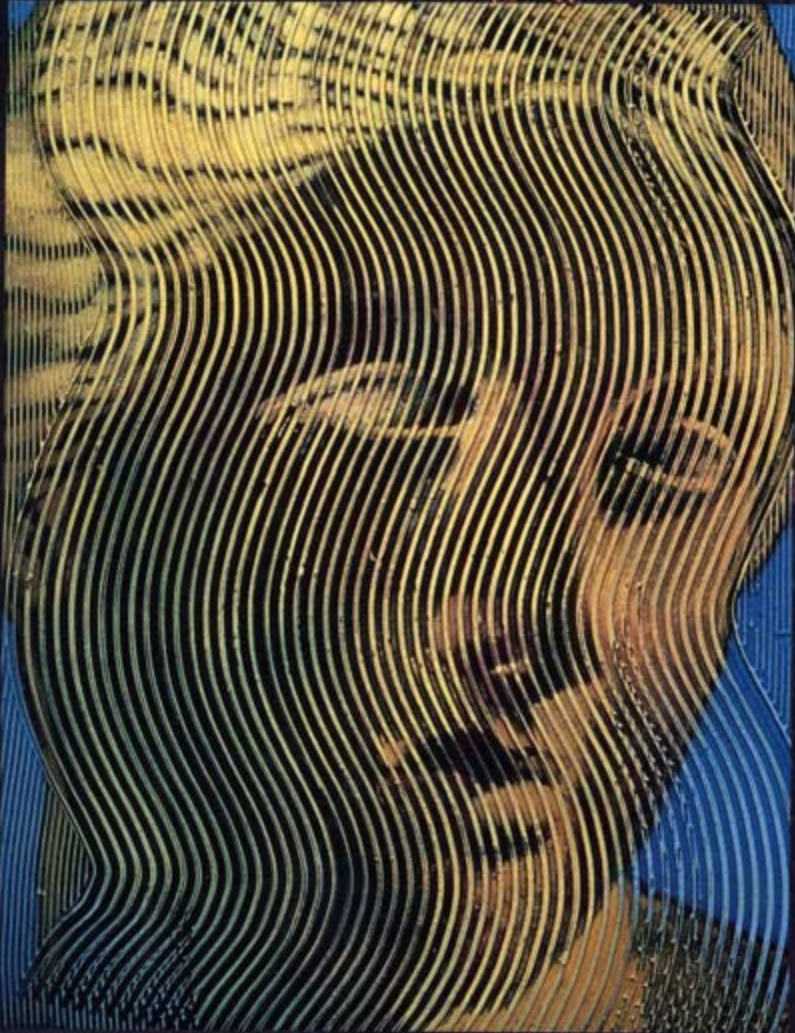


In Praise of
Commercial



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Tyler Cowen

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**COMMERCIAL
CULTURE**

Tyler Cowen

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Reader feedback is welcome. I can be reached at Department of Economics, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030, or tcowen@gmu.edu.

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There is no great work of art which does not convey a new message to humanity; there is no great artist who fails in this respect. This is the code of honor of all the great in art, and consequently in all great works of the great we will find that newness which never perishes, whether it be of Josquin des Pres, of Bach or Haydn, or of any other great master. *Because: Art means New Art.*

Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*,
Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg

I have many times asked myself, not without wonder, the source of a certain error which, since it is committed by all the old without exception, can be believed to be proper and natural to man: namely, that they nearly all praise the past and blame the present, revile our actions and behaviour and everything which they themselves did not do when they were young, and affirm, too, that every good custom and way of life, every virtue and, in short, all things imaginable are always going from bad to worse.

Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*

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Introduction

Does a market economy encourage or discourage music, literature, and the visual arts? Do economic forces of supply and demand help or harm the pursuit of creativity?

I present market enterprise and productive wealth as allies of cultural production. I seek to redress the current intellectual and popular balance and to encourage a more favorable attitude towards the commercialization of culture that we associate with modernity. The capitalist market economy is a vital but underappreciated institutional framework for supporting a plurality of coexisting artistic visions, providing a steady stream of new and satisfying creations, helping consumers and artists refine their tastes, and paying homage to the eclipsed past by capturing, reproducing, and disseminating it. This book presents some social mechanisms that link markets, wealth, and creativity, examines how these mechanisms have operated throughout cultural history, and attempts to account for the widespread perception that modernity suffers from a cultural malaise.

I develop several related themes concerning culture. First, I contrast cultural optimism with some opposing philosophies of cultural pessimism. Differing varieties of cultural pessimism are found among conservatives, neo-conservatives, the Frankfurt School, and some versions of the political correctness and multiculturalist movements, as well as in the history of ideas more generally. The first four chapters offer a critique of these views, and the final chapter offers a deconstruction of them.

Second, I redefine the distinction between popular or “low” culture, and “high” culture from a cultural optimist perspective. When viewed in the long term, successful high culture usually comes out of a

healthy and prosperous popular culture. Forces for popular culture therefore serve as forces supporting the eventual emergence of high culture as well. I also question the common identification of quality culture with high culture, and of popular culture with low-level or accessible culture. Shakespeare, Mozart, and Beethoven thought of their work as popular, while much of today's so-called popular culture is in fact a highly refined product that appeals only to a distinct minority. Rather than trying to use aesthetic criteria to order artworks on a high/low spectrum, I examine how economic incentives affect the artist's choice of audience. Poetry costs very little to write, and therefore can appeal to minority tastes. Most movies, in contrast, must cover their high capital costs by appealing to a larger number of viewers.

Third, I focus on the role of markets and economic factors, including technology, in influencing culture. I do *not* present a mono-causal materialist theory of culture, but I do outline some ways in which economic forces have shaped Western art, literature, and music since the Renaissance. Without dismissing the role of non-economic forces, I argue that economic forces have had stronger effects on culture than is commonly believed. The printing press paved the way for classical music, while electricity made rock and roll possible. For better or worse, artists are subject to economic constraints, just as other businessmen are.

Fourth, I attempt to account for why the philosophy of cultural pessimism has proven so persuasive and has attracted so many adherents. The fifth and final chapter outlines a series of social mechanisms that help explain why cultural pessimism has remained such a successful and popular philosophy. For a variety of reasons discussed in that chapter, contemporary culture tends to appear degenerate even when it is thriving. This deconstruction of cultural pessimism does not prove the worth of contemporary creations, but does encourage a more critical stance toward views that culture is corrupt or declining.

Capitalism and the Market Economy

I define capitalism as a legal framework based on private property and voluntary exchange; this framework supports an advanced system of commerce, industry, technology, and markets. I take it for granted that

capitalism supports these institutions, and I focus on the more controversial question of how culture will fare in such a world.

The word capitalism refers to the private ownership of capital goods that is found under such a regime. I also use the term “market economy” to refer more generally to a nexus of voluntary exchanges. Beethoven and Michelangelo, who sold their artworks for a profit, were entrepreneurs and capitalists. Rembrandt, who ran a studio and employed other artists, fits the designation as well. I treat capitalism in terms of its underlying economic logic, rather than in terms of a particular historical epoch, as do many Marxists. Nonetheless I do not assume that capitalism has operated in the same fashion across historical eras. In reality, different kinds of markets (and states) have shaped the arts in radically different ways. The greater ability of modern performers to reach large audiences has given popular music a relative boost over classical music, for instance. The declining financial power of the church led to a diminution of interest in religious art. In this book I present numerous examples of how cross-sectional variations in forms of capitalism have influenced accompanying artistic productions.

I do not define capitalism in terms of a pure market model, as do many libertarians. Historically capitalism and powerful states have risen hand-in-hand; this connection will not be severed in the imaginable future. I am concerned more with particular features of the capitalist model than with the purity of market freedom. Specifically, I focus on the following features, which I identify with our modern, commercialized society: profit and fame incentives, decentralized financial support, the possibility of financial independence for some artists, the entrepreneurial discovery of new artistic technologies and media, and the ability to profit by preserving the cultural creations of the past.

I do distinguish capitalism from societies whose wealth is based on outright plunder, fortuitous discovery of a natural resource, tax haven status, or other accidental features. These societies may develop wealth, but they will not reap the full benefit of the mechanisms discussed below. Stealing or “lucking into” wealth typically will stimulate the demand for culture, but the supply capacity for cultural production will not be favored as well as under capitalism. Artistic masterpieces usually stem from favorable conditions on both the demand and supply sides of the market, as I will illustrate throughout the text.

I do not argue that capitalism is a monocausal or even a primary determinant of artistic success. If Beethoven's parents had not met, married, and slept together when they did, the market could not have produced another Beethoven some other way. Pure, dumb luck is one of many factors in cultural success. The greater cultural vitality of Renaissance Florence than modern Singapore does not serve as a counterexample to my thesis, even though Singapore is wealthier and arguably more capitalistic as well. Singapore and Florence differ in many important regards, including their cultural heritage, degree of government censorship, and intellectual climate. Culture is a problem of joint production involving both economic and non-economic forces; I am arguing that we should upgrade our estimate of the efficacy of the market, not that the market is all-important.

Counterexamples to my version of cultural optimism arise to the extent that cultural successes come about in spite of the market, and to the extent that cultural failures come about because of the market. I present a number of counterexamples, including the failure of the modern world to support contemporary classical composers, the declining quality of the best-seller lists, and the dubious quality of much of American television, among many others. I view these counterexamples as real rather than apparent, and I seek to explain them rather than to explain them away. An optimistic perspective should not blind us to failures or hinder the identification of the mechanisms that cause cultural markets to misfire.

It is obvious to most observers that new art faces significant obstacles in a market economy. Large numbers of consumers are ignorant, poorly educated, and sometimes even hostile to innovation. Many creators are confronted by large corporate conglomerates that demand a proven track record or prior contacts. Complex networks of retail distribution, advertising, and media make some products profitable and others unprofitable, often without regard for artistic quality. Art lovers who revere aesthetic merit often dislike or resent market exchange for these reasons. No social system, however, elevates "Goodness" to a deciding principle, whether the realm be art, politics, or economics. Rather than comparing the market for art to a Platonic alternative, I seek to uncover the social mechanisms that encourage and discourage creative artistic achievement and therefore shed light on the production of culture.

Culture and Art

I use the terms culture and art interchangeably to cover man-made artifacts or performances that move us and expand our awareness of the world and of ourselves. I have in mind painting, sculpture, music, film, architecture, photography, theater, literature, and dance. What counts as culture is a matter of degree; broadly, culture ought to broaden our horizons and help us see the world in a new way. Culture stands above the concept of entertainment, although broadening our horizons is often entertaining.¹

I will devote special attention to visual art, literature, and music, arguably the three arts most central to the Western tradition. Each of these receives a chapter of its own. These arts come closest to providing a common knowledge base and have provided the primary field of debate for the economics of the arts.

No single book can consider artistic production as a whole. Furthermore, the question “What is art?” has become increasingly less fruitful with the growing diversity of production. Numerous activities hold a blurred, in-between status. Fashion, decoration, cuisine, sports, product design, computer graphics, and commercial art—to name just a few—bring beauty and drama into our lives. Even if these genres do not fit a narrow definition of art they nonetheless stimulate our aesthetic sense. Most have met with great success in the contemporary world, yet I do not address them directly in this book. I hope to show some illustrative factors in the history of the major arts, rather than cover each and every cultural episode.

In addition, I focus on Western culture, although I am currently working on a more systematic treatment of non-Western, tribal, and indigenous cultures. Some foreign cultures appear to provide counterexamples to the view that markets benefit the arts. Haiti, for instance, has produced much painting and music of note, despite being the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. My preliminary research indicates two conclusions, which I will only mention here. First, some of the mechanisms regulating artistic success may differ in countries with very small degrees of division of labor, both in consumption and production. To that extent the arguments of this book do not hold in all circumstances. Second, many non-Western arts have relied more

heavily on markets and wealth than it may first appear. The market for Haitian Naive paintings, for instance, has been driven largely by tourists from wealthier, capitalist countries. Much of the growth in third world art, music, and literature has been supported by modernization, growing wealth, and cultural exchange. A more complete approach to the matter must, however, await future research and writing.

What Is Good Culture?

The case for cultural optimism relies partly on judgments about the quality of contemporary cultural creations. Skeptics who dislike all contemporary culture usually cannot be convinced to weaken their pessimism. Cultural assessments contain an irreducibly subjective component and for this reason it is not possible to present a knockdown argument for (or against) cultural optimism. Rather than tackling cultural pessimism head on, I attempt to chip away at its plausibility, while keeping debate over the quality of particular artworks from dominating the analysis.

My approach to cultural pessimism runs as follows. First, I present a number of social mechanisms through which a healthy, growing economy tends to support cultural creativity. While these mechanisms do not prove the intrinsic aesthetic worth of any particular creations, they do weaken the expectation that commerce should corrupt culture. The three subsequent chapters outline the successful operation of these mechanisms in the past, and show that criticisms of contemporary culture resemble the criticisms leveled at past masterworks. Finally, I discuss some particular developments in our contemporary culture that I see as healthy and creative.

The discussions of contemporary culture will entail both a value-neutral aspect and a value-laden aspect. The value-neutral aspect attempts to show that market wealth supports creative artworks of many different kinds, appealing to many different tastes. My favored variety of aesthetic pluralism admits the validity of contrasting perspectives on culture, values diversity, and recognizes the ultimate incommensurability of many artistic values.

Orson Welles argued for the supremacy of consumer opinion in judging aesthetic value. He once said: "We must not forget the audi-

ence. The audience votes by buying tickets. An audience is more intelligent than the individuals who create their entertainment. I can think of *nothing* that an audience won't understand. The only problem is to interest them. Once they are interested, they understand anything in the world. That must be in the feeling of the moviemaker."²

Harold Bloom advocates a different point of view. He considers the true masterpieces of the Western canon to be inaccessible to most readers. Culture, Bloom's substitute for religion, requires a Gnostic rather than Catholic view of the truth. Only those who read, reread, and study the classic works can hope to unlock their secrets. A work easily accessible on first reading is unlikely to be truly great. The best writers know far more than their audiences, who are wrongly tempted to dismiss *Finnegans Wake* as nonsense. The elitist venture of criticism can proceed without much regard for the preferences of the audience.

Rather than attempting to adjudicate between these two provocative perspectives, the value-neutral aspect of my analysis considers the ability of capitalism to support each kind of art. The market brings crowd-pleasing artists such as Michael Jackson or Steven Spielberg in touch with their audiences, while at the same time securing niches for more obscure visions, such as those of Brian Eno or Peter Greenaway. The categories commonly labeled high and low art often are complements rather than alternatives that we must choose between.

The value-neutral approach to cultural evaluation also stresses how the wealth, commercialization, and technology of the modern world provide the means and the incentives to preserve past culture. Cultural optimism does not suggest that any modern playwright is the superior or even the equal of William Shakespeare. It will never be the case that our favorite works, or the very best works, all were produced just yesterday. Rather, cultural optimism receives some of its support from the unparalleled ability of the modern world to preserve, maintain, disseminate, and interpret past masterworks. Artistic preservation and dissemination are supported by market mechanisms, just as artistic creativity is. Artistic production is not a single event, but rather is an ongoing process, often stretching over centuries, and requiring continued societal cooperation.

William Hazlitt wrote a famous essay—"Why the Arts are not Progressive—A Fragment"—that has been cited as ammunition against the idea of cultural progress. Hazlitt argued that the arts do not experi-

ence progress in the same manner that the natural sciences do. In the arts, later inventions do not typically render earlier inventions obsolete. To give a modern example, we cannot establish that Gabriel García Márquez is objectively “better” or “worse” than Charles Dickens. I do not, however, accept Hazlitt’s total rejection of the idea of cultural progress. Today’s art consumers enjoy more choice and greater diversity than ever before. Regardless of how aesthetic philosophy judges García Márquez versus Dickens, modern readers can now enjoy both for a pittance.

Market exchange and capitalism produce diverse art, rather than art that appeals to one particular set of tastes. Mid-to-late twentieth-century Western culture, although a favorite target of many critics, will go down in history as a fabulously creative and fertile epoch. The culture of our era has produced lasting achievements in cinema, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, architecture, dance, graphic and commercial design, fashion, jazz, the proliferation of classical, early music, and “original instrument” recordings, the short story, Latin American fiction, genre fiction, and the biography, to name but a few examples. These genres have offered a wide variety of styles, aesthetics, and moods. An individual need not have a very particular set of tastes to love contemporary creations.

The second part of the book’s aesthetic argument requires a greater role for subjective judgments about artistic value. Are Jasper Johns, Steven Spielberg, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and the Beatles frauds, mediocrities, or geniuses? Dare we go one step further and ask the same question about even more controversial (and lesser known) figures, such as Robert Gober, John Woo, Robert Ashley, and My Bloody Valentine?

Although I am not providing a treatise on aesthetics, I do, throughout the chapters, raise the possibility that these artists and others are in fact notable masters who may last the ages. The three chapters on art, literature, and music suggest that the contemporary world has produced a very large number of excellent creators and works. I do not, and cannot, provide knockdown arguments for these aesthetic views, but I hope that the book as a whole will persuade the reader to take a closer look at these and other artists. Despite the subjective component behind these judgments, I try to persuade the reader to see widespread support for the cultural optimist vision, as I do.

The tastes and recommendations that comprise the value-laden part of the argument will appear odd or idiosyncratic to some readers. Nonetheless I have deliberately tried to restrict myself to figures and works that have already achieved recognition from the specialists in their fields. Most lovers of Mozart and Haydn react with skepticism or disagreement when Ashley, Feldman, Scelsi, and Glass are cited as notable composers of our age. Yet the highly respected *Fanfare*, a journal of music reviewing, promotes precisely these names and rejects the notion that music composition is dead, as do I. Observers tend to be cultural optimists in areas where they specialize, and cultural pessimists when they serve as outsiders or general critics.

The cultural optimist position does not seek to make the achievements of modern creators commensurable with the achievements of the past, just as we cannot rank Dickens and Garcia Marquez, or ascertain whether five or ten Beatles songs might add up in value to one Haydn string quartet. It can be said, however, that modern creators have offered the world a large variety of deep and lasting creations that are universal in their scope and significant in their import. These creations delight and enrich large numbers of intelligent listeners, and continue to influence subsequent artists. We can expect many modern and contemporary works to stand the test of time, and indeed many have already. Alfred Hitchcock, once considered a purely commercial filmmaker for the masses, now is revered as an artistic genius by audiences, film critics, and other movie directors. We can expect many more recent creators to pass the test of time in a similar manner.

Cultural Pessimism

One significant class of critics, whom I call the cultural pessimists, take a strongly negative view of modernity and of market exchange. They typically believe that the market economy corrupts culture. The modern age is often compared unfavorably to some earlier time, such as the classical period, the Enlightenment, the nineteenth century, or even the early twentieth century. T. S. Eliot exemplified the pessimistic view when he wrote: “We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than

they were fifty years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity.”³

Cultural pessimism comes from various points along the political spectrum and transcends traditional left-wing/right-wing distinctions. Its roots, in intellectual history, include Plato, Augustine, Rousseau, Pope, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Spengler. Cultural pessimism received its most explicit statement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the so-called “Battle of the Books.” In these debates, William Temple, Jonathan Swift, and others argued that modern writings and achievements were inferior to those of antiquity. In the contemporary scene, various forms of cultural pessimism exert wide intellectual influence.⁴

Neo-conservative intellectuals, such as Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, have questioned whether a market economy supports healthy artistic tendencies. Bell, for instance, favors artistic modernism but views it as exhausted and superseded by less constructive movements. Allan Bloom, in *Closing of the American Mind*, provides a Straussian slant on cultural pessimism. Bloom blames left-wing academics, youth culture, and the philosophy of moral relativism for our supposed cultural malaise. In the American political realm the new religious Right and Republican Right have attacked the moral values exhibited by contemporary culture. Nationalist parties in Europe have criticized the loss of cultural unity brought by a market economy.

The pessimism of the neo-conservatives often extends beyond culture in the narrow sense. Many neo-conservatives believe that Western civilization is collapsing under a plague of permissiveness, crime, loss of community, and related ailments. Robert Bork, in his latest book *Slouching towards Gomorrah*, provides an extreme statement of this view. The supposedly sorry state of the modern arts is both a cause and reflection of the deeper plight of modernity. As I consider cultural pessimism, however, I focus only on the charges about culture in the narrower sense of artistic production.

Neo-Marxists and critics of mass culture, including the Frankfurt School, also adhere to largely pessimistic views. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, among many others, believe that market exchange damages the quality of cultural production. The commodification of culture stifles our critical faculties, induces alienation, degrades artworks, and protects the capitalist system against inter-

nal challenges. Adorno advocates atonal music, and regards jazz and rock and roll as abominable corruptions. Frankfurt School writers tend to dislike popular culture, which they perceive as hostile to the project of a society built on modernist reason.⁵

Jürgen Habermas, also associated with the Frankfurt School, stakes out a positive position on modernity but holds unsympathetic attitudes toward the culture of capitalism. On one hand, Habermas views modernity as explicitly progressive, as did Marx. Habermas believes in the utopian potential of modernity, based on objective reason and the Enlightenment project of a good society. On the other hand, Habermas is highly critical of modernity as we experience it in contemporary capitalist society. He sees Western reason, when combined with capitalism, technology, and the media, as a force of domination and manipulation rather than a force of liberation or free expression. Critical social theory is needed to reform communicative discourse and bring about a more fully progressive modernity. Habermas sees the market as hindering rather than aiding critical communication.

Many neo-liberal writers echo the concerns of the Frankfurt School, although they do not accept Marxist solutions. Neil Postman emphasizes how modern technology and media corrupt our culture. The title of Herbert Schiller's book summarizes the views of many: *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*. Pierre Bourdieu, one of the leading sociologists of culture, argues against the corporate control of culture that he associates with a market economy. Even the mainstream American case for liberal social democracy portrays capitalism as an uneasy ally of culture, at best.⁶

The political correctness movement often identifies market culture with the suppression of women and minorities. Puritan feminist Catherine MacKinnon, in her book *Only Words*, argues that sexually explicit literature and art create harm and should be banned. Some branches of multiculturalist thought argue that free cultural exchange leads to cultural homogenization and a culture of the least common denominator. Marshall McLuhan raised the specter of a "global village," in which we all consume the same products. In the political realm we find cultural protectionism practiced around the world.

Many left-wing "cultural studies" scholars stake out a mixed position. These individuals tend to look sympathetically on modern popular culture but they dislike capitalism and the forces of the market.

Fredric Jameson exemplifies these attitudes. He describes himself as a “relatively enthusiastic consumer of postmodernism,” but he also promises us that central planning someday will return in superior form. Only then will our culture become a “project” to be planned by free individuals.⁷

Writers from the British Birmingham school (such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall) tend to reject the distinction between high and low culture and propose a unified methodological approach to the two. Like much of the cultural studies movement, writers in that tradition have helped legitimize popular culture and have shown sympathy for cultural optimism. Unlike the Frankfurt School, Birmingham writers see popular culture as containing liberating influences against otherwise elitist capitalist structures. When it comes to the market, however, the Birmingham school uses neo-Marxist economic analysis and emphasizes mechanisms of hegemony, rather than innovation and freedom of expression.⁸

Finally, to conclude this discussion of sources, cultural pessimism is by no means an exclusively intellectual phenomenon. The final chapter of this book examines the criticisms of contemporary culture coming from parents, churches, artists themselves, and other sources.

Cultural Optimism

The cultural optimists are a less prominent group in intellectual history than the pessimists. Cultural optimism nonetheless has attracted a number of prominent defenders in the history of ideas. Charles Perrault, a seventeenth-century French believer in cultural progress, wrote “Mother Goose” and other tales in a deliberate attempt to match *Aesop’s Fables*. Baldassare Castiglione defended cultural progress in his *Book of the Courtier*. He argued that the modern age (1478–1529 for him) compared favorably to the world of the ancients. In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson defended the civilizing aspects of books, printing, and commercial bookselling. The Marquis de Condorcet, a classical liberal Girondist and victim of the French Revolution, argued that human reason provides a strong impetus for cultural progress.

We find at least three versions of the cultural optimist position in the history of ideas. The first view suggests that the arts tend to flourish in a modern liberal order (today, democratic capitalism, although not all the cultural optimists of the past were democrats). I promote that position in this book. This view does not predict that any single geographic area necessarily produces great culture in a particular genre. As discussed above, artistic creativity is highly contingent upon many factors, including luck. Nonetheless the world as a whole is highly diverse and we can expect a flourishing of creativity in the aggregate. Bad luck or intervening causes may influence a specific culture for the worse, but cultural optimism nonetheless suggests that a preponderance of factors favor positive outcomes for the free world as a whole.

The second version of cultural optimism goes further and makes the political prediction that a liberal order will remain prominent for many years to come. I have sympathies for this view as well, but it lies beyond the purview of this book (in its defense, see Francis Fukayama, *The End of History*). The third version of cultural optimism argues that the arts will flourish precisely because capitalism is doomed and will be replaced by a superior system, such as socialism or communism. This is the classic Marxian statement of cultural optimism, which I reject.

My favored version of cultural optimism draws upon a wide variety of contemporary writers, many of whom work outside a purely academic context. Camille Paglia defends the Rolling Stones and Hollywood cinema as artistically vital forces in the modern world. She even writes favorably about how capitalist wealth has stimulated artistic production. Robert Pattison's *The Triumph of Vulgarity* takes the supposed aesthetic defects of rock and roll and interprets them as virtues; his book *On Literacy* argues that literacy has been increasing over time, rather than decreasing. Herbert Gans, in his *Popular Culture and High Culture*, praises popular culture and argues that modernity has produced increasing diversity of culture. Cultural studies theorist Paul Willis, in his *Common Culture*, praises the "symbolic creativity" of capitalist consumerism. Nelson George, well-known author and critic for the *Village Voice*, defends rap music and argues the importance of "black capitalism" for contemporary music. Wendy Steiner, in *The Scandal of Pleasure*, defends contemporary culture and the autonomy of art against moralizing critics, from both left and right. William Grampp, economist and author of *Pricing the Priceless*, argues that artistic production is

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