3 WHO IS CULTURE?

First I am a Pathan because I have been so for thousands of years; then I am a Muslim, which I have been for 1,300 years and, third, I am a Pakistani, which I have been only for the last 40 years or so.

—WALI KHAN (AHMED 1992: 133)

Culture comes in *cultures,* attached to particular societies. Cultures are not only *whats* and *hows,* but *whos.* This raises two thorny questions: what are the criteria for deciding what counts as a particular culture, and what constitutes cultural membership and identity? The latter connects to the question of what it means to be a "people," an "ethnic" group, or even a "race," briefly treated in Chapter 1. These connections are difficult to analyze, not only because of the sheer obscurity of the terms, but because such groupings trouble us modern liberal folk. If we open the door to the salience of cultural membership, will race and ethnicity and other "primordial" attachments sneak through, bringing intolerance with them? But open that door we must—it will not stay shut—and do some conceptual cleaning, even if sweeping initially kicks up enough dust to make the mess seem worse than ever.

We may try to set the bounds of *a* culture as a single *horizon* of shared practices, artifacts, and narratives, our judgment of "a horizon" being determined by the relative coherence of what is inside and its relative difference from what is outside. We may imagine extreme cases of discreteness, where one society bears a culture that is utterly unique and internally homogeneous. This is a perfectly decent procedure; starting with the easy cases usually makes sense. But easy cases are hard to find. It is dubious that we can identify cultures that share nothing (as we will see later, the very idea is senseless). Also, if as we have noted cultures need not be coextensive with polities or societies, then we cannot employ administrative or state boundaries. Further, we will always find internal disputes and differences in each society

that are hard to distinguish from cultural differences. Even if, using Edward Shils's terminology, two cultural "centers" can be distinguished, they are likely to have indistinct "peripheries" where the percentage of persons in the locale embodying a trait goes continuously down, leaving us with the choice of labeling them deviant members of culture A or members of another culture B.

But things are not all that bleak. Unlike color spectra or other continua we might study, here the objects of our investigation help us out: *people identify themselves.* Self-acknowledgment of membership is a *prima facie* sufficient, if fallible, condition for cultural identification ("No, we are not Uzbeks. We are Tadjiks"). Beyond this we would expect, as noted in Chapter 1, those who identify with one culture to share a system of judgmental endogamy, the boundaries of a lifeworld of socially compelling expectations and norms. Above all we must remember that the kind of unity a culture exhibits may not be rigid. As MacIntyre claims of traditions, a culture is best characterized as an ongoing debate. Following Martha Nussbaum again we can expect societal cultures to be *thick but vague.* They deeply color the self, but are in most cases broad and pluralistic enough not to determine one narrow course of life. The point is, we do have some markers to look for, as long as we don't expect bright lines and red flags.

The level or zone of cultural phenomena matters here as well. At the "lowest" level, that is, most closely related to everyday social behavior, society and culture *must* merge. Interacting social members, even if they have different cultures, must share judgments of intelligibility and propriety. Sharing an understanding of what the social group takes to be the meaning of its practices, its rules of propriety, its natural language(s), is at the same time sharing a part of a culture. In a polycultural society, members of different cultures must, to the degree they are fellow social members, find each other intelligible and proper. Thus their cultures must overlap at the everyday level. At the less pragmatic and more symbolic level, however, culture includes rites, icons, and metanarratives for the constitution of meaning in a more global sense. Depending on the kind of social norms active, these can indeed diverge among social members. In the extreme case, modern liberal society, individuals or groups who bear distinct rites, icons, and metanarratives may yet function together under common norms of intelligibility and propriety on the everyday level in public and restrict the nonoverlapping portions of their cultures to privacy. Citizenship in such a society requires little sharing at the symbolic level.

More important for our purposes, however, is the meaning of the *verb* that stands between person and culture. A culture is not the kind of thing that can be "held" or "had" for external, instrumental reasons. While it makes sense to say that I learned Italian to do business in Italy, I cannot say that I *became* culturally Italian, that I *am* Italian, for such purposes. Parekh argues for example that being British is sharing not a body of values, or history, or civic institutions, but "a specific form of life . . . a specific way of talking about and conducting common affairs. Being British therefore means learning the grammar, vocabulary and syntax of the prevailing form of life and knowing how to participate in its ongoing dialogue . . . [it is] a matter of acquiring conceptual competence in handling the prevailing cultural language" (Parekh 1991: 203). This account would indeed capture much of what we mean by cultural *familiarity.* But it does *not* capture cultural *identity.* For what does it mean to have competence in "handling the prevailing cultural language"? This implies an instrumental attitude. There is nothing wrong with that; my point is conceptual, not moral. Is being able to "handle" British culture equivalent to *being* British? If it were, British-ness would be a kind of technique or competence. But cultural identity must be thicker than this; it must in some sense characterize my *ends.* As such, to treat a "culture" as something to be acquired for a prior purpose, and perhaps discarded later, is to admit that one has never really been a member.

Likewise we take culture to be something that cannot be gotten didactically. To acquire a culture requires the kind of long training that comes from living in or with the social group of which the culture is a possession. The usual way is through birth and maturation. This distinguishes "knowing" a culture from "belonging" to a culture, or cultural *facility* from cultural *identity.* I can be a scholar and lover of Egyptian culture and yet not identify myself as an Egyptian; indeed, I can adopt Egyptian values and still fail to be Egyptian, for as Kymlicka himself notes, shared ideals are not enough (Kymlicka 1995a: 188). I have a friend who immersed himself in things Japanese, including moving to Japan, learning a great deal of the Japanese language, studying Japanese philosophy, and finding a Japanese fiancée. This led to the bizarre situation in which he knew more about traditional Japan than most Japanese (including, awkwardly, his prospective in-laws). It may be that we can say at this point, or will be able to say, that he has "acquired" Japanese culture; certainly he is very familiar with it, knows an enormous lot about it, and so on. But is he a "member"? Has he "turned Japanese"?

No, for the Japanese do not accept him as Japanese. Knowing, and even agreeing, is not being.

This is precisely where, as we saw in Chapter 1, the linguistic analogy fails. Do I *have* a culture the way I *have* a language? The "having" of many languages is possible precisely because it does not make the demands on the self that cultural membership makes. A culture is not merely a competence, it is a social group. Having a culture is not like having a language; it is more like having a family, regarding which *having it* entails *being had by it*. Here having is belonging, and belonging constrains individuality while constituting it. We must now explore some of the human groupings through which the *who* of culture has been understood, forms of human association or identity from which the modern and especially liberal democratic mind often recoils. Today Western liberals often throw all of a list of suspected bases of community and conflict together, using the terms "nationalist," "tribal," "ethnic," and "racial" as synonyms. But each has a distinct meaning.

Race

If the reality of race has always been divisive in the United States, in contemporary theory the *concept* has become so. On the one hand, the continuation of integrationist and antiracist liberalism, which always denied the political importance not only of race but of biology, has led to a denial of the very sense of "race," no doubt with the best of intentions. On the other hand, a multicultural movement, trading on a Foucauldian view of discourse, actually promotes the notion of race against the attempts to erase it. If the racists used race to oppress, it argues, *we* must now use it to combat the results of oppression. Denying the importance of race is then a subterfuge that actually serves the *status quo.* During a dinner a couple of years ago among black and white intellectuals, I cringed as I heard a white liberal—not an academic, hence a well-meaning and decent human being, but out of touch with current theory—argue that, of course, the very concept of race is senseless. He was immediately taken to the rhetorical woodshed by a black Afro-American studies professor with whom he had thought he was expressing solidarity. Alas, he had fallen behind the theoretical times.

The most cogent case against race in philosophy comes from Anthony Appiah, who famously argues that nothing in the world corresponds to the

meaning the term has been given for the last century or so. For Appiah, simply, "The truth is that there are no races" (Appiah 1992). Races exist in the same sense that witches do: there are none, but many people act as if there were. The modern notion of race is the result of the nineteenth-century "biologization" of the notion of culture, the view that culture is heritable. The only real thing in the world the term "race" *per se* picks out is morphology, that is to say, skin color, hair texture, facial features, and the like. Morphological distinctiveness is the result of sufficiently long ancient periods of genetic isolation. But genetic sameness across such groups is much greater than the groups' differences from each other, just as differences within each group are greater than differences between them. Racial determinations of identity must then rely on two distinct judgments: a reference back to a subcontinental genetic homeland of morphological homogeneity, then a series of rules in each generation as to what constitutes continuity with the former (such as the American "one drop" rule according to which having *any* black ancestors makes one black) (Appiah 1996). Such rules are themselves changing sociocultural constructions. Thus if "race" means a morphology that carries with it a culture, nobody has one.

Certainly the curve of human history is toward racial mixing; Theodore von Laue's characterization of the modern world as the "Great Confluence" holds for race as for economics and culture. Immigration and emigration mean a society includes more people racially distinct from its long-term genetic pool; thus the "racial we" is increasingly inadequate to the "social we." The racial "we" gets further confounded by interracial mating. We may also agree with David Hollinger that the contemporary American classification of race is untenable (Hollinger 1995). As categorical schemes go, the "ethno-racial pentagon" of colors—black (sub-Saharan African), red (natives of the Americas), yellow ("Asians" and Pacific Islanders), brown (Latin Americans), and white (European)—is a mess. The worst categories are "Asian"—which ought to be "East Asian" so as not to include Israelis, Siberian Russians, and Pakistanis, not to mention Polynesians—and Latino, which is the best example of a cultural category masquerading as a race. Many Latinos have mixed Native American and Spanish/Portuguese descent and could be morphologically categorized as "brown," but commonly identify themselves and others through language and culture, regardless of color. Perhaps most bizarre, the official pentagon leaves South Asians, North Africans, Arabs, and Persians as "white," which, if it were true, would make

Caucasian racism against them logically impossible. This is not even to raise the problem that the pentagon's categories of racial morphology do not consistently correspond to color; by the criterion of skin tone alone, many native Australians and some South Asian peoples should be "black" (being as dark as many sub-Saharan Africans) and the majority of North Africans, Arabs, Persians, South Asians, and many others, by process of elimination, if nothing else, ought to join Latinos in the "brown" category.

We thus could say that for these reasons the discussion of culture has no special interest in race at all. Appiah's argument against race sensibly expresses his Ghanaian roots in a multiply morphological family where nobody could confuse color with culture or cultural identity. If the "Enlightened" West did indeed play the race card, constituting European modernity through invidious morphological contrasts, then that is a world well lost. But there is more to understand here than the history of an error. For if race merely means morphology, then Appiah's argument does *not* deny its reference. Racial differences are the real results of a bygone era of long-term genetic isolation. At some point in prehistory and early history, the ancestors of people who today bear distinctive racial morphologies must have lived and reproduced separately. To this day, some racial descendents continue to live both in genetic isolation and in the genetic "homeland." And where persons shared a homeland, they likely shared not only morphology, but other social and cultural traits as well. This is roughly Philip Kitcher's claim: "race" refers to the phenotypic commonalities in a group defined by sufficiently inbred lineages (Kitcher 1999). At this point the putatively scientific objection that intraracial differences quantitatively exceed interracial differences is heard. True, but so what? That is presumably true of *any* grouping of human beings we can imagine, including sexes. Indeed, the vast majority of my DNA is shared with mice, but nobody is arguing that membership in the human species is open for application from rodents.

Race is a set of morphological traits that are inherited, hence can serve as markers for ancestry, which societies *may* then pick out as salient whenever they think ancestry matters. There has been in some times and places, and still can be found, a contingent, *a posteriori* connection between morphology and culture. As such, race has functioned in many places and times as a sign for social, psychological, and cultural differences. Certainly, even in the best of correlations, morphology fails to be a sufficient marker, since there are many more cultures than races. Still, many people can plausibly

claim that in the local world they know, race is in fact *contingently* correlated with some sociocultural traits, that "we" are of one race and "others" are of a different race. Such people can rightly regard themselves as descended from a people who had a particular social or cultural character to go with its morphological distinctiveness. When a citizen of Kinshasa and his country cousin see two youngish men in dark suits with briefcases walking a city boulevard together, one light-skinned with straight hair and thinner lips and one ebony-skinned with tight curls and fuller lips, the cousin makes neither nonsense nor evil in saying, "The white man is a European." His statement's only liability is its, admittedly, increased probability of empirical error in a changing world, a probability usually proportional to ignorance of local conditions. Thus the Kinshasan may respond, "Man, don't you know that a community of whites has been living in this city for generations? That man is probably a son of Zaire like you." The liability to error makes the cousin's inference no worse than many of our guesses. The evil of such race-to-culture inductions lies not in the act of guessing but in what is staked on the outcome.

Blood

Race is the ultimate, but not the only, "bad" source of cultural association for modern liberals. Most of the "new culturalists" discussed in Chapter 1 regard connections of "blood and soil" to be only marginally less nasty. Political references to blood are held to be reactionary, "essentialist," and "biologistic." As noted, Kymlicka claims without argument that "descent-based approaches to national membership have obvious racial overtones, and are manifestly unjust" (Kymlicka 1995a: 23). Liberals fear the political salience of the "natural," anything prereflectively given and unchosen. For the post–World War II generation of political theorists and their students, the intrusion of biology into politics can only mean eugenics and racism. Feminists added their own repugnance, fearing that biology is only relevant for patriarchal dictation of female "destiny." Even if race is Public Enemy Number One for progressives, blood remains high on the Most Wanted List.

But as suggested in Chapter 1, this is unfair. Blood is in one sense narrower and in another sense broader than race. For blood means *descent,* and descent is a complex matter. It first of all refers to natality and parentage. It is partly genetic. (Even in this respect it is complicated by gamete donation

and adoption. Is the singer American singer Shania Twain part Native American because her adoptive father is?) It is also partly social and legal, given that nonincestuous parents are not close blood relatives. My family includes lots of people from whom I did not descend: aunts and uncles, not to mention in-laws. Kinship is wider than descent. An interesting point about blood is that it can create ties among people who *do not share blood*. Descent generates non-descent ties. If it matters to one of my group memberships who my parents were, then blood matters, even if it is *not blood* that constitutes the tie among members. So if I am the child of police officers, but not myself a police officer, I am nevertheless tied in a way I may regard as important to the "community" of police officers. At any rate, the political manifestation of blood is not racial or ethnic politics, but *clan* politics. Blood-politics is rule by, as Gellner says, "cousins, not kings." It is Hatfields and McCoys, not Hutus and Tutsis. Under normal conditions even a small segmentary society cannot be constituted by a single clan, unless marriage partners are regularly imported from outside.

Nor is "tribalism" equivalent to racialism, ethnocentrism, or nationalism. The tribe is supralocal and subethnic, usually covering a set of clans living in a collection of villages over a region. It must be carried by some non-descent characteristics, like language or religion or a shared history. It is true that in a small society characterized by racial (morphological) homogeneity in which clans to some extent intermarry, so that kin crisscross society, it might be natural to conflate blood with ethnicity or tribe. But any influx of foreign marriage partners, or emigration of members who then isolate themselves from the homeland, drives at least the thin end of a wedge between blood and culture.

As Tamir notes, while liberal polities assert a civic, not a blood, tie among members, they nevertheless automatically extend citizenship to those who descend from citizen parents. For blood correlates to the *who* that teaches me a culture and to the *where* they taught me, in short, my *natal-maturational world*. Because children are inevitably part of their parent's surrounding community at the most form-giving age in the human life cycle, descent plays an enormous role in identity. Family is the most powerful and common way of acquiring a culture. Understood thus, blood is indeed crucial to many human ties and certainly to conceptions of ethnicity, nationality, and culture, in liberal as well as illiberal societies. Most families not subject to recent emigration inhabit a single polity, hence their familial loyalties may cathect the polity: to protect my family I may have to protect the state that

houses them. Therefore, most polities that have popular legitimacy are endorsed by familial feeling even though not constituted by descent. If descent is somehow an unjust means of acquiring legitimate, obligation-inducing political identity, then *virtually all* extant polities are unjust.

Soil

The only competitor to biology as an object of liberal fear is soil. But of course it is more corollary than competitor, since descent is from a family, hence a community, *on some plot of soil.* Soil and place are feared by liberals as the justification for intolerance and ethnic cleansing. They are certainly right that the two are often linked; the most immediate goal of ethnic cleansing is the removal of the hated group from "*our soil.*"

Liberal fears notwithstanding, we cannot avoid the fact that soil is commonly a significant correlate of culture. For soil is most simply *place.* My natal-maturational world is likely defined by the boundaries of a place. If we add local homogeneity, then the culture of the domicile and the locale are identical; their nonidentity is virtually the definition of minority status. If family and locale concur, failure to acquire their jointly carried culture is virtually impossible. Soil or territory, then, is essential to the historical reference that is cultural identification, because there must have been a geographically continuous population at the source of this reference. Wherever we find a societal culture, there had to have been *at some historical point* a plot of soil on which it developed as a possible object of identification.

Unfortunately, recent liberal political philosophy—and as Edward Casey has argued, recent Western philosophy in general—has shown at best a remarkable neglect of the significance of place in human experience, and at worst, an active hostility toward it (Casey 1995, 1999). For like blood, soil is typically pregiven, "natural," and unchosen. The liberal and intellectual antipathy to location has led to serious mangling of the significance of soil on the rare occasions when theory has turned to examine it. Jacob Levy nicely punctures the common anti-imperial story of European protocapitalist colonizers importing a foreign notion of *land as commodity* into their dealings with indigenous Americans and Australians (Levy 2000). That revisionist narrative was always too simplistic. The feudal and early modern West certainly did understand land as property, but precisely did *not* open it to commercial exchange as a commodity. Hence the principles of primogeni-

ture (eldest male heir inherits all, hence land parcels are never split among offspring) and entail (prohibition of sale, or of sale outside the family) guaranteed the perennial aristocratic ownership of choice land. The reformers of the late eighteenth century (including Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, and even Edmund Burke) rejected these policies less because of a claimed "right" of the owner to dispose of private property as desired (which would have been a fully modern "liberal" position) than because of their desire to develop a talent- (rather than birth-) based aristocracy, spur commercial progress, and increase agricultural production. They deplored the "waste" of perpetually held but undeveloped and uncultivated land. The tradition they attacked—that is, their own—was thus not *so* different from that of indigenous peoples, like the American natives, who far from lacking a notion of property, typically regarded tribal land as *collective* property, in contrast to the preliberal European conception of land as *private* yet *noncommercial* (unexchangeable) property. In fact nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western nationalism fairly, albeit not precisely, mirrored that indigenous view, insisting on the coincidence of political sovereignty and ownership. The real incompatibility between natives and Europeans was that between hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies. For Euro-American settlers, the natives' claims to huge expanses of untilled land echoed the claims of their own homegrown elites to maintain game reserves at the expense of egalitarian farming opportunities. It was *fungibility* of land that was crucial to the development of modern liberal society; mere private ownership was not enough. In this sense, recent liberals wary of current nationalists' claims to their home "soil" ironically continue the capitalist tradition of commodifying land, a tradition responsible for the development of a liberal capitalist society ill-equipped to recognize indigenous land claims.

While all communities obtain in a place, only some cultures cathect particular plots of soil on a permanent basis, sing of its specific hills and valleys as their only rightful home. We may call this the *Jerusalem syndrome*. Tamir is entirely right that this identification is troublesome and often dangerous, simply on pragmatic terms. Given the history of conquest and migration, if we want our children to live in peace we cannot generally grant ethnic groups *unqualified* rights to particular plots of soil, just as ethnicities cannot generally be granted sovereign states of their own.

Nevertheless, even if we cannot grant a general right to soil, we cannot simply deny the moral weight of its claim either. For if ethnic cleansers demand the relocation of a minority, even to good land where the latter

could enjoy sovereignty, would we not still object? Who would say today that loss of particular homelands for Native Americans was *not* a catastrophic violation of their rights? We admit as much whenever we grant financial or other compensations for forced relocation of natives. Recognizing the significance of the loss of a traditional territory need not mean that the right to homeland trumps all other rights, but it does acknowledge *some* kind of a right. For the power of the identification with place simply must be recognized.

As an example of the Jerusalem syndrome we might as well take Jerusalem itself. It is often forgotten that the Israeli government and military command before and during the Six-Day War of 1967 was dominated by hard-headed realists concerned with security, fearful of losing international support by expanding into Palestinian territory, rather than millenarian religionists longing for historical turf. On the second day of their defensive war against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, with the military outcome very much in doubt, survival was their overriding concern. Nevertheless, upon taking the Temple Mount and the Western Wall in Jerusalem that day, a flood of primordial emotions overcame the leadership. Michael Oren recounts that at the Wall,

> [Military Chief of Staff Yitzhak] Rabin . . . watched with awe the scene of hundreds of soldiers, joined by Ultra-Orthodox Jews, dancing. "This was the peak of my life," he recalled. . . . "The sacrifices of our comrades have not been in vain. . . . The countless generations of Jews murdered, martyred and massacred for the sake of Jerusalem . . ." [Foreign Minister Abba] Eban, hearing about the victory in New York, wrote of "a flood of historic emotion [that] burst the dams of restraint and sent minds and hearts in movement far beyond the limits of our land." Among the most strenuous opponents of the war . . . [Religious Affairs Minister] Zorach Warhaftig recalled how "my heart was filled with gladness," as he rushed to kiss the Western Wall and embraced both [Defense Minister Moshe] Dayan and Rabin. (Oren 2002: 246–47)

The point is simply that place matters, sometimes very much, and however we negotiate such claims to soil we must at least recognize their human and political reality.

Ethnicity

In sum, all societies are based in descent and territory in some sense. Blood and soil matter everywhere, in nationalism and liberalism, civil societies and ethnic states. Modern civil societies of course allow nondescent membership, and de-ethnicize their membership criteria almost completely (with telling exceptions like the exclusion of naturalized citizens from the presidency).* Blood and soil are *not* equivalent to ethnicity. They are typically local. This was true in premodern societies, and is not contradicted in modernity, where rather than blood and place becoming supralocal, they simple decline in public significance altogether. In the ancient agrarian empires blood and place were not confused with either political membership or culture, which were typically far broader groupings. Language commonly obtained across a far-flung, distant network of clannish locales. Religion, at least in Christian and Muslim civilizations, ranged much further. Modern nationalism changed all that in the West by evolving a mass "nation-state" culture over a dominant linguistic region, transcending descent and local relations, beneath or within the larger circle of religion. Consequently, the question of cultural membership in the modern era is inextricably entangled with the meaning of nationality and its relative, ethnicity.

The term "ethnicity" as it is used in contemporary political theory is rarely burdened by clarity. Sometimes it is a synonym for nationality. Other times it serves as a kind of quasi-race, a kinder, gentler alternative to that feared term, allowing writers to mean descent and morphology without saying so. Sometimes it is condemned for that very reason, as an attempt to water down racial distinctions. But its historical meaning is plain. The English "ethnic" derives from the Greek *ethnikos,* which referred to a foreign people, normally in a somewhat disparaging way, like "heathen." This holds true also for the roots of "nation," which in Roman times meant non-Italianate peoples ruled by Rome. Although the connotations of the terms differ—*ethnikos* was linked both to *éthos,* character, and *ethos,* custom, while "nation" derives from *nasci,* to be born, hence refers to descent—their referent is the same: *a people,* understood either through their reproductive isolation or distinctive character. Unfortunately for us "nation" has been overwhelmed by the term national*ism,* hence sovereignty and states. Bowing

*As Phu Nguyen reminded me.

to aural custom, I will save "nationality" for the political mobilization of a people, usually in modern nationalism, and use "ethnicity," for the more fundamental condition of being *a people.* That is the root notion. The basic issue is, then, *what does it mean to be a people?* Or better . . .

Who Is a People?

Let us imagine the "ideal type" of a people in the sense of what the most complete form of the kind of homogeneity we mean by "ethnic" would be like. In such a condition differences among intrasocial groups could not be *cultural.* There would have to be one sociocultural horizon, one set of socioeconomic arrangements, one system of roles, one set of rules of intelligibility, propriety, and status, and one commonly held reservoir of meaning-endowing practices, artifacts, and narratives. This scheme does not imply equality; it could certainly include stark clan, caste, gender, and political differences. Let us further imagine that *no social outsiders share the local culture* (arguably a rare condition in the last several millennia). Such a society maximally fulfills the criteria for being considered "a people" by themselves and by outsiders. What would be true of such a condition?

First, in it we would find *the identity of society and culture.* Being a social member and being a cultural member would not be distinguished, because nobody would have one without the other. The conditions of membership in society and the conditions of membership in its culture would be identical. (In reality, the closest we would get to this condition would be small, isolated segmentary societies scattered across a region, where all such villages share the same language, religion, and so on, hence cultural membership would extend beyond local society. But still the crucial point would be that all social members belong to one culture.) Second, we would expect to find *the coincidence of spheres,* the disciplinary unity of the conditions of membership for that sociocultural group. That is, if a people calls itself the Ipo, then all social members must conduct their lives in an Ipo-way, speak the Ipo-tongue, worship the Ipo-gods, practice Ipo-sports, and so on. This people has not had to make distinctions among members who, while they share the Ipo way of economic life, do not share the Ipo gods or marriage rituals, or refuse the authority of Ipo chiefs, and so on. Third, the natal-maturational world, hence the primary kin-local sphere, would be *continuous* with the public social world. The culture may of course specify distinctive roles and norms in each, and there may well be interclan conflict. But as

long as all social members regard themselves as one "people," their forms of family life will be continuous with the social order. No one, for example, will argue that kinship relations or religion should be "private" matters, irrelevant or inappropriate to public life, so as not to offend or coerce others. Last, the cultural life of this society will presumably be *thick*. By "thick" I mean that the shared culture is adequate to the determination of the sense and significance of human life. It fills the normative space for members. No further guidance is needed (except of course for deviant or idiosyncratic individuals).

We can then conceive of a variety of other, more pluralistic conditions as differing degrees of departure from this homogeneous condition. The first significant departure appears in conditions in which local societies subsist in a larger polity ruled by a *culturally distinct* center. This was characteristic of the great literate, agrarian empires that even today we count as our cultural forebears. By virtue of size they inevitably incorporated heterogeneous peoples, ruling regions and locales whose languages or religions were different from that of the imperial center. Here membership in the sovereign society or state is culturally different from membership in the locale or region. The greater the center's intrusion into the periphery—not only requiring taxes, denying local sovereignty, and providing protection from outsiders, but perhaps enforcing a religion, interfering with local jurisprudence, and so on—the more local members will have to distinguish spheres *within* their own lives and identities that cannot reflect or obey their local cultural norms. Furthermore, if legitimate political and religious authority are monopolized by the center, as in the Fertile Crescent empires and Egypt, for the first time distant peoples and events may surpass locale in normative or causal significance. There may in addition be polyethnic commercial trading and learning centers, but this complexity affects a small percentage of the population.

In a greater departure from homogeneity, a *civilization* may diffuse across half a continent, placing a layer of cultural unity across many linguistic groups and sovereignties, occasionally becoming the basis for more or less unified political action. In both the Western European and the Islamic cases, religion played this role. The result was a more complex notion of group identity, seen in the West in feudal society. In this orderly but decentralized system, life and political authority remained local while language and hence folk culture held over a region, and a symbolic cultural layer extended over much of a continent. Levels of identification thereby multiply, even if the

local society remains primary, and can be mobilized under the right circumstances. The sovereign need share neither my local culture nor my language; my homogeneous locale, along with far-flung cultural-linguistic-religious cousins, may occupy a region ruled by a foreign monarch. Even the local lord, while culturally and linguistically similar to myself, is separated from me by a social hierarchy more salient than any cultural sharing. At the same time, a profoundly important layer of culture—religion—may enforce a far wider civilizational loyalty and identity. I bow to the distant authority of miter as well as crown, and may fight and die for either, my nonlocal identity playing the final trump to my local self. Of course, local contests continue to trump that unitary identity in daily social life. In reaction to transcendent, universalist religion, locale often exerts its home court advantage in creating folk religion, a "pagan" or animistic version of the script-based high culture managed by literate urban elites. At any rate, all of these movements away from simple homogeneity entail the *differentiation of the conditions of membership,* hence the de-fusion of spheres. Political, religious, linguistic, and social identity and membership can now differ, even if each remains quite stable.

Notice that up to this point local diversity has still not been mentioned. With the exception of the towns, where there may be commercial or administrative contacts with visitors and immigrants from culturally diverse provinces, the rural locales rarely deviate from the homogeneous condition. There is still no possibility of doffing the local identity; it can be trumped, but not discarded or rendered ineffective. In any case, it is only with country-wide or rural immigration, or population shifts to the diverse cities, that the sharing of the same local society by more than one "people" becomes widespread. At this point even local culture and local society begin to diverge; I may share social membership in the most diurnally relevant portion of my life with people whose culture, in some sense, I do not share, and thus my understanding of social membership must differentiate, distinguishing, for example, the forms of address due local fellow citizens as such from those citizens who are of "my people." Responses to immigration vary, of course. However locales or states respond—with intermixing, assimilation, tolerant mutual segregation, not-so-tolerant forced segregation, or violence—unless the others are stamped out, membership and the relation of society to culture have changed forever. Eventually we get, as Michael Walzer explains, a variety of regimes of toleration: the millet system (local religious-cultural autonomy under a dominant group's imperial taxation

and military protection), consociations (shared rule between two or three communities with designated spheres of power), the liberal nation-state (a dominant yet tolerant cultural majority that guarantees civic rights for all), or the immigrant society (where no people is officially dominant) (Walzer 1997).

What then constitutes "a people"? We can now hazard that a people is formed by a *descent society = culture,* a group that subsists in the homogeneous condition, in which social and cultural membership are indistinct, and both acquired by descent or birth. But while this may be the ultimate reference, it is not the proximal or everyday meaning of the term today. For by those criteria, nobody I have ever met would have an ethnicity. So by extension we must say that in today's normal usage to claim "ethnicity" is to *claim descent from* a group that is *claimed to have at one time subsisted in the homogeneous condition of society = culture.* By today's lights, anyone fitting that criterion can rightly claim, "*That* is my people." Note that such claims can be false. No doubt all of us have ancestors who were members of such homogeneous groups, but often in the distant past about which we know virtually nothing. Those ancestors about whom we are likely to know anything may well have lived in relatively modern societies that were no longer homogeneous. It is this sense in which, as Benedict Anderson argues, nation or ethnicity is "imagined." But "imagined" here means selectively reconstructed, not invented. The claimed homogeneous society = culture—for example, the Scottish of my Scottish-American-ness—is likely an inaccurately simple portrayal of a diverse network of Scottish ancestors who, in a premodern and prenationalistic age, may have regarded each other as competing clans and tribes with little in common. My ethnic reference does indeed organize that past through a retrospective simplification and selection. But simplification is not falsification, for if it were, virtually all our "knowledge" would be false.

Ethnicity can coincide with morphology, hence race or subracial characteristics. Italian Americans and Irish Americans, like Korean Americans and Japanese Americans, often look different, have distinctive ideals of beauty, and so on. This is a contingent and historical matter. Peoples vary in their degree of morphological distinctiveness and in their valuation of such, and members may ignore such differences, or may distinguish among their fellows those whose appearance calls to mind less-mixed ancestors, giving their morphology a special status, for good or ill. For example, among many Latin American families it is not unusual to find people of very different skin

tones. Still, Mexican-American writer Richard Rodriguez's mother warned him to avoid the sun, since he was already the brownest member of the family, and she feared he looked too "Indian," which for her was a marker of lower class (Rodriguez 1982). The point is that ethnicity is both cultural *and* bodily, the result of shared culture *and* shared society, hence endogamy. That is what it means to be tied *by* descent *to* a culture.

Last, if referring one's identity to an ethnicity is to have contemporary significance for behavior, two conditions must hold. First, the claimed people must *continue to exist* in some form, although not necessarily in the homogeneous condition. Ethnicity matters in the present if and only if there is a community in some place that shares the ethnicity. Second, there must be some kind of problematic social circumstances in which my ethnic membership is *relevant*. Ethnicity sinks in importance if the major social issues of my life call out only my other, nonethnic identities and associations in response.

The Function of Primordialism

What is it about ethnicity that seems to make it so seemingly powerful, primitive, and troublesome to the modern consciousness? How is it that it appears in the world as an evil temptation, a siren song from the depths, as bloody romance? What is it about understanding myself passionately as, say, a Serb, rather than a Croat, that seems more threatening than passionately understanding myself as a member of the Cahoone family, or the educated middle class, or the American Philosophical Association? What is the unique quality, hence the potential *intensity,* of that attachment?

Edward Shils gave it a name. As we know, the attempt to distinguish modern society from traditional forms of social organization was a preoccupation of the early giants of sociology. Each of the great thinkers took his own dualistic terminological stab at the question: capitalism versus feudalism for Karl Marx; *Gemeinschaft* (community) versus *Gesellschaft* (society) for Ferdinand Tönnies; mechanical versus organic solidarity for Émile Durkheim; status versus contract for Henry Sumner Maine; charismatic or traditional versus legal and routinized forms of authority for Max Weber. Shils makes the interesting claim that all these analyses of traditional society conflate three distinct forms of connection: *personal* connection based

in individual interaction and hence the relational characteristics and roles of the persons involved (father, sister, coworker, friend, superior officer); *sacred* connection that subsumes relations under central teleological symbols; and last, *primordial* connection among persons through "objective" links of blood and territory (Shils 1957). For Shils, ethnic or national bonds are primordial, hence qualitatively and structurally distinct, not only from rational-legal or civic ties, but also from sacred and personal ties. His controversial claim is that they are unavoidable in *any* society, even modern civil society: the human mind must find ultimacy "not only in the spiritual transcendental sphere but in the primordial transcendental sphere as well." The horrors of fascism were not due to primordialism *per se,* but the *sacralization* of primordial ties under spiritual symbols.

Now, to call such primordial ties or qualities objective, natural, or absolute has for the contemporary scholar of culture an anachronistic ring. But these appellations are at least half-right. Natality, parentage, and locale are indeed objective facts. That is, given a set of concepts, for example, the definition of "sister" as female child of the same parents, one is or is not somebody's sister by public criteria. But only in some societies at some times have those objective markers of descent and locale been the primary means of group assignment, mobilized as important sources of social coherence. Kin and locale were far more important in premodern societies. As Robert Nisbet and Anthony Giddens separately argued, modernity is predicated on the reduction of the significance of local/kin or "communal" relations. Descent and soil can be objective yet at the same time socially indecisive.

This aside, Shils's account is insightful. It is reflected in mythology; since the rise of urban, agrarian-literate civilization many cultures have traditionally accessed not one but *two* distinct sets of ultimate referents or narratives, one from above and one from below. The former is the Divine, the otherworldly, the transcendent, the pure, the heavenly, the Ruler of the Cosmic cycle, often living in the sky or on the mountaintop. The other is chthonic, physical, dark, deep, reproductive, the Source, the earth itself or what is beneath and behind the earth. Presumably this opposition emerged once animism was largely replaced by transcendental notions of divinity, notions that, in the great agrarian civilizations, came to hold over far-flung peoples, leaving a gap in the legitimation of local and descent ties. Suffice to say that the Highest and the Beneath, the Towards-Which and the Out-

of-Which are qualitatively distinct forms of ultimacy. Primordiality is the feeling of the latter, transcendence the feeling of the former. What then are the definitive features of the primordial form of ultimacy?

First and foremost, primordial bonds and identities concern personal and social *origins.* They tie us together through the past. They link me to a history. My people may understand themselves in terms of a coming golden age, the return of the Messiah, or the eventual attainment of secular utopia, but the primordial bond is my descent from, origination from, the tradition that projects such a future. The future can never be primordial. Hence primordial ties are *necessitous;* the past is that mode of time that cannot be the subject of action. Although I can selectively reinterpret it, I cannot change it. The future is unknowable, the present is yet to be comprehended. The primordial repeats the only temporality we can understand, the past.

Second, primordiality characterizes my *being,* not primarily my *doing* or *making.* Thus its acquisition and maintenance are effortless. Now, I do not mean that the primordial is somehow "natural" and that other connections are "constructed." Heavy duties and efforts may attend any form of identity or membership, the culture of an ethnic group being no exception. But those duties are *consequences* of identity; they do not *make* the identity. I can fail at them; indeed, I can even be outcast and disowned. I cannot *achieve* the identity or membership by the performance of the duties; rather, I fulfill them as obligations attaching to me *a priori.* Primordial attachments are unearned.

Third, what flows from the first two characteristics is, as Shils argued, that a primordial bond is *unelective* and *ascriptive,* and is experienced as such. It is not chosen. It makes demands and claims that cannot be ignored while the identity it roots remains relevant. It holds for a person in virtue of the person's "nature," what the person is regarded, by self and others, unchangeably as being. It is experienced as fixed. As noted, even in a modern liberal society where I may cease to regard my ethnicity as significant or select one of several descent ties for identification, I cannot choose to make a new ethnicity where descent ties do not exist.

Fourth, primordial attachments are *bodily,* hence *erotic,* in the broad sense of that term, connoting not sex *per se* but *bodily love.* As noted, my ethnicity may well be "written" into my bodily appearance by my parents' genes, then read and interpreted by culture. As such it can then double back and play a role in my own sexual life, hence also for my progeny. It is not without psychic significance that the only venues in life where most people

experience intimate bodily care, experience another human being cherishing their body, are in infancy and during sex. We cannot avoid noticing that *primordiality works through sex,* through both sexual reproduction and through the intimate familial world of bodily care, mediated by the marital relation. It is hard to deny that primordial ties are the stuff of psychoanalysis. The natal-maturational world attaches our deepest feelings to immediate family, clan, the community in which the family lives, and the place these reside. As noted, human personality is notoriously *front-loaded;* the events and conditions of the first three or five or ten years are more salient and influential than any other period of three or five or ten years later in the life cycle. Thus kin-local relations are the warp and woof of the primordial. Primordial connections are thus eroticized just as the body, its appearance, family relations, and other maturational circumstances are eroticized.

The unique function or significance of the primordial can now be seen. *Primordiality alone renders intelligible, and normatively vets, the contingencies of my particular bodily existence.* In religions with a transcendent Divinity, although God has a plan, nothing about my religious life hangs on my having been the child of *these* parents, in *this* place, at *this* time, with this color of skin, with *these* genetic abilities and deficits, married to *this* spouse, with *these* children. The monotheistic personal God knows and cares about all this, to be sure. But the nature of the religious task in monotheism is to transcend these particulars. In transcending them, in demoting their importance, I recognize all other believers as my brothers and sisters, equal in the sight of God. I leave my origin, clan, locale, and body behind. Christ brought not only a new love, but a sword that might separate father and son, mother and daughter. Islam, the acme of monotheism, found its primary enemy in the clan-tribal network of Arabian society. Primordialism in contrast tells me that I *had to have been born* to *those* parents, in *that* place, with *this* body, within *that* community, speaking *that* language, because these *constitute my true nature.* From this perspective the true me is the primordial me of origin. What is the distinctive quality of self-recognition and satisfaction that contemporary people derive from researching family genealogy? The genealogical satisfaction comes from making intelligible and normatively "right" my bodily, genetic, historical origin and location, all those aspects of self that are not the product of choice or achievement, whose salience is recognized by all (with the possible exception of doctrinaire liberals). Returning to old models, ethnic or religious connections, the gender roles of our grandparents, the foods and clothing and manners of the family, all grant

that feeling of "rightness." This is not to say, of course, that such a return *is* right. Even if philosophers today recognize many exceptions to G. E. Moore's attack on the "naturalistic fallacy" of deriving ought from is, modern citizens in the forum of public discourse are perfectly well habituated to deny that what *is,* what is "natural," or what is bequeathed by the past is *ipso facto* good or right. *But primordiality lives on the naturalistic fallacy.* It grants the normative status of the given.

"What Is She?"

None of the foregoing is a lament. I do not mean to urge the superiority of the primordial, or of "thick" cultures, to thinned, modernized, and rational-voluntary social forms. The point is simply that cultural thickness and primordiality remain facts, even if attenuated in the most developed societies, and that these facts are *not intrinsically* immoral, ignorant, and threatening. For as we shall later see, it is not at all clear that the Western way of modernization, whose dominant post–World War II form did indeed seek to overcome the primordial, will be the form in which modernization is best achieved by the developing world, or even by the postmodern West.

Nevertheless, clearly modern and postmodern society tend to efface the conditions necessary for primordialism. In those areas and dimensions of social life where it is correct to say that modernity is a world of "contract," not status, of individual initiative, liberty, and self-creation, not inheritance or acceptance, of making and doing, not being, primordialism is blocked or demoted. Likewise, ethnicity has a very tentative and convoluted meaning in societies like the United States. On the one hand, just as modernity inevitably reduces the identity- and affiliation-constituting power of clan and local community, the rise of civic-nationalism as well as educational, class, and career association tend to trump the meaning of ethno-linguistic community. On the other hand, the lack of a thick national culture leaves much room for ethno-racial identities magnified through intramural jockeying for a political and economic place in the sun. Some Americans identify with no other cultural grouping than "American," others are "hyphenated" by an old country-American combination, still others identify themselves with a thick ethnicity while maintaining a permissibly thin civic commitment, as we saw in Chapter 1.

But the situation is even more complex, and, as usual in the American case, it is the racial end of the spectrum of identity that leads the way. David

Hollinger has criticized our recent American habit of "racializing" ethnicity, of regarding racial morphology as the key to group difference. He laments the Irish-African-American writer Ishmael Reed's inability to march in St. Patrick's Day parades without drawing quizzical stares (Hollinger 1995: 21). However, that inability is not the result of ethno-racial identity *per se* but of one very particular historical artifact of a single interracial relationship, the American "one drop rule"—equally beloved of white racists and black nationalists—according to which one drop of African blood makes a person black. Retired basketball star Charles Barkley admits to pressuring the multiethnic champion golfer Tiger Woods to identify himself primarily as black, which Woods will not do, presumably out of respect for his mother's (hence his own) Thai heritage. "Ethnicity" sounds wimpy to racial nationalists—hence their opposition to viewing Afro-Americans as a *mere* ethnic group—only because the fading importance of ethnic distinctions among white or Euro-Americans has been drowned out by the history of white racism. Unfortunately, the historical animosity of the United States's two oldest non-native peoples, Afro- and Euro-Americans, joined at the hip like Siamese twins in a seemingly endless dance in which they cannot see past each other, tends to warp any discussion of race and ethnicity in America. As Appiah warned, this conflict may be social—race being historically taken as a marker of social groups in conflict—but it is hard to argue that it is *cultural,* the "cultural" differences between white and black Americans being, on a world-historical scale, very limited (Appiah 1997). Peoples come in greater variety than black and white.

Which is not to gainsay the musing of Glenn Loury, who remarked to himself after a speech to a racially and politically divided (and divisive) college audience, "Man, this race thing is deep" (Loury 1995). To take a simple, and not unpleasant example, a very good student of mine, an African-American woman of Haitian descent, upon glimpsing a rather artsy photo of my wife on my desk—black and white, with her sporting dark lipstick and dark glasses—asked me enthusiastically, "Is that your wife? What is she?" We both knew what she meant. She was excited by the possibility that one of her white professors might have a nonwhite wife. For this cosmopolitan, multicultural, sophisticated young woman, the morphology of descent was the first criterion and marker of social identity. No doubt, once having identified my wife racially, other identities would have become more salient for her. Nevertheless, race was the first question on her mind, even if only because of its function as a marker for ethnicity or origin. Thus, for good

as well as ill, I agree with Cornell West that "race matters" (West 1994). So does ethnicity. But they matter *only where and when they matter,* being objective facts whose salience is the result of sociocultural selection and whose meaning is a matter of constant negotiation. By the way, my wife is about as white as white comes, being Dutch-American, an affiliation which might seem fairly devoid of sociocultural importance in today's United States. Unless of course you happen to be speaking to a Belgian-American in my wife's native northeastern Wisconsin, where you would confuse those two designations at your great peril.