

Culture and Its Contents

By Samuel Lipman

I want to talk to you today about culture and what we ought to want from culture. Culture shapes our lives and affects every action we take. The left knows this simple fact and acts accordingly; we seem not to know it, and as a result we are content to leave the left in control of culture. We, and society at large, are the losers. It is high time that this situation be changed.

Let me begin with two quick definitions. When I say culture, I mean what F.R. Cowell has called the realm of meaning and value; culture stretches all the way from how we live to how we want to live. It must be stressed that culture carries values; culture is the mental component of life, and its capacity to influence the material component, while not total, is enormous. My usage of "culture" here is thoroughly modern: it includes education and entertainment, the high and the low, the serious and the popular, the private and the public. In its widest sense, culture is created by everyone and influences everyone; in its most abstract and refined form culture is created by a small elite and only reaches society through many layers of mediating institutions. I mean to combine here the anthropological view of culture — how we behave — with the idea of high culture — the striving for what Matthew Arnold called "touchstones," "the best that has been thought and said." I am aware that this definition of culture is far removed from the pure 19th century conception of culture as aspiration and uplift, a conception that I cherish but which the contemporary world has seen fit to abandon.

When at the outset, I referred to "we," I meant, and will continue to mean, we conservatives. I have in mind those who base their notion of politics and life on a view of man as non-perfectible, incompletely malleable, capable of both good and evil, and responsible for his own actions but in no way fully capable of predicting or controlling their consequences. I mean to be conservative in talking about conservatives and culture. I do not hope to usher in the millennium either in society or in thought; I only hope that I may provide some useful observations on how we might begin to get a grip on the maelstrom of feeling and conduct that now sweeps society.

Relation to Life. I am not concerned here to talk about the relation of aesthetics to culture, but rather about the relation of culture to life. My point of entrance into this discussion is the recent controversy over the National Endowment for the Arts. I have in mind the spate of notorious grants for sacrilegious and obscene art, first associated with the names of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, that transpired two years ago, and has served to bring into question the propriety of federal support of culture.

When the NEA scandal erupted, the response from the left was twofold: they said, in the first instance, that it is precisely the most valuable art that is most provocative and destabilizing; and, furthermore, because of the value of such provocation and destabilization, public support should be unfettered by any restrictions in content. This liberal/radical response, of

Samuel Lipman is publisher of *The New Criterion*, music reviewer for *Commentary* and Artistic Director of the Waterloo Music Festival in New Jersey. From 1982 to 1988 he was a member of the National Council of the Arts, which oversees the National Endowment for the Arts.

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course, was predictable, and easily understood: we could have expected nothing less from those elements in our governing establishment that defend flag-burning as a mark of the greatness of our constitutional system.

Conservative Response. The conservative response to the NEA scandals is not so easily summarized. At first it consisted of shock and outrage, mostly coming from the religious right, in this case led by the Reverend Wildmon in Mississippi. Along with this emotional outpouring came demands, associated in the media almost entirely with Senator Helms, for legislative prohibition of grants containing obscenity, pornography, and sacrilege. The celebrated Helms amendment, much watered down in a House-Senate Conference Committee, was the first fruit of these demands. This attempt at restrictions on NEA grant-making proved a bonanza for arts advocates and the media, and turned out to be unenforceable as well. It is noteworthy that even such an impassioned outcry among conservatives in Congress and across the country failed utterly to suggest just what content should be supported by government or, for that matter, by anyone else.

But the demand for restrictive legislation has by no means been the only conservative response to the Serrano/Mapplethorpe scandals and their many successors on the long list of NEA cutting-edge grants. Other conservatives — notably Representative Crane — concentrated on using the grants scandals as an argument for eliminating the NEA entirely. For them, the issue was not that the content of these grants was objectionable, but rather that *any* federal support for art was wrong. According to this argument, culture is solely a matter of private taste and decision. I myself have heard Congressman Rohrabacher say that if a homosexual center wanted to exhibit the Mapplethorpe photographs, that was fine with him, but that the federal government had no business paying for the exhibition.

The problem with the Rohrabacher position, it seems to me, is that it does not deal with the fact that disgusting art is not disgusting because of the way it is funded, but because of its content; disgusting art remains disgusting, however it is funded.

Issue of Content. Congressman Rohrabacher is not alone in wishing to sidestep the issue of content. Congressman Hyde, a valiant fighter against the questionable NEA grants, has recently written that any attempt to enforce “minimum levels of aesthetic achievement and ethical responsibility on publicly funded art is futile,” and that the NEA funds should be used for scholarships for students “majoring in the fine arts.” In this way, the government could “encourage young artists” without “outraging the public” or “incurring charges of censorship and philistinism.” The problem with the Hyde proposal is that art students must study something, and that this term “something” is just another term for content. I would think it absolutely certain that the scholarships proposed by Congressman Hyde would be used for the study of just what he did not wish to fund in the first place.

The problem with the Helms, Crane, Rohrabacher, and Hyde approaches is not that they wish to control or even eliminate the NEA; as presently configured, the NEA is an idea whose time has gone. The problem is that in viewing culture solely in terms of its governmental and specifically federal support, these conservative leaders have not gone on to consider that in culture what goes on in government is only a microcosm of what is going on in the society at large, and thus a microcosm of what is going on in each of our lives. The problem of culture, I am sorry to say, is a problem of the private sector, and must be fought out in the private sector.

I am talking to you today in a veritable citadel of ideological and economic privatism. I have been proud to have been associated with The Heritage Foundation in the past, and am proud to be associated with it today in giving this lecture. It is because I value the private sector so highly, and because I believe that our betterment must come from the private sector, that I say that our work on behalf of a viable culture must be accomplished with the participation and the cooperation of conservatives as private individuals.

But if this halcyon state of affairs is to come about, it must be based upon a recognition of realities, not wishes. To make these realities clear, I want to propose to you a small thought experiment. Imagine that a group of 175 or so wealthy contributors could be found to guarantee, each of them, a gift of one million dollars to the arts every year for ten years – on the good conservative condition that the federal government would abolish the National Endowment for the Arts. What would happen? What would arts support look like then? How would the outcome of this organized private support, controlled solely by the private donors, be different from the present outcome of federal, politically determined support?

Same Outcome. I suggest to you – and my conclusion is based on more than a decade of close acquaintance with both public and private support – that the outcome would be virtually the same. There would immediately be a demand for the planning and coordination of the grants made by the members of the group. This planning and coordination would require an organization; to run this organization, the private support group would quickly hire all the senior staff of the old Endowment. Under the guidance of this old-new staff, and with the complete agreement of the private support group's board of directors, guidelines and procedures would soon be implemented to guarantee approximately the same distribution of grants to the same recipients. The same arguments for the importance of the artistic cutting edge – the arguments, I might add, that have already brought us federally funded Serrano and Mapplethorpe – would win the day. So too would the same arguments for the necessity of outreach and representation – and multiculturalism as well – triumph. And in a very short period of time indeed, the same arguments for increased support to show that we as a nation really care about the arts – arguments that we now hear from the left in Congress – would be heard from the private individuals who have just pledged their private money. For proof that what I have just said is accurate, I recommend that you look at the grants lists of the corporations, foundations, and individuals who support the arts in this country.

Now if you accept, at least for the sake of argument, that the outcome I have described is plausible or even likely, then you must entertain the idea that the problem is not to get the private sector involved, but rather to change the present disposition of the private sector. I propose that we start with the very conservatives – “us” – who have the most concern for the health of the private sector. Therefore, I suggest to you that conservatives have for too long shied away from asking of culture that it make possible what we wish to have for ourselves and for our children.

Let me repeat: what conservatives all too often fail to see is that culture is nothing less than the determination of how we should live. Need I tell you that the left understands this simple truth? The left, in and out of government, knows full well that it is culture that gives meaning and value to life, and that he who controls culture controls not just how people live but how they perceive themselves. We all are aware of the left's agenda in culture: primitivism, feminism, racialism, multiculturalism, and homophilia. The left wishes to use culture to remold man and society on radical utopian lines, with first the deconstruction and then the destruction of the autonomous individual, followed by the deconstruction and destruction of

every traditional social institution, beginning with the church — any church and every church — and ending with the family.

Enforcing Cultural Goals. Let us look for a moment at how our opponents put their views on the proper content of culture into practice. They enforce their cultural goals in three ways: through the selection of people, the making of laws, and the spending of other people's money. The left and its sympathizers control the administrative and the policy-making positions of our federal, state, and local cultural agencies; they control, largely through staff, the legislative committees that decide how public money is spent in culture and elsewhere; they control the administration and the faculties, and manipulate the boards, of educational institutions large and small, private and public, prestigious and not; they control the staffs and manipulate the boards of artistic institutions in every discipline, and of every quality and size; they control the great foundations — just think of Ford and Rockefeller — that support culture; they staff and control every kind of electronic and print media, including the great television networks and the quality as well as the mass press. The result is clear: today, our culture propagates the values of the left and brings them into all our homes and all our lives.

What is our response — the response of “us,” what I have called “we” conservatives — to this leftist hegemony? It is not that conservatives are uninvolved in culture. Like everyone else, conservatives consume culture; conservatives watch television, go to movies, read books, and listen to music. The children of conservatives consume culture; they watch television, go to movies, read books, and listen to music. Conservatives send their children to school, and conservatives worry about their children's education. Conservatives attend church, and support religion bountifully. Conservatives generously support the institutions of high culture. Conservatives are represented among the owners of the media and of the corporations responsible for producing popular culture. In all these senses, conservatives are fully active in culture.

What, then, is the problem? If conservatives are full participants in culture, why does culture not reflect the fact of their participation? Why is culture — the way we live and the way we think we should live — formed so completely by the left, rather than by the right? Why, if we are so many, are we so weak? Why don't conservative cultural votes count?

Conservative Efforts. On occasion, as in the recent NEA debacle, conservatives have tried to make their votes count. Conservatives have demanded the de-funding of particularly odious material; isolated conservatives have from time to time risen up over elementary and secondary school curriculums. Conservatives have spent their efforts worrying about defense, foreign policy, taxation, the economy; elsewhere conservatives have been concerned to lead private lives with as little governmental interference as possible.

But what distinguishes conservative concerns about defense, foreign policy, taxation, and the economy from their concerns about culture is that in the traditional areas of public policy, conservatives have had explicit goals and programs: resistance to communism, support of our friends abroad, lower taxes, and a sympathetic climate for business. Conservatives, for all their internal differences, have been pro-American, pro-liberty, and pro-capitalist. In these areas, we conservatives have known what we wanted, and have gone to the American people with our agendas clearly stated; the result of our having known what we wanted has been the election of Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and Bush; all of these presidents were elected as conservatives, even if they did not always choose to govern as conservatives.

Devaluing Culture. I am afraid that, as the examples I cited earlier show, we conservatives have in the main tended to devalue the entire realm of culture. Despite our moments of rage, we have taken an attitude that might vulgarly be expressed as "Let them kill each other," as if disputes between the left and the center-left as to the proper extent of cultural radicalization would somehow cancel each other out, leaving culture both irrelevant and powerless to affect the fate of society. But the terrible, engulfing developments in culture that in recent years have brought us the epidemics of abortion, drug use, and AIDS, are testimony enough to the power of the left in determining our culture and, through culture, our lives. I know that these are strong words. But think for a moment just how implicated the cultural goals of the left have been in these disasters. Abortion, after all, is defended as the exercise of a woman's freedom in regard to her body and the expression of her sexuality; in its origins in the 1950s and 1960s, drug use was legitimized as part of the search for ever higher levels of experience, and now, for minority communities, is legitimized as a response to oppression; the AIDS epidemic would hardly have been possible without the promiscuity and pan-sexuality so encouraged by the left.

Compared to the left, conservatives simply have not taken culture seriously. We have been content to allow culture, all the way from the most commercial entertainment to the most mandarin thought, to be created *for* us, rather than *by* us. We have not demanded that American culture reflect and instill our values. We have not developed a program for culture.

Why have we behaved in this way about culture? There are many answers to this question. To begin with, we have found contemporary culture so appalling that we have opted out of its formation, all the while continuing our passive consumption of cultural artifacts and our acquiescence in the values these artifacts carry. We have hoped, as I have just said, that the cultural excesses of the left would be self-liquidating. We have understood, and fled from, the idea that the war for culture is total war, a process that can hardly be carried on with amiability and grace.

Then too, it must be realized that conservatives have been charged for so long with philistinism — the indifference to refined culture and the concentration on material concerns — that we have assumed the characterization invented for us by our enemies. Instead of our realizing that the accusation of philistinism is merely a way of smearing us for our defense of traditional, continuing standards and values, we have assumed all too readily that the realm of mental culture was a liberal realm, and that our tasks lay entirely in the production and conservation of wealth.

Difficult Answers. But there are other, and more difficult answers to my question. We are the party of liberty, and it comes hard for us to prescribe thought and behavior for others. Unlike the left, we have not wanted to re-form others in our own image. The liberty we conservatives want for ourselves, we also want for others. If what I have just said is true for traditional conservatives, it is doubly and triply true for the libertarians in our ranks. For libertarians, matters of culture are entirely matters for individual determination, and cannot properly be delegated to any individual, group, institution, or political entity. The same must be said about those cousins of the libertarians, the free-marketeers. For our believers in markets, cultural decisions, like economic decisions, are properly made through unfettered contact between buyer and seller. Any attempt to control these contacts, and to ensure their outcome, is not just tyranny (as it would be for libertarians) but the rankest inefficiency. I cannot resist remarking that on both the libertarian and the free-market principles, the success of Madon-

na — the pop star, not the Virgin Mary — is a triumph of the two greatest goods: liberty and competition.

I would like to offer yet another answer to my question about why conservatives have not acted so as to influence culture. This answer I offer with some trepidation, not because I am not sure the answer is true, but because I think it may very well cause pain to some. I believe that conservatives avoid culture — construed, you will remember, as the domain of meaning and value — because the divisions in culture are not just what might be called horizontal divisions between mature adults; in our time, they are perhaps uniquely divisions between parents and children. What is at stake today in culture is not most importantly how we should live, but how our children should live. Where culture really counts is the effect it has on the young, whether on pre-schoolers, students, or even Yuppies. The left knows this, and therefore has brought the battle into the family. I need not tell you that the family is losing.

Let me put it another way. It is a mistake to think of the left as primarily concerned with economics. To make this mistake is, as I have been trying to demonstrate, to ignore the realm of meaning and values in culture. The most important question in culture today is the nature and future of the family, the obligations of parents and children to it and to each other. The sexual revolution that the left has urged, and largely made, is the true cultural revolution; it has invaded every family, split children from parents, and put all parents in terror of losing their children's love. As a matter of ordinary prudence, parents avoid discussing these questions with their children. In these matters, liberal parents have become their children's camp-followers; they endorse every demand their children make. Conservative parents resist, but find themselves with no heart for the struggle.

Throwing Down the Gauntlet. The struggle for the family, and the larger struggle for culture, will not go away. Because the war is difficult does not mean that it should not be fought. I see signs that conservatives are at last beginning to throw down the gauntlet to the left. I think immediately of the strength and eloquence of William J. Bennett on education and drugs, and of Midge Decter on the culture of the family. And I cannot forget that the very existence of *The New Criterion*, with its remarkably generous and long-term support from several conservative foundations, is yet another sign of a change in conservative attitudes. I also want to mention in this regard the very welcome involvement of The Heritage Foundation in the study of the formation of culture. My own remarks are intended to continue the working out of an active, rather than reactive, conservative position on culture.

I want to stress that in my attempting to spell out this conservative position I am not talking about laws, public funding, or governmental dictates. Conservatives hardly are agreed on the proper role for government in culture; in my opinion the burden of proof of the benefits of government intervention lies with those who advocate such intervention, not with those who oppose it. But whatever the role of government should be, conservatives should be clear about one thing: people should not be forced into certain kinds of cultural expression, and out of others. What conservatives ask for from culture, they must ask for in the culture of their own lives. In the formation of culture, conservatives should not talk about "them," but about "us." In this, as in so many other matters that affect our lives, culture begins at home. We must always remember that it is only through example, not through compulsion, that a freely chosen culture can be formed.

And so conservatives should approach culture not as the responsibility of government, but as the responsibility of individuals in society. To say this is to recommend a conservative ap-

proach to culture that sees all culture, whether public or private in origin or in support, as subject to the same criteria of excellence and the same moral values. As conservatives, we cannot demand either from government or society a higher standard in culture than we demand from ourselves. As for the actions of those with whom we disagree, we must recognize that in a free society, private choices in culture must be subject to minimum restraint. But at the same time, we must always be careful not to confuse rights with virtues: the exercise of the guaranteed right to free cultural choice is not a good in itself, but rather must be judged by the content of the choice itself.

Seeing to Our Own Lives. Before we talk about the proper cultural direction of our society, we must see to our own lives. We cannot complain about the tidal wave of malign popular culture if we are not willing to cease watching most television programs, cease listening to most popular music, and cease attending most movies. We cannot demand that schools be made places of learning rather than political indoctrination unless we back up our demands with serious proposals for new curriculums, oversight of administrators and boards, the refusal to fund what offends us, the willingness to fund what we advocate, and even the withdrawal of our children from schools that do not meet our personal standards. We cannot mock what government, foundations, and corporations support in what now passes for high culture if we do not privately support what we find good for others. And I should add that we cannot expect government or society ever to assist in making moral beings of our children if we do not start the process by demanding moral behavior in our own families.

As for the specific content of what we should demand from culture, I have two suggestions for what should be demanded; they can roughly be subsumed under the words "hierarchy" and "morality." They are indeed loaded words, and I expect to be attacked for having used them. But first let me say what I mean in the context of culture by "hierarchy" and "morality."

By "hierarchy" I mean the structure of value into which every human action and every human thought fits. The myriad things we do are either better or worse, higher or lower, more desirable or less desirable, more beautiful or less beautiful, more on the side of life or less on the side of life. On this reading, culture is a pyramid in which the top remains the pinnacle of aspiration and achievement, and the bottom provides the richness and density of life that makes greatness possible. The idea of cultural hierarchy stands in direct opposition to cultural relativism, the notion that everything is equally valid, the more the merrier, nothing better than anything else, and nothing worse. There will be those who call the idea of hierarchy fascist and elitist; I think it only describes the process of evaluation one uses when one chooses a physician for a loved one. To honor the principle of equality before the law is not to level all distinctions between men; it is to provide a basis on which these distinctions may be intelligently made. "The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he," said Thomas Rainborowe in 1647, but it is not the same life, and we must not dishonor it by paying it hypocritical tribute. Because conservatives respect each life, they can, through the application of hierarchy, give each his due.

By "morality," I mean the age-old principle that all human actions and achievements must be judged in terms of good and evil. Just as structural relativism is unacceptable, so is moral relativism, the idea that what people do cannot be judged, only empathized with. In the context of culture, morality does not mean examining what people do in terms of how well what they do works, how well it satisfies aesthetic, intellectual, or political criteria, or how successful it is in the market place. Rather it means examining what they do in terms of a higher value; in our society this value can only be the carrying on of life. Thus morality means ensur-

ing that culture and its components serve to build a world fit for our children to live in. It means ensuring that culture and its components provide the necessary order and stability, united with liberty, that make life possible. These are all moral choices, and they require the continuing application of moral judgment.

Art is not a suicide pact. Learning is not a suicide pact. Culture is not a suicide pact. Liberty is not a suicide pact. The market is not a suicide pact. All these components of human action and thought are not absolutes; they are important, not just in themselves, but because they serve the purpose of life.

Larger Task. To my two conservative imperatives of "hierarchy" and "morality," I wish to add a third: "responsibility." We conservatives, because we understand the necessary linkage between the past and the future, are the party of responsibility, the party of taking responsibility. In a sense, we are chosen, not to prosper, but to stand guard over the transmission of the great values of civilization. It is not enough for us to say what should not be funded by government, or by society; in a wider sense, it is not enough for us to say what should not be, important though this task is. Our larger task is to say what should be, first for us, and then, if we can make our case well enough, for others. This is the conservative responsibility, and this is the conservative glory.

And so what we want for ourselves, we should want for others; what we want for our children, we should want for everyone's children. The culture that exists all around us is the culture that will be passed on to the future; it is our task to make sure as best we can that the culture of the future will be on the side of life.

