

ASPHYXIATING CULTURE

The indoctrination process has now reached the point that it is rare to meet anyone who admits to having little esteem for a tragedy by Racine or a painting by Raphaël. This is true both among intellectuals as well as among others. Surprisingly, it is more among the others, those who have never read a line of Racine nor seen a painting by Raphaël, that the most militant defenders of these mythical values are to be found. Intellectuals would in some cases consider questioning these values, but they do not dare, fearing that their authority can no longer be maintained once the prestige of these myths has fallen. They deceive themselves, and in order to close their eyes to the truth, kid themselves into believing they are touched by such outdated classical works, yet they are works with which they have little dealings. As a result of all their efforts, in the end they manage as best they can to be moved—or to convince themselves that they are.

In matters of furnishings, recourse to antique styles takes the place of good taste. The provincial bourgeois pride themselves in their Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI

armchairs. They learn to distinguish one from the other, becoming distressed when the silk upholstery is not from the right period; they are convinced that this proves them to be artists. They are able to recognize mullion windows, and the late gothic and early Renaissance styles. They are convinced that this fashionable knowledge legitimizes the preservation of their caste. They work at persuading the lower classes of this, at convincing some of them of the necessity to safeguard art, that is to say armchairs, that is to say the bourgeois who know with which silk it is proper to upholster these armchairs.

The first ministry of information was instituted in England during the war, at a time when it seemed necessary to spread false information. The available supply of genuine information has suffered as a result. The first ministry of culture was instituted in France a few years ago, and it will have and already has had the same effect, the desired effect: that of replacing free culture with a falsified substitute, which acts like an antibiotic, occupying the totality of space without leaving the slightest patch where anything else might prosper.

The word "culture" is used in two different senses, sometimes meaning the knowledge of works of the past (in addition, let's not forget that this notion of "works of the past" is entirely illusory: what has been preserved represents only a very specious, limited selection based on trends that won acceptance in the minds of scholars) and sometimes more generally the activity of the mind and the creation of art. This ambiguity is used to persuade the public that the knowl-

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edge of works of the past (at least of those works which the scholars retained) and creative activity of the mind are one and the same thing.

Intellectuals are recruited from the ranks of the dominant class, or from among those who aspire to fit in with this class. The title given the intellectual or the artist puts him on equal terms with members of the dominant caste. Molière dines with the king. The artist is invited to the home of the duchess, as is the priest. I wonder in what disastrous proportion the number of artists would drop if this prerogative were eliminated. Just look at the care that artists take (with their vestimentary disguises and their individualistic behavior) to be known as such and clearly distinguish themselves from the common people.

Even as the bourgeois caste seeks to convince itself and others that its so-called culture (the cheap finery it gives this name) legitimizes its preservation, so the Western world also legitimizes its imperialist appetite by the urgent need to introduce Africans to Shakespeare and Molière.

Culture tends to take the place formerly occupied by religion. Like religion, it now has its priests, its prophets, its saints, and its colleges of dignitaries. The conqueror who seeks consecration presents himself to the people no longer flanked by the bishop, but by the Nobel prize. To be absolved, the unjust lord no longer founds an abbey, but a museum. It is now in the name of culture that we are mo-

bilized, that we preach crusades. It has come to play the role of "opiate of the people."

The myth of culture survived revolutions undoubtedly because it is so well accredited. The revolutionary states, whom we would have expected to denounce a myth so intimately associated with the bourgeois caste and Western imperialism, instead preserve it, and use it to their benefit. They are wrong, it seems, for sooner or later, this myth cannot help but return the Western bourgeois caste that forged it to power. We can only rid ourselves of the Western bourgeois caste by unmasking and demystifying its phony culture. It serves everywhere as this caste's weapon and Trojan horse.

The State's directors mean to give culture the same hierarchic form as the Church of olden days, that is, a well-structured pyramid, a *vertical* arrangement. On the contrary, creative thought would gain strength and health in the form of *horizontal* proliferation, in an infinitely diversified expansion. There is no worse obstacle to this proliferation than the prestige of a few showoffs among the ranks of high dignitaries, the importance of whom has been drilled into the public. There is nothing more sterilizing than this, nothing more apt to dissuade the common man from thinking for himself, nothing more likely to make him lose all confidence in his own capacities. Also nothing is more apt to disgust him with art, which he will come to believe is only an impostor at the service of the State, in other words, of the police.

I am an individualist, that is to say that I consider it my role as an individual to oppose all constraints brought about by the interest of the social good. The interests of the individual are opposed to those of the social good. Wanting to serve both at once can only lead to hypocrisy and confusion. It is for the State to look out for the social good, and for me to look out for the good of the individual. The State has but one face for me: that of the police. To my eyes, all of the State's ministries have this single face, and I cannot imagine the ministry of culture other than as the police of culture, with its prefect and commissioners. Such a face is extremely hostile and repulsive to me.

I believe it is healthy for a community when its individuals pride themselves in having the individual maxim prevail over the social maxim, when the opposition between the individual good and the social good is sensed and preserved. For if individuals submit to the social maxim, if they undertake to pursue social good rather than their own good, there will no longer be individuals and consequently, we can say, there will no longer be a community, except perhaps an anaemic one. Caprice, independence and rebellion, which are opposed to the social order, are essential to the good health of an ethnic group. We shall measure the good health of this group by the number of its delinquents. Nothing is more immobilizing than the spirit of *deference*.

To confer a socially *meritorious* nature to the production of art, making it an honored social function, is to seriously

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falsify its meaning, for the production of art is a strictly and strongly individual function, and consequently entirely antagonistic to any social function. It can only be an antisocial function, or at least an asocial one....

translated by Carol Volk, 1988