurse!* instead of [the Italian art film] *L’Avventura*” (235). Williams argues it is because they are uneducated and socially disadvantaged, but Macdonald counts this fact as only part of the picture. In a passage as straightforward as it is arguably accurate, he writes:

The difficulty is that most people, of whatever education or social position, don’t care very much about culture. This is not a class matter and is not even unique to our age. Some Renaissance nobles patronized the arts but most of them were more interested in hunting and fighting. Very few of my classmates in Yale „28, a notably un-disadvantaged social group, spent more time than they were forced to in that institution’s excellent library –a fifth would be generous, a tenth a realistic estimate. If between 80 and 90 per cent of the population just don’t care about such matters, the standards can be maintained only by thinking in terms of two cultures, a diluted, adulterated one for the majority, rich or poor, and the real thing for the minority that wants it.

(Macdonald 1983a: 235)

This was an overarching, universal formulation that transcended issues of class and politics, and pointed to a hierarchy of aesthetic taste and judgment. Therefore, when it came to mass culture, Macdonald refused to grant it independence from those who consumed it. As he argues at the end of “Masscult and midcult”:

I see Masscult [...] as a reciprocating engine, and who is to say, once it has been set in motion, whether the stroke or the counterstroke is responsible for its continued action? The *Lords of Kitsch* sell culture to the masses. It is debased, trivial culture that avoids both the deep realities (sex, death, failure, tragedy) and also the simple, spontaneous pleasures [...]. The masses [...] have been debauched by several generations of this sort of thing, and in turn have come to demand such trivial and comfortable cultural products. Which came first, the chicken or the egg, the mass demand or its satisfaction (and further stimulation), is a question as academic as it is unanswerable. The engine is reciprocating and shows no sign of running down.

(Macdonald 1983b: 71-72)

Therefore, while “victims” of mass culture might exist, Macdonald saw them as both willing and unable to break out of the web of commercialization spun by producers. It was an attitude that denied the human agency so vital to Williams’ optimistic thesis that “[t]he human energy of the long revolution springs from the conviction that men can direct their own lives, by breaking through the pressures and the restrictions of older forms of society, and by discovering new common institutions” (1961: 347). Macdonald, convinced of mass society’s overwhelming power and the mass man’s unbending stupor, held no such romantic hopes.

In an act of bravery unduly replicated elsewhere, “Looking backward” also takes aim at Williams’ writing, judging it inflated and disingenuous. Macdonald admits he found the first part of *The Long Revolution*, which includes the celebrated essay “An analysis of culture”, “impenetrable” and continues with a scathing evaluation of Williams’ “appalling prose style” (1983a: 229). The primary complaint is that Williams makes it impossible to “conceive of an idea apart from the words in which it is expressed”, hence putting “the maximum distance between the reader and the subject” (231). Macdonald labels the writing “that of a propagandist [...] fuzzy in principle, swathed in circumlocutions, emitting multisyllabic words as the cuttlefish does clouds of ink, and for very much the same purpose” (231). He cites this sentence as a typical example:

In a rapidly changing and therefore confused society, in which the cultural forms will in any case change but in which little is done by way of education to deepen and refine the capacity for significant response, the problems that confront us are inevitably difficult.  
(Macdonald 1983a: 231-32)

Such an inability to relate simple ideas is compounded by Williams’ inadequacy as a thinker. Macdonald characterizes him, rather, as a “preacher”, “more interested in exhorting than analyzing” (231). However:

[Williams] conceals this hortatory bias –perhaps even from himself– by constant allusions to the complex nature of reality. He is of the “There-is-no-simple-answer” school of thought, or rather of rhetoric. True, there *is* no simple answer. But as the artist must simplify in order to produce a work that will be a coherent statement and not merely a reflection of the chaos of reality, so the thinker must generalize.  
(Macdonald 1983a: 231)

Williams’ failure to do so, according to Macdonald, is indicative of the substantive weakness of his ideas, which seem more like “democratic prejudices [and] unexplained assumptions” (231). Hence, *The Long Revolution* is at heart a “sermon in literary form [...]

forever contrasting the dismal present with the bright future”, unsuspecting of whether the present is “the product of historical forces which will continue to affect the future”, and, to Macdonald’s mind, expand massification and propel mass culture to greater and greater hegemony. As a result, Williams’ conclusion that “[w]e only lack the will” to do away with debased commercial entertainment, coupled with his wish to establish “a public authority” to regulate cultural standards, strike Macdonald as irresponsibly simplistic (1983a: 236). Finally, Macdonald tackles the issue of *The Long Revolution*’s exceedingly positive reception by the London *literati*. He dismisses their enthusiasm, writing plainly that most critics automatically praise “think” books that “deal with some big central issue” and “have the air of boldly stating some positive solution” (1983a: 237). More intellectual honesty, Macdonald asserts, would have yielded less praise.

The critique of Williams in “Looking backward” was Macdonald’s last formal word in the mass culture debates of the 1960s. Despite his condemnation, *The Long Revolution* has continued to fare well. Today Williams is credited with provoking a transformation in the framework used to analyze popular culture, expanding “the field of cultural studies –to the point, indeed, where we are now able to perceive mass culture *as* culture” (Modleski 1986: xv). Meanwhile, the “question of the masses” and their taste, which so wholly obsessed Macdonald, is simply no longer explored, while his precious and strict dichotomy of high and low culture has fallen dismally out of favor. As a result, whatever the merits of the criticisms in “Looking backward”, and however furiously the essay battled against Williams’ denial of the supposedly ineluctable and destructive logic of mass culture’s ascension, Macdonald lost the war, rendered a casualty of his own ideas.

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