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A Common Culture in the Age of Blogging?

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Now, art critic Terry Teachout offers an analysis of the blogging phenomenon that mixes personal testimony with deep cultural observations. In "Culture in the Age of Blogging," Teachout devotes his considerable skills as a writer and his deep expertise as a critic of culture and takes a hard look at the blogosphere.

Published in the June 2005 issue of *Commentary*, Teachout's article is primarily directed at those who follow developments in America's "high culture." In other words, Teachout's regular readers are those who follow developments in the art scene, regularly attend art museums and exhibitions, are serious students of classical music, and are likely to be devotees of the theater. After all, in Teachout's other life he is the music critic for *Commentary* as well as the drama critic of the *Wall Street Journal*. A member of the National Council on the Arts, Teachout is a formidable conservative critic.

Now, he is also a blogger. Teachout has joined with literary critic Laura Demanski to produce "About Last Night," a blog hosted at ArtsJournal.com. Clearly, this was not something Teachout had expected to do. For one thing, the blogosphere has been dominated by political commentary and cultural analysis has been more commonly found in the established journals, review pages, and other dimensions of elite media. Teachout's decision to join the blogging revolution represents something of a revolution in itself.

In this article, Teachout explains why he made this decision and what this means for the larger culture. In a nutshell, Teachout believes that America's common culture no longer exists.

Describing the change that produced the blogging phenomenon, Teachout offers this observation: "The simplest description of this change is also the starkest one: the common culture of widely shared values and knowledge that once helped to unite Americans of all creeds, colors, and classes no longer exists. In its place we now have a "balkanized" group of subcultures whose members pursue their separate, unshared interests in an unprecedented variety of ways."

This represents an enormous shift in American self-consciousness, Teachout admits. "The idea of a common American culture is so central to the American idea itself that it was long taken for granted. Just as young people pledged allegiance

to the American flag in school each day, so they studied the same historical events, read many of the same books, heard the same popular songs on radio, and watched the same movies and TV programs. No one, whether in or out of school, seriously attempted to deny that our country's cultural heritage would rather be Judeo-Christian West, and more specifically of what Winston Churchill called "the English-speaking peoples."

America demonstrated an amazing capacity to "absorb immigrant folkways," but the nation was shaped by a common culture and worldview. That world has simply disappeared.

America's common culture was soon replaced by a Culture War, a basic conflict over issues of worldview and ultimate meaning. To those on the cultural left, Western culture was seen as the enemy of progress and the engine of oppression. Teachout recalls a "watershed moment" in 1988 when a group of students and faculty members at Stanford University protested that institution's famed introductory course in Western civilization. Led by Reverend Jesse Jackson, "then at the height of his influence as an advocate-without-portfolio for progressive causes," the protesters shouted: "Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture's got to go!" In Teachout's words, this slogan "offered a simplified but nonetheless telling clue to the ultimate purpose of those academics who repudiated the universal significance of Western civilization."

Teachout suggests that these cultured despisers of culture were and are so committed to the idea that all truth and meaning is socially constructed that they could only judge "quality" in art and literature in political terms.

Clearly, America's common culture was under sustained assault from the cultural left—and especially from forces safely ensconced in tenured positions in American universities. The academic left was aided and abetted in its mission of undermining the very idea of a common culture by the media elite and allied forces of cultural condescension.

By now, the Culture War is simply a fact of American political and cultural life. Teachout argues that demographics now play a significant role in this picture. "The presidential election of 2000 disclosed to the American public at large, including the mainstream news media, a phenomenon that had already been noticed by alert analysts like Michael Barone," he advises. "Not only had the party affiliation of American voters become closely linked to their cultural views, but people of differing views were choosing to live in different geographical places."

The migration of many Americans to the so-called "Sun Belt" and the heartland of the country is now understood to have been driven by more than economic considerations and climate. America is now separated between "Blue America" and "Red America," with Democrats concentrated in large cities and college towns while Republicans are more likely to be distributed across the nation's heartland, in smaller towns, and in the fast-growing suburbs of metropolitan areas.

"The existence of so thorough-going a split would seem to offer ideal conditions for a *Kulturkampf* [German for "Culture War"], especially since Blue America is the home of the national news media and the educational establishment, two cultural institutions dominated by liberals (another once-controversial claim that has been substantiated by extensive polling)."

Nevertheless, this Culture War has not taken the form of an all-out contest for dominance of the mainstream media. Instead, conservatives have gravitated toward the creation of an alternative media culture. The blogosphere is now a major part of this culture and one of the most significant factors behind conservative political and cultural influence.

As Teachout tells the story, "Instead of trying to take over those aging institutions, or transform them from within, [conservatives] launched parallel institutions of their own. Talk radio, the Fox News Channel, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, private secondary schools, religious colleges, the burgeoning home-schooling network: all these are aspects of a collective end-run around a liberal establishment whose favor conservatives no longer seek to curry."

This represents a seismic shift in America's cultural landscape. Teachout is clearly on to something of importance here. As one who has devoted his life to the study of elite culture, Teachout understands what it means for a significant portion of Americans to decide that elite opinion really doesn't matter. "Only those who insist on living and working in the islands of Blue America are affected by the stigma of liberal disapproval," he understands. "In Red America, by contrast, a Harvard degree or a favorable mention in the *New Yorker* does not enhance one's social status (a fact of which George W. Bush is famously aware)."

Rupert Murdoch, the founder and chairman of News Corporation (and thus of Fox News), tried to explain this to the

American Society of Newspaper Editors. “What is happening right before us is, in short, a revolution in the way young people are accessing news. They don’t want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don’t want to rely on a godlike figure from above to tell them what’s important. And to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they certainly don’t want news presented as gospel,” Murdoch argued. “Instead, they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it. They want to question, to probe, to offer a different angle.”

Teachout clearly agrees with Murdoch’s analysis. “Instead of staying to fight, Americans withdrew from the battleground, went home to cultivate their own cultural gardens—and started blogging,” he explains.

Teachout also cites Richard Brookheiser as another cultural observer who “gets it.” Responding to Murdoch’s speech, Brookheiser explained, “Murdoch was being polite. What he was telling his colleagues was: newspapers are dead.”

As Brookheiser continued: “Newspapers were more than the particular paper you read. They were part of the dawn, with toothpaste, coffee, and trying to find the right sock.” That world exists no more. In its place, we are now confronted by a daunting array of media and news sources—most made available by the information revolution.

For Teachout, the point is clear: “One thing of which I am sure is that the common culture of my youth is gone for good. It was hollowed out by the rise of ethnic ‘identity politics,’ then splintered beyond hope of repair by the emergence of the web-based technologies that so maximized and facilitated cultural choice as to make the broad-based offerings of the old mass media look bland and unchallenging by comparison.”

Terry Teachout’s analysis, published in the respected pages of *Commentary*, signals a growing awareness of the blogging revolution and what it means for America. In a strange twist of irony, the culture of Western civilization may survive through the efforts of a core of dedicated bloggers who are unwilling to see it die. The media elite will simply have to watch from a distance, scratching their heads as they watch their audience disappear and their influence dissipate. The long-term impact of the blogging revolution is yet to be seen. Nevertheless, the toppling of the mainstream media’s monopoly is a cultural achievement in itself. May the revolution continue.

