

Is Our Culture in Decline?

by Tyler Cowen

The “culture wars” and recent debates over the National Endowment for the Arts reflect deep disagreements about the health of contemporary culture. The current wave of cultural pessimism, expressed in various forms by both the left and the right, suggests that our culture is experiencing corruption and decline. The left concludes that government support for the arts is needed, while the right often favors government support for traditional culture. But a review of the evidence offers strong reasons for cultural optimism and confidence that a modern commercial society will stimulate artistic creativity and diversity.

The music of Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven is more accessible to today’s listeners than it was to the listeners of the 18th or 19th centuries. Modern concertgoers can sample an unparalleled range of musical periods, instruments, and styles. Even relatively obscure composers have their material stocked in music superstores, which are common in both American cities and suburbs. A small Tower Records outlet will offer at least 10,000 classical music titles, and the largest Tower branch in Manhattan has over 22,000 titles. The Naxos label markets excellent performances of the classics for as little as \$5.99 for 70 minutes of music. Music of all kinds—both old and new—is available in great profusion.

Movies, including many silents, can be rented on videocassette very cheaply, or on laser disks for those who want higher quality picture and sound. Modern video stores, run on a private for-profit basis, are libraries full of classic works.

New and definitive editions of many literary works, or better translations, are pub-



Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich leaves the Cato Institute after keynoting a Cato Policy Forum, “Should We Lower the Capital Gains Tax?” on July 16. Other speakers included Congressional Budget Office director June O’Neill and Joseph Minarik of the Office of Management and Budget.

lished regularly. The Bible and Plato, two favorites of many cultural pessimists, continue to be reissued in new editions, while the classics are available in cheap paperback. Television, video stores, and bookstores give modern fans better access to the works of Shakespeare than the Elizabethans had.

Literacy and reading are two areas where the modern world comes in for especially harsh criticism, but even here the trends are largely positive. Between 1970 and 1990 the measured world literacy rate for adults rose from 61.5 to 73.5 percent. The industrialized countries increased their literacy rate from 93.8 to 96.7 percent over that period. American illiteracy was far worse 100 years ago or even in the middle of this century. Consistent with those trends, the average American buys more than twice as many books today as in 1947. The number of bookstores has jumped nearly 10-fold, and their

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average size has increased dramatically. Book superstores are now commonplace.

Contrary to many claims, television and the Internet are not killing the book. The printed word offers unique modes of storytelling and analysis that other media have not replaced. Television and the Internet often complement reading and stimulate reader interest in books, instead of replacing them. Today a wide variety of talented writers is actively publishing and transcending traditional genre boundaries.

Art museums and art museum attendance are booming. Blockbuster art exhibitions travel the world and bring great paintings to increasing numbers of viewers. Earlier in this century, most Americans outside New York had few means of viewing high-quality art. Art publishing is doing well; even minor painters now have published catalogs full of high-quality color plates.

Live performance of the arts has flourished as well. From 1965 to 1990 America grew from having 58 symphony orchestras to having nearly 300, from 27 opera companies to more than 150, and from 22 non-profit regional theaters to 500. Contemporary Western culture, especially in the United States, is flourishing.

Markets Spur Innovation

The market economy continually spurs new artistic innovations. Arguing the worth of particular contemporary creations is more difficult, given the tendencies for disagreement about the culture of the present day (Mozart was controversial in his time, but few dispute his merits today). Modern creators, however, have offered many deep and lasting creations, which are universal in their scope and significant in their import. Those creations delight and enrich large numbers of intelligent fans and influence subsequent artists. We can fully expect many modern and contemporary works to stand the test of time, just as earlier works have, even if we cannot identify exactly which ones.

The most impressive creations of contemporary culture include cinema, rock ‘n’ roll, Pop Art and Minimalism, modern dance, jazz, genre fiction, and the modern biography, to give but a few examples. The sky-

lines of Manhattan, Chicago, and Hong Kong were financed and designed almost entirely by the private sector. The exact contents of a list of important contemporary creations will vary with taste, but our culture provides a wide variety of styles, aesthetics, and moods. An individual need not have a very particular set of preferences to love contemporary creations. The 20th century is not only the age of intellectual, atonal music, it is also the age of Buddy Holly and Steven Spielberg, both life-affirming and celebratory creators.

New musical genres continue to blossom. Our century has seen the development of blues, soul, rhythm and blues, jazz, ragtime, swing, rock, country and western, rap, and bluegrass, as well as more recent forms of electronic music. Some of the most significant modern artists are still around, playing and recording for our enjoyment. We can hear Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones in concert, still in good form, even if not at their youthful peak.

Film is the art of the 20th century, par excellence. It combines drama, music, and high technology to entertain and inspire large audiences. Moviegoers all around the world want to see American films. Some movie buffs complain that “they don’t make ‘em like they used to,” but the best American films of the last 20 years—my list would include *The Thin Blue Line*, *Blue Velvet*, *Basic Instinct*, *Schindler’s List*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *L.A. Confidential*, *Titanic*, and *The Truman Show*—believe that opinion. (The viewer who disagrees with my list will have no trouble coming up with his or her own favorites.) Art movies and independent films show continued vitality.

New or newly deregulated technologies are likely to induce further cultural innovations. Cable television is expanding rapidly and breaking down the hegemony of the networks. Eventually viewers will be able to choose from hundreds of channels. Cable already offers the world’s greatest movies; the modern drama of sporting events; large doses of popular music; and high arts such as ballet, theater, and classical music. Viewers can take a class in Shakespeare without leaving their living rooms or use foreign-language channels to learn languages, thereby enlarging their access to the world’s cultural treasures.

Cable is not the only new artistic medium. We can only guess at the development of the Web, Virtual Reality technologies, and Hypertext, both as means for delivering older creations and as new media for future works.

Finally, quasi-artistic activities are blossoming like never before. Fashion, decoration, cuisine, sports, product design, computer graphics, and commercial art—to give just a few examples—continue to flourish and grow. As recently as 20 years ago, Thai food was not available in most American cities; now Thai restaurants dot the suburbs as well. Although those fields are not art in the narrow sense, they bring beauty and drama into our lives. A beautifully decorated home or a luxurious shopping mall delights us and appeals to our aesthetic sense. The question “What is art?” has become less meaningful with the growing diversity of capitalist production.

Markets and Contemporary Culture

It is no accident that contemporary culture has flourished in our wealthy society. Most of the great cultural movements of the past—those of Athens, Rome, early China, the Islamic empire, the Italian Renaissance, and 19th-century Europe—like 20th-century modernism, occurred in societies that were relatively wealthy and commercial for their time. Today, most important works in film, music, literature, painting, and sculpture are sold as commodities. Contemporary art is capitalist art, and the history of art has been a history of the struggle to establish markets.

Creators have the best chance of living from their work in a wealthy, capitalist society. Both artists and audiences have more leisure time and are freed from tiresome physical labor. The larger size of the market supports a greater diversity of products, in both artistic and nonartistic realms. Not surprisingly, the number of individuals who work as full-time creators has risen steadily for centuries.

Capitalism increases the independence of the artist from the immediate demands of the culture-consuming public. The wealth of a market economy funds alternative sources of financial support, such as private foundations, universities, bequests from wealthy relatives, and day jobs. Those sources of fund-

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ing allow artists to invest in skills, undertake long-term projects, and control their fate. Ironically, artists who care about art, rather than money, have the best chance in a system based on money and commercial incentives.

Wealthy societies give artists the greatest chance of financial independence and thus creative independence. Beethoven wrote, “I am not out to be a musical usurer as you think, who writes only to become rich, by no means! Yet, I love an independent life, and this I cannot have without a small income.” In other cases, income also allows artists to purchase the materials necessary for artistic creation, such as paint and canvas or, in the case of Damien Hirst, sharks and formaldehyde.

We should not disapprove of artists who produce for money. The painters and sculptors of the Italian Renaissance were businessmen who produced for profit and negotiated hard bargains. Mozart wrote, “Believe me, my sole purpose is to make as much money as possible; for after good health it is the best thing to have.” Capitalism allows artists to commercialize their product and sell to large numbers, if they so wish, thereby mobilizing greed in the service of creativity.

Finally, many arts depend on the technological innovations delivered by capitalism. We take paper for granted, but in earlier eras its expense significantly limited the output of both writers and artists. Photography, cinema, and electronic reproduction of music were not possible until relatively recent times. Advances in medicine allow artists to live to older ages, and birth control allows many female creators to manage their careers more effectively.

The economist William J. Baumol has argued that the performing arts suffer from a “cost disease” because they do not enjoy the benefits of technical progress as much as other industries do. Baumol notes that it took 40 minutes of work to produce a Mozart string quartet in 1780, and it still would take 40 minutes today. Baumol, however, underestimates the progressive nature of artistic production. Electronic reproduction, in the forms of recording and radio, has improved the productivity of musicians by allowing them to reach larger audiences. Today’s string quartet travels by airplane rather than by stagecoach or train. A string quartet in 1780

could play Mozart, but today’s string quartet can play Beethoven, Bartok, and the Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby” as well.

Cultural Pessimism and Its Appeal

Many cultural commentators take explicitly pessimistic views. Neo-Marxists and critics of mass culture, such as the Frankfurt School, believe that markets degrade culture. In their view, the commodification of culture lowers artistic quality and corrupts artists. They identify market culture with the production of low-quality television programs for the masses. The influence of that view, of course, has extended well beyond the radical left. Many neoliberal writers share the concerns of the Frankfurt School, even though their politics are far more moderate. Neil Postman argues that modern technology and media are destroying literacy. Herbert Schiller titled his book *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*.

The political correctness movement identifies capitalistic culture with the suppression of minorities and women. Some multiculturalists argue that market exchange leads to a globalized, homogenized culture of the least common denominator. Marshall McLuhan wrote of the “global village,” in which we all consume the same products. In response to those fears, cultural protectionism is practiced around the world, especially in countries such as France and Canada that fear American influence. No American representative was invited to the recent Ottawa conference on cultural protectionism, on the ostensible grounds that America has no cabinet-level culture minister—which is one reason why American culture has proven so formidable.

On the right, many neoconservatives believe that our culture is in a sorry state, as a reflection of more general trends of permissiveness, crime, and loss of respect for tradition. Allan Bloom, Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, and Robert Bork have all written critiques of culture under capitalism. They argue that capitalistic culture gives insufficient support to traditional values.

Yet Western culture has been on an upswing since at least the year 1000. Both innovation and preservation of the past have blossomed. Why then has cultural pessimism had so much influence?

Cognitive biases induce observers to grant cultural pessimism more plausibility than it deserves. The pessimists focus on the decline of what they already appreciate, and neglect the rise of what is yet to come. It is easy to perceive the loss of what we know and harder to discern new developments and surprises. Even if long-term trends are positive, culture may appear to be deteriorating.

Observers often judge present culture against the very best of past culture, causing the present to appear lacking in contrast. But comparing the best of the past against the entirety of the present is unfair. No matter how vital contemporary culture may be, our favorite novels, movies, and recordings were not all produced just yesterday. Anyone’s favorite epochs, including those of the cultural optimist, will lie at some point in the past. As a result, each field will appear to have declined, given that some superior eras lie behind us in each case. Yet we should not conclude that creativity is drying up or slowing down. Rather, the past contains more accumulated achievement than does any single moment in time, such as the present. Furthermore, cultural pessimism will appear increasingly persuasive, precisely because the world continues to produce creative works. With every passing year, the entire past contains an increasing amount of culture, relative to the present.

We also consume contemporary culture less efficiently than we consume the culture of the past. Eighteenth-century music critics did not commonly understand that Haydn and Mozart were categorically superior to Gluck, Cherubini, Cimarosa, and Gretry. Years of debate and listening were needed for the truth to become obvious. Similarly, we cannot yet identify the truly worthy and seminal performers in modern popular music or contemporary art. It takes decades, and sometimes even centuries, to separate the cultural wheat from the chaff.

Most great creators, even those who now strike us as conservative, faced considerable opposition in their day. The French Impressionists were rejected by the artistic mainstream of their day and considered ridiculously unstructured. Mozart’s music was considered incredibly dissonant by many of his contemporaries. One critic charged Anton

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Bruckner with being “the greatest living musical peril, a tonal Antichrist . . . [who] composes nothing but high treason, revolution and murder . . . poisoned with the sulphur of Hell.”

Older audiences often cannot appreciate new and innovative cultural products. Many individuals devote their maximum attention to culture in their youth. Between the ages of 15 and 25, for instance, the mind is receptive to new influences, individuals are searching for their identity, and, more often than not, they are rebelling against their elders. For many individuals, those years are a formative period for cultural taste. Over time, however, marriage, children, and jobs crowd out the opportunity to discover new products. Therefore, in the eyes of many individuals, culture appears to be drying up and declining, which creates yet further support for pessimism.

Some individuals hold pessimistic attitudes to support their elitism. Elitists need to feel that they belong to a privileged minority. Contemporary culture, however, is massive in size, diverse in scope, and widely disseminated. Elitists have a hard time sustaining their self-images if they admit that our culture is wonderful and vibrant. Celebrating the dynamism of modern creations ascribes aesthetic virtues and insights to a very large class of artistic producers and consumers—contra elitism.

The diversity of modern culture implies that much trash will be produced, providing fodder for pessimism and elitism. We should keep these low-quality outputs in perspective and view them as a luxury that only diverse and wealthy societies can afford.

Some kinds of cultural pessimism spring from lack of imagination. Cultural pessimism and “resource pessimism” share common roots in this regard. Resource pessimism is

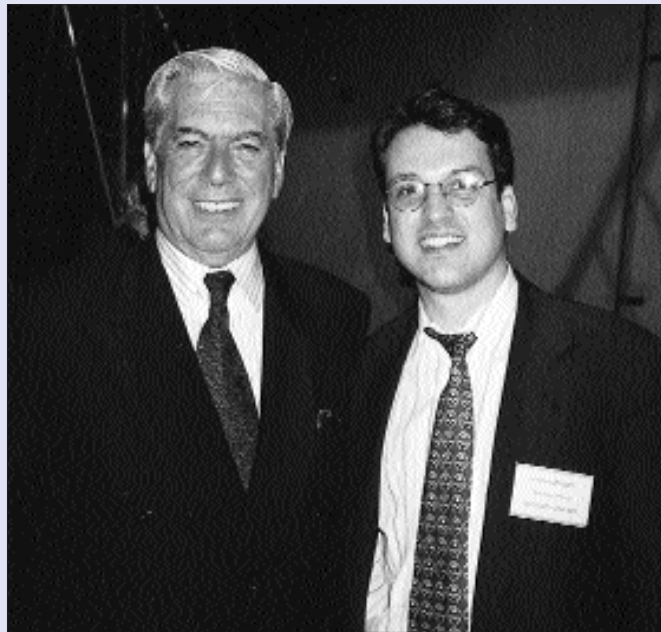
the view, effectively criticized by Julian Simon, that the world will run out of resources in the near future. Resource pessimists focus on one kind of resource, such as oil, and see only so many years’ supply remaining. They fail to see that the world could procure energy by different means in the future. Many cultural pessimists hold analogous attitudes. The West has developed certain great art forms, such as epic poetry, classical drama, and the symphony. Those forms have been “exhausted,” at least in terms of the taste of the pessimist, implying cultural decline. Yet

ence. Books became a target after the onset of publishing. Eighteenth-century pessimists accused novels of preventing readers from thinking, preaching disobedience to parents (note the contradictory charges), undermining women’s sense of subservience, breaking down class distinctions, and making readers sick. Libraries, especially privately run circulating libraries, were another target. Edward Mangin remarked in 1808, “There is scarcely a street of the metropolis, or a village in the country, in which a circulating library may not be found: nor is there a corner of the empire, where the English language is understood, that has not suffered from the effects of this institution.”

In the 18th and 19th centuries the targets included epistolary romances, newspapers, opera, the music hall, photography, and instrumental virtuosi, such as Liszt and Paganini. The 20th century brought the scapegoats of radio, movies, modern art, professional sports, the automobile, television, rhythm and blues, rock ‘n’ roll, comic books, MTV music videos, and rap music. Each new medium or genre has been accused of corrupting youth and promoting excess sensuality, political subversion, and moral relativism.

My version of cultural optimism offers a contrasting perspective. Capitalist art consists fundamentally of bringing the consumer and producer together. Therein lies its exhilarating, challenging, and poetic nature. Marketplace art is about the

meeting of minds and hearts. We should not deplore our culture, as do the pessimists. Rather, we should recognize its fundamentally capitalist nature, which implies creativity, entertainment, innovation, and above all diversity. ■



Novelist Mario Vargas Llosa and Cato’s Ian Vásquez were among the speakers at a conference celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Fundación Libertad in Rosario, Argentina, on June 4–5.

we should not look for cultural innovation to recur in the same areas over time; if anything, we should expect the exact opposite. There is no 20th-century Homer or Aeschylus, but we do have Alfred Hitchcock, Duke Ellington, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Cultural pessimism has been around as long as culture. Pessimistic attacks have been leveled for centuries, although the target has changed frequently. Many moralists and philosophers, including Plato, criticized theater and poetry for their corrupting influ-

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