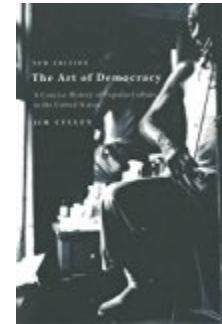


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Jim Cullen.** *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996. 320 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 085345-919-3; \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-85345-920-0.

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## Popular Culture Meets Democracy

This book presents the history of popular culture from four perspectives. First, new forms of popular culture are typically resisted by the elites. Second, over time even the elite accepts the new form. Third, the most “resonant” of the new culture becomes universal, connecting even antagonistic groups. Fourth, newly available “hardware” often provokes new cultural elements, but they are the “software” that uses the new “hardware” (pp. 14-16). There are additional comments in the introduction that suggest the author believes popular culture, coming from the general public, is inherently democratic but that often democratic government itself, being isolated from the public, can debase the thrust of popular culture. Elsewhere, I suspect the author finds popular culture shapes even the perspective of those who govern and thus that popular culture causes what is both good and bad in a society and government.

As a political scientist who has taught courses on the media and politics and on the role of public opinion in a democracy, as well as having done research that suggests the institutional changes that have so often been attempted to alter human behavior, I find little that can nudge that behavior. This book’s documenting the waves of popular culture reshaping society therefore proves most provocative. Here at last was something that changed, reflected, or deflected human behavior. Perhaps, however, political science’s causality is wrong. Public opinion does not cause public policy but rather popular culture causes both public policy and public opinion. The art of those conceiving the new “soft-

ware” shapes ultimately both opinion and policy.

I am not sure where these ideas lead us. While Cullen spins a good tale and I find his chronological structuring of cultural change satisfying, at its root this is all anecdotal research. Unfortunately, since most of this culture is history, we cannot gather much evidence on how popular culture shaped both opinion and policy. Lacking such data, social scientists are not likely to be convinced.

The internet, which is not covered in the book, may be the ultimate expression of popular culture. Perhaps since I have little confidence in being able to foresee new hardware or software, I should say the internet is the most irresistible and uncontrollable expression of popular culture seen thus far. Probably by removing its electronic core within the United States, government could control this expression. Certainly there would be massive outrage and probably electronic sabotage of government computer networks. Apart from this I expect we will see more tasteless and artless software pervading our surfing. Perhaps Cullen should have a corollary that as time passes, popular culture has become less resistible.

Not being expert in this area, I cannot highlight omissions or what I would view as mistakes in interpretation. I can say, however, that, apart from the introduction, the writing is light and certainly informative. The reader is left uninformed at several points in Cullen’s presentation. On page 21, he differentiates between folk and popular cultures, arguing that popular cultures did not exist until the nineteenth century and are “... refracted

(and magnified) through the prism of mass production.” I do not understand the benefit of this distinction. Do the dynamics of popular culture, such as resistance by the elites and the ultimate acceptance by them, not apply to earlier folk cultures? A similar occurrence of Cullen not bringing along the reader is on page 95. He comments that leftist intellectuals suspect popular culture for its “...hegemonic qualities and narcotic effects.” He further notes that “working people’s worldview...survive(s) commodification,” and that “the subversive elements within it...defy control or price tag.” He makes a distinction between “ordinary working people” and the “modern working class,” so presumably he means modern working class here rather than working people. My point is merely that

Cullen is presuming knowledge that his readers may not have as well as presuming a logic that they might not accept.

I value the ideas considered by Cullen both as an individual with vague recall of much of this history and as a political scientist grappling with how the governed and the governors interact.

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