

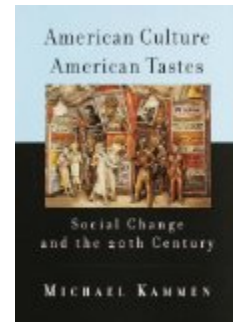
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Kammen. *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. xxvii + 320 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-42740-7.

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Kammen shows us how concepts of culture as well as its production and consumption have changed over time. Though glancing back to colonial times, he focuses on how these changes occurred hand-in-hand with economic, political, and personal developments in the twentieth century and on how they can be framed in distinct phases.

While many see “mass” culture beginning with, say, the spread of newspapers in the eighteenth century, he sees it as really coming into its own with the advent of modern mass media, most signally television. But as he stresses, when TV was invented is not what matters; what’s important for mass culture to come into being is the leisure time and disposable income to consume it. That came only after World War II and really took off in the late 1950s when practically every American family had a television.

Preceding that he sees what he terms a “proto-mass” culture beginning with the mass consumption of necessary goods as offered in Sears catalogues and burgeoning in the 1920s with the increasing consumption of leisure goods and activities, ranging from arts to sports. Standardization of food in packages and in restaurants likewise illustrate these trends. And as Henry Ford realized, for his mass production of automobiles to succeed, he also had to have mass consumers. These were soon created by modern advertising and “PR.”

Preceding that, in turn, is what Kammen calls “popular” culture which he distinguishes from mass culture by stressing its participatory, interactive nature. Even though radio is a mass medium, for example, it still required listeners to construct their own “theatre of the mind” while TV presents everything to us ready-made.

And because to watch it, we can’t do other things as we can while listening to the radio, we are thus rendered more passive.

Popular culture came into its prime between 1885 and 1935 when leisure time expanded and organized entertainment reached new heights and unprecedented audiences. Occurring at the same time was an increasing blurring between high and low brow culture. While cultural stratification or taste levels have persisted they’ve become more widely shared across classes—superbowl fans may listen to symphonies, and the “three tenors” sing for World Cup soccer. The marriage of Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller in 1956 personifies this merging of cultures.

A corresponding issue and change Kammen addresses is that of cultural authority and cultural power. Americans have taken their cultural cues from a shifting series of “cultural authorities.” In colonial times these were the clergy and in the nineteenth century various reform figures. In the late Victorian era cultural “professionals” emerged and authority gradually became institutionalized in museums and musical and theatrical venues. After World War II academics briefly held sway. But partly because of these academics’ tiresome disagreements and partly because of the growth of public opinion polling, people tuned them out and paid more attention to the cultural authority the country’s Gallups now granted the public itself.

The relationship between cultural power and cultural authority also changed considerably. Earlier, movie studios and ad agencies might have been said to wield cultural power while museums and critics wielded authority. But today cultural authority is the province of large

corporations which produce and promote culture (think Time/Warner and Disney). Books become bestsellers and movies blockbusters despite critics' "authority." Entertainment entrepreneurs have been able to combine their cultural power with authority by a savvy straddling of taste levels—what might be "elitist" leadership modified by responding to public demand. Corporate leaders did not, for example, like rock 'n' roll but could not long refuse the bottom-line benefit of its mass appeal.

"High" and "low" culture are equally in pursuit of the dollar, Kammen aptly reminds us, and there's been as much low culture rising to influence the high as that latter has trickled down to the former. Andy Warhol is perhaps the best example of the conflation of mass production, mass culture, and elite art. Accordingly, correlations between social class and taste which seemed fairly clear between ca. 1870 and 1945 have become much less so since the 1950s. (Where we used to talk about taste and refinement, we began in the late fifties to talk about "lifestyle.") Efforts to make these high/low distinctions in the U.S. emerged to some extent from Americans' insecurity vis-a-vis Europeans whom they had emulated so long. But when they realized that Europeans saw ragtime and jazz as American culture, American pretenders to cultural arbitersdom were forced to reconsider their concepts of culture. Some have therefore argued that high culture is in decline, others might say it's being redefined. Either way we've become increasingly "bicultural" in the sense that even if we have elite tastes we also enjoy other entertainments.

Why was anybody worried about this? Because of the same insecurity cited above. Often in the twentieth century European critics asked, Why did the U.S. flourish politically and economically but not culturally? Why did American avant-garde art, literature, and music continue to depend on European models or even imports and immigrants? One answer Kammen offers is that throughout much of the century Americans put their emphasis on the "common man." This was demonstrated in that ultimate public poll, the presidential election, which rejected an elite "egghead" like Adlai Stevenson. By now,

of course, the American cultural problem is the opposite: The world is awash in American mass culture, with people around the globe both reveling in the consumption of it and raging against its destruction of their own cultures and values.

Why have taste levels become less meaningful? The postwar spread of affluence and education made it more difficult to maintain "lower" distinctions. He sees the consequence as an increase in cultural populism accompanied by a decline in elitism and worries about a loss of "guidance." Others worry, with Tocqueville, that if in a democracy everybody's taste is equally valid we'll end up with complete mediocrity (they're confusing art with politics). But I'd argue, and I think Kammen ultimately agrees, that democracy affords more opportunity for the expression, and dissemination, of genius and its products—as well as for the greatest production and consumption of junk of course.

While some may not agree with Kammen's definitions and periodizations, they provide valuable points of departure. Important to me are his efforts to relate these definitions and periods to those other economic, political, and social phenomena, which he does in rich detail. What's missing? Is there a definition of culture? Well, if there is one, it's an all-embracing one that ranges from what the Germans call "Alltagskultur" ("everyday culture") to the most elitist arts. And while the "public" has to some degree become a cultural authority, we still look to cultural authority figures. Irma Rombauer and Julia Child, Alex Comfort and Ann Landers, Amy Vanderbilt and Martha Stewart—and Oprah of course—are names he reels off only partly tongue-in-cheek. And when it comes to art we still defer to the expertise of museum directors as the Mapplethorpe case illustrated.

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