

Pure Changes: The Social Context of Bernstein's MASS

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I. Overview of 1960s social change: Pure Changes

It is a truism that the 1960s was a time of rapid and far-reaching social change. Among the polyglot transformations of that era I suggest that a particular set of changes is most pertinent to an understanding of Leonard Bernstein's signature work, "Mass: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers". This set of changes has to do with the reconfiguration of the boundary between the private and public spheres of social life; I call them "pure changes".

Prior to the 1960s, as Farber (1994) says, "the gulf between private acts and public norms was quite wide". Social and personal ideals were increasingly out of sync with each other, but such ideals persisted. People flocked to church; we imprinted "In God we trust" on our coins; the goodness, even righteousness, of America was assumed, including American politicians, American business and the American family, even if the evidence for that assumption was not always strong. By the end of the 1960s the disjunction of the private and the public had narrowed considerably, not, as in past revivals, because of a new commitment to public conformity, but due in large part to the reconfiguration of norms to accommodate freely chosen personal behavior. It is in this sense that the 1960s was a time of the loss of purity in both the private and public spheres. By this I do not mean that people were any more venial at the end of the period than they were at the beginning, but that the notion or perception of purity itself—we might say, the illusion that there could be purity—was lost.

Moments in this social process are what I mean by "pure changes", that is, events or trends which changed purity itself by problematizing in a particular way the public-private disjunction during the decade. Among such pure changes were the rise of political assassination, the sexual revolution and the national experience of the Vietnam War. In the rise of assassinations the political became viciously personal, and in the sexual revolution the personal became famously political. Both illustrate the attempts to both enable and set limits to the shifting boundaries between the individual and collective modalities of social life. So also the emphasis on conscience from Vatican II to the antiwar movement. All of these pure changes involved questioning the legitimacy, formerly taken for granted, of both the commitment of human bodies to the ends of the state and the restrictions of the state on the commitment of human bodies. The slogan "Make love, not war" neatly connects both these themes. These changes, and others like them that could be added to this list, form a general process of public-private realignment, a loss of purity, throughout the decade.

Underlying this process are two broad social trends during the 1960s. The first is the remarkable rise in affluence and the even more remarkable rise in the equity of affluence throughout the decade. In 1959 almost 1 in 5 Americans lived in poverty, prompting a spate of corrective legislation and social effort—the "War on Poverty"—of the Johnson years, which was largely successful. From 1959 to 1973 the proportion of Americans in poverty plummeted from 19.8 to 8.7 percent. Never before in American life has such a social redistribution of income happened so rapidly or so broadly. And never before or since 1973 have there been so few Americans in

poverty. In 1968 the minimum wage provided enough income for a family of 4 to live above the poverty line—a feat which has not been replicated before or since that year. Today, by contrast, working full-time for minimum wage provides an income at only 59% of the poverty line.

The second social trend that shaped the 1960s is the well-known demographic phenomenon known as the baby boom. The usual way to report this is to note that the percentage of Americans under age 18 spiked from 31% in 1950—a proportion that had held constant since the decline of immigration in the 1920s—to over 36% in 1960. This statistic, however, doesn't sufficiently capture the ramrod effect of the large number of children and youth born each year during that era. In fact, in every year from 1953 to 1968 one in five Americans was under the age of 10. By contrast today, despite talk that we are in a "secondary baby boom", children under 10 comprise less than 13% of the population.

The social engagement with the pure changes of the 1960s was profoundly affected by this backdrop of growing affluence and youth. Social scientists broadly identify two social processes by which the order of society is conferred from one generation to another: internalization, in which the young come to adopt as their own the normative values and ideals of culture, and social control, which limits the options of those who fail sufficiently to conform to society. The potent combination of youth and affluence, I suggest, weakened the effect of both of these mechanisms during the 1960s. The sheer numbers of young people strained the resources of the usual agents of internalization, e.g., the family, the church and the schools. Abetted by the rise of broadcast communications and their parents' pursuit of affluence, many youth of the 1960s rejected these institutions, and saw the rise in importance of the peer group and an alternative, counter culture. At the same time, growing affluence insulated many of the children of the 1960s from the negative effects of such nonconformity. As a result, in the face of changes and trends that brought behavior and norms into conflict, social actors were both free and disposed to problematize social norms rather than personal behavior.

II. Overview of the work

In what specific ways *Mass* reflects or not this social reconfiguration is a question that lies beyond the competence of sociology. In a general sense, however, both the content and context of the work suggest ready engagement with the realignment of norms and behavior. With regard to content the best way to make this case may be simply to summarize the work for the uninitiated. The following is from Peter Gutman's review of Sony's 2000 re-release of the piece on CD:

MASS ANNOUNCES its intentions with mind-expanding harshness, as four loud, incompatible percussive settings of the *Kyrie* bombard the audience from quadraphonic speakers located in the corners of the auditorium. The cacophony is silenced by a guitar chord, which begins a disarmingly sweet and naive song of praise by a blue-jeaned folk singer. Donning vestments, he becomes a Celebrant. Throughout the next 80 minutes segments of the ensemble careen through a phenomenal profusion of music and moods - marches, meditations, opera arias, Broadway songs, blues, hymns, narration, scat, Hebrew prayers, gospel, folk, rounds, electronic dissonance and even a kazoo chorus. While all of this sounds

like an unholy mess on paper, everything flows together miraculously, unified and vitalized by Bernstein's overwhelming humanism and staggering creativity.

Unable to satisfy the crowd's raucous demands for peace (*Dona nobis pacem*), the Celebrant ultimately shatters the sacraments, professes his confusion in a grand-operatic mad scene, babbles irrationally and slips back into the mass of performers. The end is one of those outrageously corny but deeply moving gestures that only an ardent sentimentalist like Bernstein could possibly pull off. After its wide-ranging explorations and relentless assaults on tradition, the work concludes with a ravishingly gorgeous, richly harmonized hymn for universal peace. As the cast drifts into the audience to spread a touch of benediction, Bernstein on tape intones the final words: "The mass is ended; go in peace."

Mass was inaugurated in a hail of controversy. Critics at the time reviled it as "derivative and attitudinizing drivel," "subliterate rubbish," "cheap and vulgar." The New York Times called it "pseudo-serious. . . as thin as the watery liberalism that dominates the message of the work." Some Catholics at the time were shocked at what they saw as a secularizing or trivializing treatment of sacred liturgy. The archbishop of Cincinnati condemned the work as blasphemous and forbade Catholics to attend. But ordinary audiences who saw the work universally loved it. Its audition was met by a standing ovation of nearly 30 minutes duration, with many in the audience moved to tears. (Peyser 1987)

III. Conclusion: After Purity

It is worthy of note that Mass was commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to inaugurate, in 1972, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. It was, in other words, a personal tribute to an assassinated president, whose death symbolized for many our national loss of purity. The current president, Richard Nixon, on the advice of J. Edgar Hoover that the Latin Mass text contained coded antiwar messages, pointedly absented himself from the opening performance. Mainstream Americans loved this Mass, I suggest, in the same way and for the same reasons that mainstream Americans loved John Kennedy, at least after his death. Like him, it exuded a humanity that was more generous and thoughtful than the narrow ritualism and authoritarianism that, accurately or not, characterized most Americans'—and by 1972, many Catholics'—perception of Catholicism.

As far as content, Mass takes the Christian tradition's premier expression of faith as a context for voicing conflict, ambivalence and doubt. In many ways Mass expresses the ideals of Vatican Council II, itself a type of pure change, which sought to bring the Church into fuller engagement with the modern world. But, seen from the perspective of the Church, it also extends those ideals. This Mass is not Catholicism in a human context; it is humanism in a Catholic context. Here the Church does not read the signs of the time, but the time reads the signs of the Church.

The response to pure changes may indeed be to privilege pure change; indeed this is how the work is often understood, and was understood by its first reviewers. The juxtaposition of the Latin mass text with an exploration of the personal struggle to believe which forms the core of Mass may simply express a familiar theme of the 1960s, that this age is one in which traditional

forms are no longer relevant and the basic questions of life are addressed de novo. It is tempting, on these grounds, to conclude that the piece is little more than a response to the Durkheimian anomie of an era of rapid change.

Like all great art, however, Mass does not merely reflect the past but also anticipates the future. I think it is a mistake to see it, as most first reviewers did, as only eclectic or an attempt to be “relevant”. Rather, it is evident from the perspective of 30 years that Mass also expresses a more enduring shift in the relation of such questions to social reality. For (as much as it may dismay us aging children of the 60s) the social contestation and realignment—the loss of purity—that erupted in the 1960s was not resolved in the 1970s or 1980s or 1990s. Camelot has not returned, nor are persons today much more likely, if at all, to be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin—or, for that matter, the size of their bank account, their proximity to the Canadian border, or where they fall on the liberal-conservative divide.

Mass is best understood in its social aspect, I suggest, not as an attempt to resolve the loss of purity, to discover a truth or make a statement, but rather to affirm the possibility of living without purity. As such, it invites us to recognize what is most basic about purity: that it is irrecoverable. The social and personal ideals that ruled society before the 1960s may have been exhibited in persons’ lives only very imperfectly, but even illusory purity, like the real thing, cannot be reacquired once it is lost. Now we must live in a world where ideals are always imperfect, truth is always contextualized, social location qualifies sincerity, and faith is a struggle not necessarily toward a resolution, but just a struggle.

The young theologian Thomas Beaudoin (“After Purity: Contesting Theocapitalism.” (Princeton Lectures on Youth and Church, Princeton Theological Seminary)) eloquently describes this sense of living “after purity” in the subjective experience of those born after the 1960s. He explains: “What do I mean by many in the younger generations living “after purity”? . . . I mean living in a world that appears to us daily as irreversibly ambiguous, a particular admixture of sin and grace, exploitation and generosity, getting ahead and giving up, dysfunction and desire, power and peace, depression and delight, rage and recalcitrance. . . . We live with the knowledge and helpless feeling that someone somewhere may be suffering because of the way that the coffee we savor or the clothes we enjoy are produced, and we are too busy, tired, or bogged down with our own “issues” to even begin to do anything about it. We live with the suspicion that every preacher and politician and parent may well be deceiving us or themselves, and yet we live with the need to deeply trust these people. . . . We will give ourselves in charity but are skeptical about what gets called justice. We know that changing the system is both absolutely necessary and utterly impossible, whether it be the church or secular politics. . . .”

Those who hear the question and wonder what the answer is—the traditional stance of inquiry both classical and scientific—will fail to appreciate fully life after purity, and thereby also the significance and affirmation of this remarkable Mass. Bernstein himself may have said it best in the conclusion of his Norton lectures at Harvard, which took as their theme “The Unanswered Question”. He ended by saying that “he no longer knew what the question was, but he was sure of one thing—the answer was ‘yes’.” (quoted by Gutman 2000).