

## MASS SOCIETY AND POSTMODERN FICTION

Irving Howe (1959)

“By mass society we mean a relatively comfortable, half welfare and half garrison society in which the population grows passive, indifferent and atomized; in which traditional loyalties, ties and associations become lax or dissolve entirely; in which coherent publics based on definite interests and opinions gradually fall apart; and in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass-produced like the products, diversions and values that he absorbs.

No social scientist has yet come up with a theory of mass society that is entirely satisfying; no novelist has quite captured its still amorphous symptoms--a peculiar blend of frenzy and sluggishness, amiability and meanness. I would venture the guess that a novelist unaware of the changes in our experience to which the theory of mass society points, is a novelist unable to deal successfully with recent American life; while one who focused only upon those changes would be unable to give his work an adequate sense of historical depth. This bare description of the mass society can be extended by noting a few traits or symptoms:

1. Social classes continue to exist, and the society cannot be understood without reference to them; yet the visible tokens of class are less obvious than in earlier decades and the correlations between class status and personal condition, assumed both by the older sociologists and the older novelists, become elusive and problematic--which is not, however, to say that such correlations no longer exist.
2. Traditional centers of authority, like the family, tend to lose some of their binding-power upon human beings; vast numbers of people now float through life with a burden of freedom they can neither sustain nor legitimately abandon to social or religious groups.
3. Traditional ceremonies that have previously marked moments of crisis and transition in human life, thereby helping men to accept such moments, are now either neglected or debased into mere occasions for public display.
4. Passivity becomes a widespread social attitude: the feeling that life is a drift over which one has little control and that even when men do have shared autonomous opinions they cannot act them out in common.
5. As perhaps never before, opinion is manufactured systematically and ‘scientifically.’
6. Opinion tends to flow unilaterally, from the top down, in measured quantities: it becomes a market commodity.
7. Disagreement, controversy, polemic are felt to be in bad taste; issues are ‘ironed out’ or ‘smoothed away’; reflection upon the nature of society is replaced by observation of its mechanics.
8. The era of ‘causes,’ good or bad, comes to an end; strong beliefs seem anachronistic; and as a result, agnostics have even been known to feel a certain nostalgia for the rigors of belief.
9. Direct and first-hand experience seems to evade human beings, though the quantity of busy-ness keeps increasing and the number of events multiplies with bewildering speed.
10. The pressure of material need visibly decreases, yet there follows neither a sense of social

release nor a feeling of personal joy; instead, people become increasingly aware of their social dependence and powerlessness.

Now this is a social cartoon and not a description of American society; but it is a cartoon that isolates an aspect of our experience with a suggestiveness that no other mode of analysis is likely to match. Nor does it matter that no actual society may ever reach the extreme condition of a 'pure' mass society; the value of the theory lies in bringing to our attention a major historical drift. If there is any truth at all in these speculations, they should help illuminate the problems faced by the novelists whose work began to appear shortly after the Second World War... Our society no longer lent itself to assured definition."

Irving Howe

"Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction"

*Partisan Review* XXVI (Summer 1959) 420-36

Most of Howe's predictions in 1959 proved to be accurate and they contribute to an understanding of Postmodern fiction. He is extremely wrong only in points 7 & 8 when he predicts that there will be less controversy and "the era of causes comes to an end." The civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements were on the verge of exploding and the iconic Woodstock festival was only a decade away. By the 1980s liberal "Political Correctness" was forcing conformity throughout American society, but the backlash against PC in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century divided society again as in the 1960s and during the Civil War.

Michael Hollister (2018)