
This book makes a passionate plea for a reconsideration of the very basis of North American society: democracy. The point that David Trend tries to drive home, throughout this indictment of our conceptualization of democracy, is that what democracy is and how it is ultimately exercised has and continues to be eroded through the misguided efforts of a media directed not by societal interests but the corporate profit margin. In the end Trend suggests that it is the metamorphosis of the media from a passive reflector of society to an active shaper of it which is leading to heightened levels of divisiveness and ultimately antagonism amongst the American citizenry itself. What is being called for, throughout this book, is the consideration of a new sociopolitical space from within which engagement between citizens and new definitions of citizenship under the banner of a radical democracy might take place. It should be stressed that what Trend is suggesting is not new, but a thoughtful re-articulation of the scholarship on the growing need for a revitalization of society and the public sphere.

The problem, as Trend discusses at length, is that the strategic role of the arts and humanities in both shaping human identities and ultimately influencing public policy, under the broad banner of culture, has and continues to be marginalized for the benefit of and by the American corporatist economy. Thus, according to Trend, the problem which has been created, and stratifies American society, is: how can the positive influences of culture, as embodied in the ability to exercise critical thought, be re-asserted in a society that has spurned this ideal as irrelevant and supplanted it with the headstrong drive toward the acquisition of hard skills?

To prove his thesis Trend divides his book into two loose parts. First, Trend seeks to provide the historical basis for his assertion that the solution to the American society’s current social malaise is the need to embrace a radical democracy through an examination of how various cultural institutions and communication technologies have evolved mainly through the education system, entertainment, arts, and media. Second, Trend wants to assert that the American moral dissatisfaction with the mainstream political system does not have to be accepted carte blanche, as is typically believed by the citizenry. Furthermore, Trend suggests that there are easily obtained alternatives to the current sociopolitical system through the embracing and celebration of cultural difference within all strata of society. Essentially this program would entail the creation of what Chantal Mouffe has affectionately labelled a “new political space.”

A central pillar to Trend’s discussion is the corporate influence on the role of the media in society and the implication of this on the sociopolitical articulation and understanding of culture itself. Trend’s evaluation of the effectiveness of the media as both a positive and negative societal force is predicated by his political economic misgivings of corporate America. But, it should also be stated that Trend’s assertions about the media are nothing new, merely a horizontal recapitulation of economic and social ideas already well developed by Herbert Schiller, Allmard Mattelart, Neil Postman, and George Gerbner, to name but a few authors who have surveyed this terrain.

While the discussion of the need for egalitarian principles to guide a rapidly evolving society into the millennium, also labelled as a radical democracy, is central to Trend’s thesis, his ability to articulate the liberal and conservative cleavages that have rallied to shut out any voices that would challenge their centrist views becomes bogged down in the simple articulation of the terms right and left, liberal and conservative. The theoretical portion of this text is its major stumbling block. Instead of being clear and decisive, Trend prefers to trade in ambiguities and nuance. Liberal and conservative political parties in the United States, much like in Canada, tend to be centrist in their convictions and this basic
principle of the American political system is lost on Trend who persists in arguing that liberal and conservative popular political views in America are indeed wholly separate and at odds with one another. Trend goes on to assert that the problem with American political and cultural identity is the problem of the left and right articulation itself, which is confusing and less than convincing.

While there may be holes in the theoretical discussion of the American political model and its influence on the citizenry, this is not grounds for the outright dismissal of this text. In fact, the horizontal development of the role of culture within society is useful as a tool through which to understand why the American state and public alike find it so difficult to articulate culture as anything but business. The point that this book ultimately tries to make is that culture as it relates to a society, in this case the American society, is very important to the function and relation of the people that embody it. The argument for culture presented here champions getting above language, colour, and the superficial differences amongst the population and embracing the philosophical differences in the thought process of the people who ultimately comprise the society as a whole. The point being made here, and arrived at through the veiled pursuit of a radical democracy, is that if ideas—the very things we as a society believe, debate, and reject—are premised on a media that is based solely on the economic value it represents, then the interpretation we give to the very content of that media has the possibility of being tainted by the fact that it is being created and disseminated for the sole purpose of consumption without consideration of its ability to stimulate and foster meaningful thought. The reductionist logic that this idea employs is that media in general, and the American media in particular, are nothing more than a vehicle through which a fusion of political and profit motives take place creating an entertainment complex that sets national agendas and is ultimately closed to the will of the many to the benefit of the very few.

Trend suggests that technology as exemplified by the Internet could be the turning point for democracy and accelerate its reclamation by the people through its radicalization of society and the ability of non-standard communities to be created and brought together. But technology alone will not bring about change which can only be achieved by a re-conceptualization of society on the part of the population itself. What is being called for is nothing less than the redefinition of citizenship and political identity through the creation of a new political space. Thus culture and its acceptance within society as more than simply an economic vehicle is paramount since culture, in this text, is defined as the backbone of a radical democracy providing a means of obtaining knowledge on the part of the oppressed as well as a vehicle of change. Trend is challenging the researcher to go back to the basics of communication, as it relates to society, to re-evaluate the very concepts that we have come to accept, and to question them once again in light of both technological and socio-political changes which have both come about and are pending.

James Piecowye
Université de Montréal