

ELITISM VERSUS POPULISM:
THE CONTINUING DEBATE¹

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"Elitism vs. populism" identifies dichotomous stances that are increasingly causing acrimony among those concerned with defining cultural and educational relations. Not surprisingly, the controversy is one of the sundry things touched on by the Rockefeller Commission Report The Humanities in American Life.² The report characterizes the opposing positions as follows:

Some people think it elitist to point out that our culture arose in what is generally described as the Western tradition; populist to affirm that Native and Latin American, African, and Asian cultures also form our heritage. Elitism is associated with high culture, which often refers to a finite list of works, authors, and standards; populism with popular culture, which has an inexhaustible list. The rich are thought elitist because they can afford educational and cultural activities the poor cannot. Those who emphasize our common culture are sometimes called elitist, whereas those who accentuate cultural pluralism are called populist. Maintaining traditional forms of cultural expression is often viewed as elitist, whereas admiring novelty and spontaneity is apparently a populist trait. It is allegedly elitist to advocate the preservation of cultural resources, populist to urge broad access to them.

At one level, the report appears to express weariness with the entire issue, claiming that the dispute prevents us from coming to terms with genuine problems in our culture and that some of the divisions are more artificial than real--e.g., does not our heritage contain non-Western as well as Western elements, examples from popular as well as from high culture? In almost the same breath, however, the report warns that populist and elitist orientations "express tension between cultural views that are sometimes irreconcilable [emphasis added] and often must compete for limited resources...." But having acknowledged tensions and declared viewpoints

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irreconcilable, the report cannot have it both ways simply by formulating a new set of principles.³ These remarks will therefore follow another strategy, one that leaves open the possibility of narrowing the gulf separating the contending parties. To be sure, the chances for achieving this goal are slim so long as debate degenerates into ideological haggling and name-calling. Since, moreover, during such exchanges, elitism suffers by being used as a term of derogation while populism retains an aura of democratic virtue, an effort to rehabilitate elitism is in order before a reconciliation is attempted.

For present purposes, a useful outlook on elitism is provided by Stuart Hampshire,⁴ who writes that elitists accept four propositions. An elitist, that is, believes

first, that there is a tradition of great, and of very good and interesting work, in each of the liberal arts, and that there is good reason to expect ...that these traditions are being prolonged into the future. Second, that at any time a minority of otherwise intelligent persons, including artists, are deeply interested in one, or more, of the arts, and have devoted a considerable part of their lives to their involvement with them, and to thinking about them. The judgments of artistic merit by such persons, who are not difficult to recognize, are the best guides to artistic merit that we have....Third, that enjoyment of one or more of the arts is one of the most intense and most consoling enjoyments open to men, and also the principal source of continued history and of pride and of sense of unity for any city, nation, or empire. Fourth, very often, though not always, a good artist does not create his own public within his lifetime and needs support, if he is to work as well as he might....

It follows from these beliefs that elitists set some store by the ideas of tradition, continuity, judgment, and competence. Nothing in Hampshire's four propositions, however, implies that elitists are necessarily cultural snobs, insensitive to minority or ethnic interests, antidemocratic, or contemptuous of popular culture. Neither do these propositions demand that access to the heritage be restricted, nor intimate that the masses are incapable of acquiring a taste for high culture. In short, much of what elitism is often criticized for is not part of Hampshire's description of it. Still, it is difficult to imagine that Hampshire's position would change the minds of avowed populists who bridle at the suggestion that judgments of artistic merit are necessary and, what is more, that they are to be made by a minority (artists, critics) specially qualified for the task; this, they would charge, constitutes an unwarranted imposition of elite tastes.

Whether one finds judgments by an aesthetic elite objectionable or

not, they are the manner in which artistic merit has usually been determined, a point to which Lord Kenneth Clark bears witness when he writes, "would deduce from history this first law...of the relationship of art and society: that visual art, whether it takes the form of image or ornament, is made by a minority [i.e., an elite] for a minority but accepted by the majority unquestionably, eagerly, and with a sense of participation."⁵ One might suppose populists unpersuaded, however, for they would interpret the historical record only as confirming their conviction that the masses have long been deluded and that it was high time they were undeceived and ready to defend their own preferences in art.

And the right of the masses to their own culture is, of course, a central tenet of what is called the new egalitarianism (a term here taken to be nearly synonymous with "populism"). Herbert Gans,⁶ for example, would disagree with Hampshire's claim that only experts are "the best guides to artistic merit that we have." Since the United States is a democracy, culture should reflect the people's tastes. Knowing what they like, the people ought to be given the art they want. In other words, since there can be no disputing the value of people's preferences, considerations of quality and merit are to be abandoned in favor of a de gustibus principle. What are the likely consequences?

Some are described by Barbara Tuchman⁷ in an indignant article. "The new egalitarians," she writes, "would like to make the whole question of quality vanish by adopting a flat philosophy of the equality of everything. No fact or event is of greater or less value than any other; no person or thing is superior or inferior to any other. Any reference to quality is instantly castigated as elitism, which seems to inspire in users of the word the sentiments of Jacobins denouncing aristos to the guillotine." Tuchman's objections are in part aesthetic: a "flat philosophy of the equality of everything" presents an uninspiring prospect; nothing stands out to attract attention or admiration.

But the new egalitarianism can also be faulted on pragmatic grounds. Hampshire, it will be recalled, said that even good artists may need support. In modern times, this has increasingly been understood to mean government support, which in turn has resulted in government policies for financial aid to art and artists. Yet how are such policies possible under the populist proscription of judgments of artistic merit? In the absence of standards of promoting the best, all that can be done is to distribute cultural resources equitably and to satisfy as many interests as possible. Once it is discovered, however, how wide-ranging cultural interests are and how new ones can be thought up overnight (especially when it is believed there is money available to satisfy them), a de gustibus principle becomes untenable because unmanageable.

The preceding remarks were intended to disencumber the term "elitism" of some of its undeserved negative connotations. But it should also be asked whether the new egalitarianism deserves its reputation for serving the best interests of the people. Sir Roy Shaw⁸ has broached just this issue as part of his examination of the popular (and populist) view that because Western culture--the culture of Titian, Shakespeare, and Bach--is middle-class or bourgeois in its origins, it can have no relevance for

today's working classes and that those who insist it can are perpetrating one of the major deceits of the twentieth century. This position, Shaw contends, is rife with hypocrisy:

Some of those who invoke the title of democrats seem to believe that the most are incapable of appreciating the best and so you must give them something less than the best specially prepared for their weaker constitutions. However, they grossly misuse the word "elitist" by using it to smear anyone who champions traditional arts or high standards in them. These so-called democrats are elitists in the proper sense of the term. They agree with cultural snobs that the high arts should be preserved for the elite, a privileged few and the rest of the population should have something else.

He concludes that attacks on elitism are often "politically inspired philistinism at best, and advocacy of a form of cultural apartheid at worst...."

The great hypocrisy of the new egalitarianism, then, consists in this: cultural apartheid--i.e., giving the masses less than the best--violates a sacred democratic principle, the individual's right to self-improvement. Many who came from backgrounds that did not include an appreciation of the fine arts but who were fortunate to have been encouraged to educate themselves to "one of the most intense and most consoling enjoyments open to men" (Hampshire) should have no difficulty in understanding the severity of Shaw's charge against populism.

If this particular indictment is seen to even the score somewhat in favor of elitism, it still has done nothing to effect a rapprochement between elitism and populism. Yet conciliation is not out of the question. One needs only to remember that the present discussion has equated populism with the "new" egalitarianism, which suggests that "egalitarianism" also has a traditional meaning. In an illuminating essay, the late Charles Frankel⁹ wrote of the old egalitarianism that its virtues consisted of "chivalry, loyalty, generosity, at least a rough courtesy, self-reliance and self-discipline, an eagerness to improve oneself but also a sense of amusement at oneself, respect for an honest day's work and getting one's hands dirty, a capacity to tell the genuine article from the fake, and a certain earthiness and imperiousness to gentility." Such virtues, says Frankel, "were drawn from the traditions and experiences of all classes; and while it [traditional egalitarianism] espoused equality, it did so in recognition of the value of other things which create differences, partisan feelings, and stratification in society," not least of which was "the need in every society to give public recognition to things noble and excellent lest everything in the society's culture be regarded as disposable." Such considerations, he says, do not subvert the principle of equality, they merely set limits on it and keep it sane. Judgment, excellence, limitation, sanity--these attributes certainly make the old egalitarianism compatible with the kind of elitism described by Hampshire and defended by Shaw, an elitist egalitarianism or egalitarian elitism that aims at the best for

the most and pays the majority of the people the compliment of believing them capable of appreciating the best. Here, then, is a reconciliation between elitism and populism that could appeal to the best sentiments of educators.

Realistically speaking, however, what hopes are there for resolving the "elitism vs. populism" dilemma in art and aesthetic education in the direction of the old egalitarianism? One might expect that periods of consolidation such as the one we are said to be passing through at the moment would be more receptive to ideas of the kind just expressed-- ideas that would have been laughed out of most forums in the 1960's. But optimism would be premature, for the opposition remains formidable. Energetically promoted by influential sponsors, the panaceas of the populist/pluralist recent past continue to be urged upon the public.¹⁰ And new voices are beginning to be heard which, should their chorus swell, would drown out the concerns discussed here. These voices belong to the new social critics (or critical theorists) whose writings emphasize the links between art and its social, economic, and political conditions and who tend to believe that the function of art and aesthetic education is to promote radical social change, meaning that the study and appreciation of art for its unique qualities and satisfactions get subordinated to ideological interests. This is not to say that all critical theorists and their followers are hardened ideologues; some serious work is obviously being done. But there is also some adolescent dabbling and thrill-seeking, as evidenced by unexpected references to Marx and condemnations of capitalism from previously timid and conservative writers.

The path of sane compromise is thus strewn with sizable obstacles, and those bold enough to set foot on it may wish to draw inspiration from the famous words of Matthew Arnold:¹¹ "The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to another, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light."

Footnotes

¹Versions of these remarks have appeared in Cultural and Educational Affairs 2 (January 1981), the newsletter of the Council for Policy Studies and Art Education, and Art Education (July 1981).

²Report of the Commission on the Humanities, The Humanities in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

³Several critics--among them Hilton Kramer, Samuel Lipman, and Ronald Berman--have pointed out the report's characteristic squeamishness about taking a firm stand, a failure of nerve also evident in its reluctance to define the humanities with any decisiveness.

⁴Stuart Hampshire, "Private Pleasures and the Public Purse," Times Literary Supplement, 13 May 1977; a review of Janet Minihan, The Nationalization of Culture (New York: New York University Press, 1977).

⁵Lord Kenneth Clark, "Art and Society," in The Sociology of Art and Literature: A Reader, ed. M.C. Albrecht et al. (New York: Praegers, 1980).

⁶Herbert J. Gans, Popular Culture and High Culture (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

⁷Barbara Tuchman, "The Decline of Quality," New York Times Magazine, 2 November, 1980.

⁸Sir Roy Shaw, "Education and the Arts," in The Arts and Personal Growth, ed. M. Ross (New York: Pergamon, 1980); cf. "Elitism versus Populism in the Arts," City Arts Series, ed. J. Pick (Eastbourne, E. Sussex: John Oxford, n.d.).

⁹Charles Frankel, "The New Egalitarianism and the Old," Commentary 56 (3), September 1973.

¹⁰I am thinking primarily of The Arts, Education, Americans Panel, David Rockefeller, JR., Chairman, Coming to Our Senses (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), which, though distinctly out of joint with the times, is still systematically promoted by the interests that brought it into being.

¹¹Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, quoted (which is the point here) in Lawrence A. Cremin, The Genius of American Education (New York: Random House [Vintage], 1966).