Week 4: 2 October

**Modernity: The ‘culture and civilization’ tradition**

Reading: Storey, ‘Chapter 2: ‘The “culture and civilization” tradition’
Hartley, ‘Culture’
Raymond Williams, ‘Civilization’ (Coursepack)

“The highly instructed few, and not the scantily instructed many, will ever be the organ to the human race of knowledge and truth. Knowledge and truth in the full sense of the words, are not attainable by the great mass of the human race at all.” (Matthew Arnold)

**Introductory Comments**

This week’s lecture focuses on the ‘culture and civilization’ tradition, best exemplified by Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, cultural critics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Both men expressed the anxieties of the ruling class as industrialization and urbanization radically changed the way people lived, how society was structured, and structure and content of culture.

As such, they bemoaned the decline of what they saw as traditional cultural cohesion.

But their concern was not limited to culture. They were also concerned that the rise of mass democracy meant the collapse of traditional authority.

They lamented the spread of ‘democratic sentiment’ which made possible the reversal of the traditions of taste and the canon of culture ‘by popular vote’

They expressed their fear and disgust with popular culture (as an expression of the ‘ignorant and uncultured masses’)—“a revolt of the mob against our literary masters”

For them, the role of culture was relatively straightforward:

- 1) a means to continue the social order based on class and privilege (although not stated in such bold and straightforward terms)
- 2) a social function to police the disruptive presence of the raw and uncultivated masses’

Keep in mind, then, that Arnold and Leavis are exemplary of how those with social and political power utilize culture to police and control (‘mold’ and ‘civilize’?) those with less political and economic power.
Historical context

The key material dynamic: *industrialization and urbanization*

- industrial capitalism was rapidly growing
- cities were developing along strict lines of class segregation
- these changes in the way people lived and worked were expressed in a general change in culture

Industrialization and urbanization meant that the bulk of society were no longer peasants but ‘working class’

- living close together in an urban setting, enabling them to develop their own culture
- thus it was a site for both a) new cultural entrepreneurs; and b) for political agitation thru. culture

It was against this background that Arnold focused his elitist perspective (culture as a means of social control and the ‘sweetness and light’ of culture as that of the ruling class)

Key Themes and Concepts

1) Matthew Arnold—‘culture and civilization’
2) Leavisism—culture in ‘minority keeping’
3) Post-war Mass Culture Debates

1) Matthew Arnold—‘culture and civilization’

The ‘cultural elite’ (a combination of elements of the aristocracy and educated middle class) felt they could still command cultural deference (and thus control)

Arnold lamented the passing of “the strong feudal habits of subordination and deference”

Culture as a means for social order and social authority won thru. cultural subordination and deference

Arnold is not interested in popular culture (or working class culture) per se.; rather, he sees its very existence as being symptomatic of broader social and political decline and crises—*a breakdown is social and cultural authority*
**Historical context for Arnold**
- father was the headmaster of a famous old English private school (‘public school’)
- family was part of the English cultural elite (professors, novelists, colonial administrators)
- he travelled across England as a School Inspector before becoming a Professor of Poetry at Oxford
- he was appalled by the Reform League and the Hyde Park Riot of 1866—a movement to extend the institutions and practices of democracy
- the Reform League sought the extension of suffrage (voting rights) to all adult males, regardless of whether they owned land or not
- Arnold characterized this call for greater democracy as mob anarchy
- he originally wrote ‘Culture and its Enemies’, later changing it to ‘Culture and Anarchy’
- he proposed ‘culture’ as a means to ‘soothe’ this mob anarchy

**Why is Arnold important for the study of culture?**
- one of the first modern ‘cultural critics’
- he is among the first to study popular culture in the modern age
- he inaugurates the culture and civilization perspective
- thus, he reads popular culture as a problem; as symptomatic of social disorder

**How does Arnold define culture?**
- 1) as “the best thought and said”—the ability to know the best
- 2) as ‘sweetness and light’—what is best
- 3) as that (1 & 2) which ministers to the ‘diseased spirit of our time’—the mental and spiritual application of what is best
- 4) the seeking of culture—the pursuit of what is best

There is no place for working class culture and lived experience in this definition—except as its problematic ‘other’

Indeed, as evidenced by his reaction to the push for more democratic franchise, Arnold perceives working class culture in the following terms: ignorant, envious, brutal, and uncultivated

Arnold was against the Reform League movement to extend the vote to all adult males because he claimed they were too ignorant.

A closer examination reveals that he was perhaps more against an autonomous working class culture
He called the working class a “dangerous class” because they had lost their “strong feudal habits of subordination and deference.”

Again, we are back to the socio-political context: traditional authority declined as democracy and the working class rise.

Thus the need for education and culture to civilize the working class—civilize meaning to train them for subordination, deference, and exploitation.

Keep in mind this relationship b/n culture and power (expressed as coercion) when we read Gramsci.

Schools should teach the working class to be subordinate and the middle class to rule.

In short, under the guise of a critique of popular culture, Arnold is putting forth a plan for (what Gramsci would call) middle class hegemony.

2) Leavisim—culture in ‘minority keeping’

“The people with power no longer represent intellectual authority and culture” (Q.D. Leavis)

The ‘minority’ (cultural elite) realized they could no longer simply command cultural deference, and thus control—hence the ‘cultural crisis’

It was a ‘crisis’ because those in the ‘minority keeping’ of culture were now in a ‘hostile environment’

Furthermore, “the masses” no longer had to receive “their amusements” form above.

‘Mass civilization’ and ‘mass culture’ threaten to put society into ‘irreparable chaos’

Thus, Leavis proposes that schools and universities implement “training in resistance [to mass culture]...[by a culturally] armed and active minority”

Resistance is typically thought of as something that comes ‘from below’ yet Leavisites saw their project as one of resistance...

What does that tell us about the relational nature of resistance?
What is condemned by Leavisism?

- popular fiction as a form of ‘compensation’ and ‘distraction’
- films which are ‘largely masturbatory’ and elicit pleasure thru. “the cheapest emotional appeals”
- the popular press is a “powerful and pervasive de-educator of the public mind”
- radio silences ‘critical thought’

Leavis on advertising

What is interesting about the Leavisite critique of advertising is that it is done for purely cultural reasons w/o any concern for capitalism itself

- he criticizes the cultural content of advertising, not their role in reproducing capitalism
- it results in “a debasement of emotional life, and the quality of living”
- it panders to ‘mob passions’ and appeals to uncultured types of low character

Storey views this as a form of self-confirming cultural snobbery

Here it is critical to remember that the very ‘minority keeping’ cultural position Leavis occupies is predicated on a capitalist hierarchy—i.e. he is part of the middle class

- culture, as defined by Leavis, not only separates him from the lower classes, it compensates for his lack of capital and aristocratic standing
- thus culture secures his position in the socio-economic hierarchy

Leavis vs. Frankfurt School

Remember Leavis on advertising when you read the critique of the ‘culture industry’ by the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer)

Both are concerned with key elements of commercial mass culture

I.E. the Leavisite critique of advertising is focused only on the symbolic; the Frankfurt School critique is on the material and symbolic

Also, keep in mind the Leavisite critique of industrialization

- it destroyed the ‘organic community’ and the ‘quality of craft’
- a deterioration in the experience of work
- thus people turn to culture for compensation and passive distraction
• they become addicted to ‘substitute living’

What is most problematic about Leavisism?
• laments the loss of a ‘golden age’ (of the ‘organic community’) when ‘cultural coherence’ was based on authoritarian and hierarchical principles
• this ‘golden age’ (Leavis typically cites the Elizabethan era) was still one of grinding poverty for the majority of citizens (90% were peasants)
• thus it is more of a literary myth than an historical reality
• the very notion of ‘minority keeping’ of culture is exclusive, elitist, and anti-democratic

The Legacy of Leavisism
• until the late 1950s, ‘Leavisism’ was the primary intellectual tradition for the study of popular culture
• thus it is a profound marker for the pre-Cultural Studies era
• strongly influenced the discipline of English in the 20th c.
• literary criticism was based rigorous evaluation and judgement
• but Leavis also demonstrates a holistic perspective—art is expressive of life and aesthetics and form are expressive of morality
• literature should reflect a strong moral interest in life (but whose morality?)

Morality vs. Ethics?
• morality is imposed, ethics is willfully taken up