

CINEMA, LITERATURE & SOCIETY

Elite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain

Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith

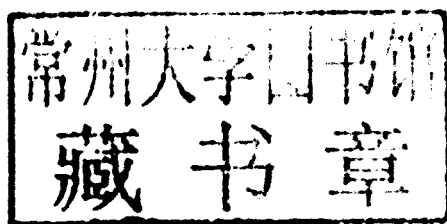
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PETER MILES AND MALCOLM SMITH



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Elite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain

Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith

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for Kathy and Elaine

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Introduction

DEFINING TERMS: CULTURE, IDEOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROCESS

'The past is a foreign country', wrote L.P. Hartley, 'they do things differently there'.(1) It is a comment which serves as a useful corrective to the view that we can understand and learn from the past simply by a process of assimilation of historical facts. It is no doubt comforting to believe that people in the past shared the assumptions and values that we hold, and just happened to get it all wrong. It undercuts the sense of loneliness at being simply part of one generation, discrete and self-contained, walking apparently unguided into the future. The notion that people have passed this way before, that they have shared the same or analogous problems, even if they did not find the right solutions, provides the framework of a popular memory which insists upon connections across time, connections and judgements which can guide action in the present for society as a whole. But to argue along such lines is to underestimate the depth of the process of historical change and thus to undervalue the 'foreignness' of the past. The past was not struggling hard to be like us. It was living in its own present tense, with its own short-term problems and its own solutions, and with its own sense both of the future and of the past.

A sense of the past being not altogether foreign but, rather, proximate and cautionary, informs the culture of every generation. The interwar period is a particularly significant case in point for post-war British generations. This period contributed greatly to contemporary consciousness, but our view of those years has begun to change considerably as a new generation has interposed itself between the experience of the 1930s and the experience of the 1980s. The generation which learned its politics in the 1950s and 1960s, which did not have to worry

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overmuch about unemployment, 'knew' that the 1930s were the 'locust years', and 'knew' too that government policy - be it Conservative or Labour dominated - was based on a rejection of those 'locust years'. The ideal of full employment was deeply embedded in the political culture of the post-war period, as a rejection of what the 1930s were deemed to have stood for. The major argument against the dismantling of the concept of full employment, indeed, has been that it would store up problems for the future in the shape of a generation that would grow up alienated, like the 'forgotten millions' of the interwar dole queues. Yet the revisionist historians of the 1970s and beyond would have us believe that the impact of the Great Depression has been greatly exaggerated, and that unemployment and social distress never really did produce the degree of social friction that was formerly assumed to have played such a dominant role in the interwar political structure.(2)

Media shorthand for the interwar years is switching from the stark monochrome of When the boat comes in and Days of hope to the yellow-filtered nostalgia of Brideshead revisited and Another country; once a symbol of despair and misery, the 1930s are becoming a decadent Golden Age. What is significant about this change in perspective is not whether it is 'right' or 'wrong' as a view of what really happened in interwar Britain; rather it is the fact of the change itself which is important. By challenging the former popular memory of the period, handed down to us by a variety of cultural devices ranging from academic history to journalistic shorthand, the revisionists have challenged the basis on which an opposition to renewed mass unemployment is built. By reworking the popular memory, in effect, they are actually altering perceptions of current events. This is not to say that history is simply a cynically manipulative process, rather to point out that every generation has to rewrite history in terms that contemporaries can understand and to which they can relate. The past is, in fact, simply dead and gone: the real experience of the past cannot be fully recreated; and yet it must still remain true that, as Marx put it, 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.(3) Assumptions about the lived experience of the past must form part of our lived culture in the here and now; history works for society as a whole as memory works for the individual. It is a major element in shaping

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the culture of any society, shaping, validating and explaining the present as a function of the past.

History has no past; it exists only as an element in the consciousness of the present. The process of rewriting history to suit the next generation is therefore to some extent inevitable. The key issues are not so much what happened in the past, but how events were perceived at the time and how they have been perceived since; how, in effect, events are mediated by their cultural setting. The documentary record of the twentieth century is immense, but not without its shortcomings. On the one hand, there is the massive written documentation, a function not simply of the vastly expanded role of the state and its consequent need to keep detailed records, but also of a new mass literate society. This material makes up the traditional bread and butter of the historian, sometimes supplemented by new sources like oral history. But, huge as they are, these sources still leave gaps in the record. In spite of mass literacy and oral history, documentation of working-class views of life is still necessarily very partial while, on the other hand, the official record cannot be anything like the full story; on the whole, the official record is more likely to give us only the elite view, and evidence of other views will be at best indirect and at worst simply incorrect.

The major problem, however, is one of absorption: the record is so massive and overbearing that it is very difficult to see the wood for the trees, and the tendency must be progressively to concentrate on increasingly specialized and narrow areas of the historical record in order to make sense of contemporary history. Even when a complete map is made of the inter-relationships between these islands of specialism, a vital ingredient will still be missing, namely the unspoken and unwritten assumptions, the realities behind the realities, the thought processes, the world view of that age and its perception of itself. The past will continue to be a foreign country if we fail to see the significance of placing what happened in the past in the context of the culture, the ideology of that age. It is not just that what happened in the past only took on significance for contemporaries within contemporary culture as a whole, but that culture may also have created what happened in the past, in the sense that it made this fact significant rather than that one. It is this process of backgrounding and foregrounding, of marginalising and of privileging, of structuring, that makes culture such an important

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element in dealing with the past, and it is in this area that the foreignness of the past is most conspicuous.

We are concerned in this book with how a society creates and projects an identity for itself in relation to its past and its future. The choice of concerns that informs this book, centring on the complicated issue of the relationship between culture and society, will be familiar to those with a knowledge of mass communications or cultural studies, for it is in these academic areas that critical techniques based on this approach have made their greatest impact. In literary studies, too, and in some areas of social history, the groundwork for such an investigation has at least been laid.⁽⁴⁾ Many literary critics and historians, however, will still find this kind of approach boorish and insensitive, if not irrelevant. Literary critics who have grown up in the practical criticism tradition would argue that a poem or a novel exists independently of the circumstances in which it was written, that it is perfectly possible to appreciate the poetry of, say, W.H. Auden, while understanding nothing of the politics of the interwar period. An equally dominant historical school, with a long and respectable record in the British empiricist tradition, would argue that literature and cinema have very little to do with the historical process. Novelists, poets and film-makers, in this view, are by definition extraordinary and atypical, and their work cannot therefore be taken as valid evidence of the views of society as a whole. To hold these positions, however, is to reinforce the view that art and ideas stand autonomously in relation to the society in which they are produced and in which they operate.

It is not so much that literature and cinema may be used as historical evidence as such, nor that historical evidence may be used to elucidate a novel or film, but that text and history must be seen in tandem. There are three points to make here:

(1) It must be true that literature is written to be read and films to be seen, that all texts - be they written, pictorial or 'lived' - imply a relationship between producer and audience, which takes us immediately into the realm of the social, and which is historically specific. Even an unpublished manuscript or an unreleased film implies something directly about the nature of the expected reaction of the audience which can therefore legitimately be taken as part and parcel of the significance of the text. Clearly, W.H. Auden or

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Gracie Fields will be re-interpreted by successive generations or by different cultures precisely because the context in which they are encountered changes.

(2) The relationship between producer of the text and its audience also implies an act of articulation, a connection not only between individuals but between ideas as well. A society cannot function simply as a collection of autonomous individuals; it is articulated through its cultural forms in recurrent patterns of themes and ideas. Literature and cinema are just two of the many ways in which an individual's experience of the world is organized and mediated in ways which become common to the cultural group to which the individual is thus induced to cohere.

(3) But, although literature and cinema may be only two of the forms which articulate an advanced society, they are undoubtedly two of the most significant, because of their broad frame of reference and because of their representative status. Traditionally, the question of literacy and of finding the time to read made literature above all the domain of the leisured and the well-off, and while these problems have declined in the twentieth century to the extent that we may legitimately talk about reading as a mass pursuit, nevertheless the concerns of the traditional producers and audience for literature continued to exercise a dominating influence over the mass-reading public. The very acts of writing or reading a novel or a poem, and of subconsciously relating that novel or poem to an established literary canon of what is good and what is bad, in itself implies a certain social positioning. Cinema had no such long tradition and, as part of a new mass culture, was considered to be at daggers-drawn with the literary tradition by dominant cultural theorists. Cinema and literature in the interwar years signify much more than what people did in their spare time; they signify in fact a cultural battleground, a struggle between competing modes of articulation which in turn embodied separate values and assumptions. It was through the perspectives provided by this battle, which was symptomatic of a much wider cultural struggle, that contemporaries acquired consciousness of events that were going on around them, and positioned themselves in relation to those events.

'Culture' is an extraordinarily complicated term, not surprisingly in that some of the definitions of the term take it to the heart of the social process

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itself, something which can hardly be described either briefly or succinctly. For our purposes, there are two broad ranges of definition which concern us centrally. On the one hand, the tradition inherited from Matthew Arnold and Samuel Taylor Coleridge defines culture as 'harmonised perfection'. Culture is man at his most aspiring in this tradition; whether in Art or Learning or Philosophy, it was the nearest he could come to immortality on earth.(5) This tradition emphasizes the extra-ordinary as opposed to the commonplace, the spiritual as opposed to the material, and the minority as opposed to the majority. In the period with which we are concerned, this theory of culture remained dominant, and the challenge to the conception of Art which it embodied represented by the development of mass culture was a central fear.

Conversely, 'culturalists' such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson in the 1950s and 1960s shared the view that culture was more than simply the art and the learning of a society, that these could be included as just one part of an extended conception of culture which also included the institutions and rituals of leisure and everyday life in the fullest sense. More importantly, the assumptions that underpinned all these manifestations needed to be teased out. In this view, culture could be defined as those shared and binding assumptions, values and aspirations in a group or a society as they manifest themselves in institutions, habits, rituals, artefacts and art forms. (5) To move away from the more traditional definition of culture, as it had been formulated in Humanities and Arts faculties in Academe at least, was an important venture. 'Culture = Art' was a social definition which directly rendered cheap and tasteless all those things which the elite which made and maintained that definition did not consider to be part of 'the higher things in life'. The culturalists' extended definition of culture concentrated on culture as a social function; culture was in fact society at work being a society, a collection of individuals inter-relating, articulating, reinforcing or challenging power relationships between groups. The definition 'Culture = Art' itself was, in this formulation, merely a cultural manifestation of the fact that, for long periods of British history, an elite had managed to arbitrate taste and to make that arbitration stick for society as a whole. 'Art' was a mystification which had made ideology transcendent, and in establishing this very idea of 'Art', the elite had

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managed to set itself up as supreme arbiter of the 'structure of feeling'.

'Structure of feeling' was the phrase that Raymond Williams used to describe the shared sets of ways of thinking and feeling which are displayed in a patterned regularity either in a social class or even in a society as a whole.(7) The emphasis of the phrase, however, went beyond a mere description of the form of relationships within a society which may be deduced from its typical cultural forms, for it also hinted at the way in which this process limited the possibility of change within that society. These patterned ways of thinking and of feeling both formed, and were formed by, the whole way of life of the particular class or society in a specific period. At this stage in the development of his ideas, Williams brought culturalism close to structuralism. Culturalism and structuralism are different in many ways but for our immediate purposes, defining culture, they may be taken as similarly opposed to the elitist definition. Structuralism has taken many forms and variations but what underpins the structuralist tradition, as it relates to the role of culture in society, is the view that all the surface phenomena of society - the texts, be they myths, rituals or habits of everyday life - can be analysed and shown to be connected by the similarity of the structures of the rules and codes which govern them in their usage.(8) In the same way that, for example, language is governed by grammatical rules and codes, a structure shared and understood by all in that language group, a structure which must be used if a speaker or writer is to be understood, so all the surface phenomena of society share a repeated structure which guarantees coherence. It follows, however, that fracture of these structures will just as surely guarantee incoherence unless some new structure takes its place and is implicitly accepted and understood. The structures thus both allow communication and also fix identity within a group, by virtue of the fact that they are both familiar and shared. But they also implicitly limit both new communication and new identities by their very inflexibility. Not only are the structures formed by the society, then, but the structures in turn form the society.

If the simplified versions of culturalism and structuralism here presented were the end of the story society would never change, because the inherent conservatism of culture would not give it the wherewithal to do so. But to these analyses of

culture must be added the dynamic of Marxism. The extended definition of culture presented by the culturalists, and the socially cohesive function it performed that culturalists and some structuralists identified, brings us within reach of the Marxist concept of ideology. It is basic to Marxism that all the surface phenomena of society are ultimately products of the way in which that society is organized economically. The social formation is composed of classes organized by the relations of production, how they stand in relation one to another as sellers of labour or as owners of the means of production. Class is therefore primarily an economic category but, in that class designates all the relationships in which individuals stand one to another within a class and between classes, it is also a cultural category, describing shared assumptions and values. The ultimate development of the proletarian state depends on the development of a discrete proletarian consciousness. But the connection in Marxism between the economic 'base' of a society and the 'superstructure' of ideas, culture or ideology is a complex and contentious one. The use of the engineering analogy, 'base' and 'superstructure', implies that the latter is directly dependent on the former, and the 'economist' or 'vulgar' Marxist tradition has it that ideas are simply extensions into the realm of ideology of the real relationships within the social formation. In this view, ideology may be seen as something quite ephemeral, in the last resort, in that it will simply change when the economic organization changes with revolution at the grassroots level.

It has been argued, however, that ideology necessarily plays a much more significant role. If revolution depends on the development of working-class culture and solidarity, a reaction to alienation, then a successful challenge to bourgeois ideology becomes virtually a sine qua non of revolution. In this argument, the analogy of 'base' and 'superstructure' is slightly misleading, in that the two are in fact inter-dependent. The Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, was the most prominent of those who, though staying within the classic Marxist concept of class struggle, emphasized the importance of ideology as a legitimizing strategy for the bourgeoisie, adapting to and winning the active consent of subordinate groups by a process of negotiation. Gramsci in effect placed as much emphasis on the role of the working-class intellectual in challenging bourgeois ideology as on