**The theory of mass society**

The Theory of Mass Society In George Gissing's novel New Grub Street (1891), two representatives of the new world of mass publishing are cynically discussing the profitable living and potential fortune which await them if they transform the semi-popular paper Chat into Chit-Chat and the serious Tatler into Tittle-Tattle. And why? Because the late nineteenth century is the age of mass democracy and universal semi-literacy: 'I would have the paper address itself to the quarter-educated ... the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board schools, the young men and women who can just read but are incapable of sustained attention. People of this sort want something to occupy them in trains and on the buses and trams ... what they want is the lightest and frothiest of chit -chatty information - bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics. . . . Everything must be very short, two inches at the utmost; their attention can't sustain itself beyond two inches. Even chat is too solid for them: they want chit-chat.' I In almost identical language, a modern critic writes of the 'shapeless sprawling and anti-human' environment of modern mass society in which peoA. Swingewood, The Myth of Mass Culture © Alan Swingewood 1977 2 The Myth of Mass Culture pIe 'read manic journals and magazines' as they journey to the 'meaningless tasks' of work to find relief only 'in office flirtations, pin-up and pop-singer cults, film and television talk, cosmetic and fashion preoccupations'.2 The culture of modern capitalism is thus defined by the literary imagination as egalitarian and mediocre. Mass culture 'mixes, scrambles everything together, producing homogenized culture. '" Mass culture is very democratic; it refuses to discriminate against or between any thing'. 3 Thus the inexorable levelling of culture and loss of standards: capitalist culture and its artefacts become commodities, their function to entertain, divert and reduce consciousness to a state of total passivity. This chapter will explore the development of the theory of mass society and culture in the pessimistic versions associated with literary critics such as F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, and the Marxist critics T. W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse as well as in the more optimistic and recent sociological theory of post-industrial society. Origins: de Tocqueville, Nietuche, Gasset, T. S. Eliot and Leavis The historical origin of the concept of mass society is linked to the rapid industrialisation of west European capitalism during the latter half of the nineteenth century which created the social, political and ideological conditions necessary for the emergence of modern class society with its basis no longer in the notion of the 'people' but in the mass. The development of the capitalist division of labour, large-scale factory organisation and commodity production, densely concentrated urban populations, the growth of cities, centralised decision-making, a more complex and universal system of communications and the growth of mass political movements based on the extension of voting rights to the working class are the ideal characteristics of mass society. But this term 'mass' also implies a change in ideology: as pre-capitalist social relations dissolve in the wake of these massive economic and social changes, the emerging bourgeois ruling class seeks to legitimise its domination through the secular and rational ideals of democracy, equality and material justice.