4 MODERNITY: CULTURE OF REASON OR REASON AGAINST CULTURE?

As I have argued elsewhere, modernity is in some important sense *anticultural* (Cahoone 1988). This may sound absurd. The Enlightenment was certainly a cultural movement, initiating an explosion of literature, philosophy, and scientific activity. The sheer volume of production of modern cultural items—books, art, political discussion, and so on—dwarfs earlier cultural production. My suggestion may also sound ideological, either a conservative plea for the reinvigoration of a Greco-Roman or Christian-Medieval culture of unity, hierarchy, and transcendence, or a condescending implication that what modern Euro-Americans produce is *objective* truth while the rest of the world is mired in mere cultural particularity, that *our* knowers are culture-transcending scientists but *their* knowers are culture-relative witch doctors. I am implying nothing of the kind; modernity is as inescapable as it is beneficial, and while modern Western science does achieve a unique cognitive status, it remains a cultural product. My point is rather that the development of modernity alters the nature and social role of culture *per se*. The modern West, believing it had discovered a new, suprasocial, universal cognitive method, went on to discover unprecedented knowledge, amass unheard-of power, and create a novel way of life built on the constant transgression of tradition for the sake of progress. We may say it constructed a new kind of culture, and that is perfectly true. But its new kind of culture undermined the role that culture had played since prehistory. I will try to explain and justify this observation in the present chapter and the next.

We must note that such an investigation loads a new definitional problem onto our shoulders. For no account of modernity can be adequate to the phenomena. The novel civilization that became fully apparent in the West in, let us say, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which, in various forms and accompanied by various social cataclysms, has spread around the world, is complex beyond description. The difficulty is not the

inaccessibility of the relevant historical phenomena but the variety of these phenomena and a surfeit of ways to interpret them. J.G.A. Pocock remarked of the eighteenth century that there is no one Enlightenment, but many Enlightenments discoverable in that most fecund of centuries, so while each of us can legitimately plump for our favorite version, we must accept it as one among many. My own favorite recipe for describing modernity would begin with the boiling away of community in favor of the dyadic confrontation of individual and state sovereignty (as in Giddens 1990 and Nisbet 1990), grate in the concept of spontaneous or emergent order (from Adam Smith to Charles Darwin), and mix with a pot full of social and intellectual differentiation, sometimes called rationalization, all cooked into a more or less (Max) Weberian stew. Nevertheless, while this would be my best dish, it is hardly the only item on the menu. Using an old mammalian metaphor, if I believe the elephant's most distinctive, forward-looking feature is her trunk, I must nevertheless acknowledge the tail, side, foot, ear, and tusk to which my fellow blind men and women persistently call attention. The reason for the indeterminacy is the complexity and size of the animal, not to mention that it's still growing. But even if a complete taxonomy of the beast is impossible, a fuller naming of its parts is nothing to sneeze at.

Where Did Modernity Come From?

We cannot avoid the philosophy of history; our modern self-consciousness makes it inevitable. The modern world *knows* that it is unique in human history and cannot refrain from comparing itself to its the past in order to gauge its own uniqueness. That knowledge is part of what makes it unique. This does not mean, of course, that we can accept a teleological or necessitarian view of historical change. History is a contingent affair, and no one knows where it could have gone, or where it is going now. But we do know something about where it happens to have been.

Leaping to the biggest of big pictures, Ernest Gellner argued in his sweeping *Sword, Plough, and Book: The Structure of Human History* that the human sojourn can be divided into three great periods: the segmentary, the agro-literate or stratified, and the modern industrial (Gellner 1988). These categories are by no means novel, although Gellner gives them a new twist. The first era is characterized by small, preliterate, relatively egalitarian, hunting-gathering groups, societies of, if you will, spears and eventually swords. The

creator of spoken language and oral history, music, and often striking visual art and ornamentation, this form of life accounts for the great majority of the human sojourn, although we know least about it. The second refers to large, hierarchical societies with a marked division of labor that evolved from the invention of agriculture and writing sometime after 10,000 B.C.E., hence the societies of the plough and the book. The most extensive and longest lasting of these constitute what we call civilizations. In these two forms the majority of humans lived until very recently. Our current era, at most a three-century-old infant, if brazen beyond its years, is characterized by industrial production, centralized bureaucratic-legal organization, scientific knowledge, and technological innovation. In it progress is institutionalized through the constant outstripping of sociocultural integration—the inherited or traditional modes of social organization—by the "spontaneous" order of interlocking, functionally organized contexts of enterprise, that is, the coordination of human activities through jobs based on outcome efficiency and profit.

To accept this three-fold philosophy of history is to assert that there have been two momentous shifts in the human form of life once it was achieved, from segmentary to agroliterate and from the latter to industrialism. The recent shift has been, and still is, happening before our eyes, making it easy to examine, if inconclusively. The earlier shift is virtually lost to prehistory, with the exception of remaining segmentary populations, whose study is hampered by the methodological quandaries they provoke among anthropologists. Nevertheless, this is not to imply that the "surpassed" phases wholly cease to exist, either in their complete form in backwaters, or as undigested premodern elements in advanced societies. The addition of a new form of life usually spells the reorganization and reinterpretation of an older form, not its elimination. As Freudians argue of the mind, in human society as well the past lives on.

I take this account to be barely arguable. Certainly other economic and social forms have existed among island and coastal peoples dependent on the sea, cosmopolitan trading centers, themselves coexisting with and often parasitic on Agraria, and pastoral peoples, many nomadic. The latter became the dominant forces in a number of civilizations, most remarkably in central and south Asia. But as Gellner shows in his *Muslim Society,* pastoral society in some respects resembles segmentary society, and in most other cases where one can speak of a nomadic civilization, we find a segmentary herding people who, in conquering a sedentary agrarian population, settle down to

create a kind of hybrid with Agraria, as Ibn Khaldun famously recounted in his *Muqquhadima*. Additionally, other questions can be raised about the division and the precise delineation of the basic characteristics of each form. But the deeper analysis is not, I think, a threat to the basic hypothesis. So let us back up and follow developments more slowly.

Segmentary societies are primarily small and local, even if they involve migration in pursuit of herds. Their religions are typically polytheistic and animistic, and not soteriological. That is, segmentary individuals do not need "saving," for they can hardly fail to have their lives legitimated by the social membership with which religious meaning is by definition intertwined. Gellner's essay into the murky, ever-revisited concept of the "primitive mentality" offers the helpful notion of "multistranded" thought and activity. Segmentary culture is characterized by the nondifferentiation of norms; each act is beholden to a multiplicity of value-constraints that the actors do not differentiate. For example, a social utterance may simultaneously serve as a report, a reaffirmation of a personal tie, and the ritual reenactment of a social norm. Indeed, it is characteristic of early social life that it is differentiation, not multistrandedness, that needs to be explained. For Gellner this means that in segmentary societies the points of the cognitive-ritual system that allow unaltered inputs from the "natural" or "factual" world are highly limited. Some forms of disconfirmation could get through, of course; otherwise you and I wouldn't exist. But few do, or need to; social cohesiveness is more important. While this issue will require a more complete epistemological response in later chapters, basically Gellner is right. As he remarks of the vast majority of human existence, "Language is not merely rooted in ritual; it is a ritual. Grammar is the set of rules of a ritual performance. . . . Most uses of speech are closer in principle to the raising of one's hat in greeting than to the mailing of an informative report" (Gellner 1988: 51).

For us moderns, in contrast, the objective truth of an utterance is entirely differentiated from its social role; we can value truth independently of social fealty. The rationalization that Max Weber described as essential to modernity depends on dividing up the social functions of an act or utterance, so that only one kind of consideration is relevant to its validity at a time. Only thereby can progress become continuous. Rationality thus requires *commensurability* of acts or utterances, requires that those to be compared serve the same goal or norm (such as truth as correspondence to objects). To do this it must accept the incommensurability of distinctive

types of utterance or act. Differentiation *between* types permits commensurability *within* type. Hence the normative, custom-conforming function, which exhibits the agent's or speaker's fealty, cannot be compared to truth-functional speech acts. Again, we who make such distinctions think of them as having been implicit in segmentary utterance, waiting for us to discover them, but for the segmentary mind our distinction is an invention of dubious justification. As Gellner puts it, *logical* cohesion and *social* cohesion are incompatible—the former requires differentiation, the latter multistrandedness. For multistrandedness is *the primacy of the social.* The price of (our) logical cohesion is the separation of the referential function of acts and utterances from their social function, which for a ritual society would rend social cohesion.

The domestication of plants and animals ushered in a new period, but only after thousands of years of experimentation and social evolution. It seems likely that from their southwest Asian epicenter, the grain agriculturalists—later to be matched by maize growers in the Meso- and Andean-America, and rice growers in the warm and wet areas from India around through southern and coastal China—continually exhausted their soils, becoming slow-moving agrarian nomads. Eventually the rich river valleys of the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, and Indus provided yearly silting that enriched soil and permitted permanent settlement, stimulating the development of cities around 5,000 to 3,000 B.C.E.

Urban agroliterate societies brought something new into the world: *storage.* What we call civilization is the result of two great leaps in human storage capacity, bringing liberation from the here and now and a vast expansion of human constructive capacity, hence the creation of an increasingly artificial environment. For the first time people are able to store *cereals* and *culture,* dry grain for times of scarcity and information in writing. Each entails a hierarchical society, for grain must be defended by a military elite and codes must be interpreted by a literate elite. The restriction of swordplay to the few (farmers having famously beaten their swords into ploughshares, unlike those original citizen-soldiers, segmentary hunters) encouraged the political division into a vast farming population ruled by warrior-aristocrats (maintaining a sort of continuity with the segmentary war party and its, now called, martial values), themselves flanked by the other elite, the literate authority of scribes, keepers of written records and sacred texts. In some cases, as Marshall Hodgson put it, *court* and *temple* kept each other in check, in others they merged (Hodgson 1974). We can also say that civilization is

based in cities, and, like Hodgson, speak of civilizations as "citied" cultures (as long as we do not make the mistake of saying that culture and progress are intrinsically urban, since it is more efficient rural food production that allows the cities to develop in the first place). And certainly with cities comes a third player, beyond court and temple: the market. There are no cities without markets.

To this new age we can add a conception which Gellner, and sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt, take from the German existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers. Jaspers coined the term "Axial Period" for the remarkable global explosion of philosophical-religious genius that occurred during the first millennium B.C.E. (Jaspers 1953). Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zoroaster, the authors of the Upanishads, the Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tzu, and the Hellenic Greek philosophers all lived within three centuries of the millennium's "axis" of 500 B.C.E. In southwest Asia, this brought the flowering of monotheism, whose most successful forms, Christianity and Islam, would later announce their revivals of the prophetic message, thereby eventually conquering between them most of the agrarian world outside the South-to-East Asian crescent of India-Indochina-China-Japan. In the Axial Age the implicit possibilities of a transcendental conception of God—which already existed in Judaism—were fully exploited. Something new enters the religious world: the need for salvation. Agrarian religion evolved the novel method of calling the individual conscience to confess its fealty to the Ideal. The soteriological nature of agroliterate religion presumes the possibility of being a social member yet having one's religious *bona fides* in question. In the religions of older animistic hunter-gatherer groups one could hardly be a social member and *not* be a faithful religious participant. Once the religious task has changed from performance of ritual to belief in doctrine and obedience to authority, religion becomes something to which social members can be recalled by the prophets and periodic revivals.

Agraria thus encourages a Platonic model of social reasoning, in which the validation of particulars entails their participation in, or conformity to, ideal norms or patterns. Social structure is divinely sanctioned, and divinity is *omnivalent,* that is, logically prior to any distinction between the true, the good, and the beautiful. God is an inherently multistranded concept, hence too is God's society. Here truth is indeed distinguished from political rightness, but then rationally *reintegrated* in the Divine. Literate metanarratives become essential to hierarchic, stratified societies. They make society binding on all human activities by inscribing it on the cosmos, forming what

Gaston Bachelard described as the anthropocosmic order (Bachelard 1964). Note that stratified society is not *more* integrated or unified than segmentary society. It is differently integrated, or as one might say, it is integrated, whereas segmentary society is predifferentiated. God, the Cosmos, and the hierarchical society replaces the yet undifferentiated whole of segmentary society with a *differentiated whole.*

To this account we can add our concern for the changing relation of social and cultural spheres. Among segmentary times and groups, society *is* culture and culture *is* society. We cannot distinguish social and cultural phenomena, or religious and political phenomena. The reason is not merely the great likelihood of local homogeneity. Social life is *the way,* the one and only way, the universe of activities and icons, which are not yet differentiated into the economic, social, or religious zones. The sacred/profane distinction, so important for Mircea Eliade, cuts across all activities and artifacts; it does not contrast what we would call religion from secular life, but rather the most impressive, symbolically rich, cognitively laden, and affectively complex zones of a unified social-religious life from their more mundane dimensions (Eliade 1954). So it would be perfectly apt to say that in segmentary life *culture is everything,* for in such a time society is everything, and culture is society. It is only in agroliterate or stratified societies, made inevitably more complex by their size, incorporation of distinct peoples, administrative complexity, and later their cosmopolitan trading and governing centers, that culture begins to be differentiated from society. *High* culture based in writing, and reproduced by a literate elite, becomes for the first time distinct from illiterate *folk* culture. High culture is led, of course, by religion, as the site of metaphysical representation, the ultimate seat of social norms, and the repository of education (that is, reading). The sociopolitical and religious statuses of the individual are now dis-identified, even if the symbolic code and political authority reintegrate them. Likewise, bringing diverse cultures under one imperial state-roof means that state or social membership can no longer be identified with cultural membership. It is against this backdrop that modernity evolved. The new world of commerce, science, republican politics, a growing wedge of secular culture, and the manifold traits of the modern industrial society did not obliterate, but overlaid and submerged, in some places only very thinly, the agrarian.

One last point, important as it is simple, needs to be kept in mind about this "Western" civilization that was the first to modernize. It is seriously misleading to refer to Ancient Greece and Rome, the Hebrew tradition,

the history of Christianity, and the modernity that began with the Renaissance and culminated in the capitalist-scientific supremacy of north-central and especially Anglo-Saxon Europe all as the story of a triumphant "West." Ancient Greece, Rome, and early Judaism are *not* parts of Western civilization. The first two belong to *classical* civilization, a series of eastern Mediterranean empires and cultures that ended with the fall of Rome, itself issuing in three different civilizations: Western, Orthodox, and Islamic. For its part the Hebrew tradition lived a complex life amongst the peoples of the Levant for the two millennia preceding Christ. Nothing is surprising in this. As Carroll Quigley argues, what we call Western civilization is a product of *feudal* times, historically centered in North Central and Northwest Europe, and defined by Western or Roman Christendom (Quigley 1979). It follows the destruction of Greco-Roman civilization by *three centuries,* dating from Charlemagne's centralization of authority in the eighth century C.E., flourishes in the High Middle Ages, then undergoes a series of remarkable changes that create modernity. Even within this narrative we cannot speak of any kind of progressive Western civilization, any scientific or technical superiority, until the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That we can indeed trace characteristics of this modern civilization back to Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem does not make them all one civilization. Civilizations rise, fall, mix, borrow, and otherwise influence each other. That China and Japan have been heavily influenced by an Indian-born Buddhism does not mean that they are part of Hindu civilization, or that Hindu civilization is in any way East Asian. The point is that we ought to stop using that convenient four-letter word, "West," to weave a fantastic continuum, a triumphant four-millennium march from Abraham to Aristotle to Aquinas to Adorno. There is not and never has been such a civilization.

What Gets Colonized?

The most systematic of recent philosophical accounts of modernity and the contemporary world remains Jürgen Habermas's monumental *Theory of Communicative Action,* published in German in 1981. This work has been often criticized but never matched; no one else has provided a comparably interdisciplinary, social and philosophical vision of the dynamics of the

modern world, along with a diagnosis of the problems, and promise, of our current condition. After two decades, while the debate over modernity and postmodernity has generated much heat and some light, his account remains the classic of its genre. It can serve to focus our discussion, while we highlight one of its largely neglected themes.

Habermas's account of contemporary society was rooted in three key notions: the distinction of strategic or instrumental versus "communicative" action, the corresponding distinction of system and lifeworld, and the colonization of the latter by the former. The system is the "systematically stabilized actions of a socially integrated group" coordinated by action consequences or, in the modern world, the interlocking network of money-and-power, capitalism and government bureaucracy. The lifeworld is the realm of interaction among social actors coordinated by inherently normative communication among the actors themselves, institutionally embodied in liberal democracy. For Habermas, modernity hangs on the release of the system and the lifeworld from traditional cultures, each freed to pursue its own "logic." Modernity is rightly characterized by Habermas, in a Weberian vein, as a differentiation of law, economics, and politics from tradition and from each other.

This allows him to reinterpret the functionalization thesis of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who had argued that modern instrumental rationalization undermined the possibility of reasoning about ends or values. Habermas agrees that in late modernity the system of market and state expands its power to the point of taking over social spheres that had been in earlier phases of modernity coordinated by the lifeworld of communicative action. "When stripped of their ideological veils," he writes, "the imperatives of autonomous subsystems make their way into the lifeworld from the outside—like colonial masters coming into a tribal society—and force a process of assimilation upon it" (Habermas 1987: 355). But, he argues against Adorno and Horkheimer, modern rationality is not *all* functional. There is as well the communicative rationality of the lifeworld, the reason-giving of agents who must implicitly respect the freedom and equality of each in discourse aimed at achieving agreement on any given issue. This is the source both of the scientific method and of liberal democracy. There is in communicative action a "moment of unconditionality," of normatively governed freedom, uncorrupted by strategic purposes (Habermas 1987: 399). In his later work Habermas derived an ethics from such discourse (Habermas 1990).

The political project, then, is to reverse the oppressive "colonization" of face-to-face, communicatively rational human dialogue by the functional system of money-and-power.

Along with this goes a related development, which Habermas had explored in an earlier book: the rise and fall of the modern public sphere (Habermas 1989). In the Middle Ages there was no public sphere of political discussion to which citizens *per se* were invited, all land being owned by the aristocracy and king. Habermas recounts the early modern development of free towns, the movement of population to cities, increasing commercialization, and above all the spread of literacy and the rise of newspapers. But the colonization of the lifeworld in late modernity is at the same time a colonization of the public sphere. Commentators have periodically charted a decline of the public sphere in America for decades: Hanna Arendt in the 1950s, Richard Sennett in the early 1970s, Christopher Lasch in the late 1970s and 1980s, and Robert Putnam in the 1990s (Arendt 1958; Sennett 1974; Lasch 1979; Putnam 1995). They have lamented the decline of civility among strangers, participation in public organizations, the condition of public spaces, and increasing cynicism regarding politics itself. At the same time, our public spaces seem to be flooded with what Lasch called narcissism, and Jean Bethke Elshtain has recently labeled the politics of displacement, the displacing of private energies onto the public realm, the emotional catharsis of Jerry Springer and the reported sex lives of public figures (Lasch 1979; Elshtain 1995). In the language of Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man,* this is a "repressive desublimation," a release of passion and intimacy that serves political repression, or in Habermas's sense, the continued undermining of critical public discourse. Paradox remains, however, in that on the one hand we seem overwhelmed by distant bureaucratic and corporate power that continually invades the private sphere, and on the other our public discourse and media culture seems saturated with personal, even intimate, coloration. We will return to this conundrum.

As others have noted, Habermas's concept is not entirely original (Cohen and Arato 1997). In *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944) Karl Polanyi had sketched the fitful birth of the market economy. The heyday of laissez-faire capitalism from 1832 to the early 1930s required that all the factors of economic life be managed by a self-regulating market, hence the fiction of a "market society," the triumph

of economics over sociology. But even its champions eventually became disabused of this fiction, recognizing that certain key "materials"—labor, land, and currency—could *not* be entirely subject to market forces, hence that capitalism had to limit itself to save itself. Unfortunately, it was fascism and bolshevism that in the 1930s attempted to return economics to its traditional position of subservience to society (as Peter Drucker argued in his 1939 *The Fall of Economic Man,* one of the first analyses of totalitarianism). To avoid those catastrophic systems, Polanyi argued, what liberal society requires is a return to the primacy of society, albeit one that holds onto the core of liberty and efficiency the market economy provides. Polanyi described the social strains created by the market as "shifting" among various "institutional zones," accumulating in one "comparatively independent" sphere or another. He analogized the condition of workers with that of colonized peoples (Polanyi 1957: 158). But unlike Habermas he claimed it is *culture* that bears the brunt of the distress. "A social calamity," Polanyi wrote, "is primarily a cultural, not an economic phenomenon. . . . Not economic exploitation, as often assumed, but the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim is then the cause of the degradation" (Polanyi 1957: 157). The uncontrolled market created a "cultural vacuum."

How does Habermas treat culture? Ambivalently, we must say. For while he accepts culture in principle as a mainstay of free society, as long as it is a culture of open communication and not oppressive tradition, the structure of his theory betrays a common liberal fear of culture as a conservative force.

We can see this in his classic text on modernity. Habermas claims that modernity entails a "linguistification of the sacred," a transformation of norms that in premodern society received their power from divinity and ancestral authority into articulable, discursive social rules. From the distinction of the modes of utterance—truth-governed assertions, performatives normed by "rightness," and exhibitions normed by sincerity or authenticity—Habermas derives three functions of utterances in communicative action: reaching understanding, coordinating action, and socializing actors. These yield in turn the three related processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization, respectively, all to be coordinated by communication oriented to achieving mutual understanding. Thus culture is one of three zones in which communicative action operates, the one specifically tied to truth-governed assertion, hence reaching understanding, as in the "transmission of culturally stored knowledge" (Habermas 1987:

63). At the same time he describes the lifeworld as the "stock of knowledge," the repertoire of cultural-linguistic interpretive patterns which serves as the logically prior background for the subjective, objective, and social worlds. In a diagram depicting the special status of the lifeworld with respect to these three worlds, culture is made, with language, the medium of the lifeworld, and thus "constitutive for mutual understanding as such" (Habermas 1987: 126). In short, Habermas virtually identifies culture with the lifeworld; rather than one sphere within the lifeworld, culture is the realm of meaning from which participants supply themselves for the sake of all understanding. He even admits, sounding a bit like his philosophical rival, the hermeneutic thinker Hans-Georg Gadamer, that speakers and hearers cannot "distance" themselves from this cultural stock. So roughly speaking, culture is the cognitive reservoir that funds society's regulation of behavior. In this vein Habermas does indeed recognize an "impoverishment of culture" in late modernity (Habermas 1987: 327).

But having made culture the very basis of the lifeworld and communicative rationality, Habermas proceeds to restrict its role. He criticizes what he calls the "culturalistic" concept of the lifeworld, which he associates with American sociologist Peter Berger, for ignoring the solidaristic function of discourse. Culture's validity is dependent on, and rightfully criticized by, rationality and knowledge; its reproduction must be "evaluated according to standards of the rationality of knowledge" (Habermas 1987: 141). Apparently contradicting his own denial of our ability to distance ourselves from culture, he insists that in the modern era of communicative action "culture no longer remains at the backs of communicative actors; it sheds the mode of background certainty and assumes the shape of knowledge that is in principle criticizable" (Habermas 1987: 220). But where is this knowledge to come from that could criticize the storehouse of knowledge (that is to say, culture)? How do we acquire the ability to distance ourselves from, what he earlier identified with *the lifeworld itself*?

The point is that there are two conflicting concepts of culture in Habermas's theory. Where he thinks of culture as the stock of interpretive patterns that social actors carry into interaction, he in effect merges culture with the lifeworld, according it a correspondingly central place. Here all critique must operate *within and through* culture's resources. But where Habermas recognizes that such resources are predominantly inherited, his progressive-liberal instincts lead to him to fear culture as an obstacle to

freedom. He then shrinks culture to an object of or component of the lifeworld so that knowledge and political discourse can act independently of it and criticize it. This vacillation on culture is symptomatic of a problem that plagues his entire theory.

Habermas's thesis that modernity released various social spheres to pursue their own "logics" is, I think, quite right. But, as others have criticized, the lifeworld-system distinction is problematic. First, it is too rigid. In his hands it simply recapitulates the old Kantian dualism of freedom and nature (Cahoone 1989). Certainly the lifeworld is interwoven with practical consequences, and the system includes moments of communicative action. While it is true, as I have argued, that culture concerns ends and cannot be fully instrumentalized without ceasing to be culture, we cannot separate out social zones, regions of social life, according to whether they are instrumental or not. The distinction is more subtle and complex, as we shall see. Second, it is too simple. Whereas Habermas calls attention to the two media of money and power, it would make more sense to refer to *four* media: money, power, *law,* and *signs.* Government as administration is part of the system. Law and power—meaning political power—are each bivalent: there is systematized law and unsystematized (or "lifeworlded") law, systematized political power and unsystematized power. For law and political power exist within civil society, below the level of the system, as well as within the system. Some of the inputs from civil politics arise to affect the system. This is something Habermas notes but fails to emphasize. In the contemporary system, law and the signs manipulated by what we can call the mass *mediaculture* are as much a medium of functionalization as money and power.

One way of putting this is that there are several distinct forms of internal "colonialism" that need to be differentiated. I will mention three: the colonization of local economic life, the replacement of local culture and civic life by mass mediaculture, and the sheer obsolescence of culture.

Regional, "national," and global corporations buy up and supplant local business. If this is a form of "colonization" in Habermas's sense—and I think we must say that it is—then independent local businesses must *not* be part of "the system" that is doing the colonizing. The system, then, is that realm of activities, properties, and their effects that are tightly bound up in the "logic" of the highly centralized, national, and increasingly, international market. What Habermas calls the "system" cannot simply mean

business and government; it must mean big, distant, bureaucratic, powerful business and government (and as I have added, big law and big media). What remains unsystematized are largely *local* regions of economy, social relations, and culture, into which the tendrils of the system have as yet limited reach. IBM and CBS are part of the system, but the local *bodega* and repair shop, where neighbors swap stories while engaging in low-yield instrumental activity, are not. The greater the money, power, or audience at stake, the more systematic, the more integrated into the system, any social phenomenon must be.

This distinction can help to address the seeming paradox, presented above, of a simultaneous decline in the public sphere through a flight to privacy *and* a decline in privacy caused by public encroachment. It is true that in contemporary American life we witness the triumph of the public over the private. But what triumphs is not public life in general, it is a particular public, the *distant public,* primarily the electronically mediatized public sphere, while local publics are devalued. In the last century the local public realm has for many Americans been replaced by a public of strangers. The operative public realm today is that realm contiguous with the state and the major electronic media and entertainment outlets. This nonlocal public soaks up more and more of social, cultural, and psychological life; distantly regulated or initiated market and state activities penetrate and replace local, family, and interpersonal life to an unprecedented degree, making some of the most important of life's skills the management of relations to those bureaucracies, while the mediaculture increasingly values distant public life and achievement, hence fame, as the primary form of social recognition. But even the triumphant nonlocal public paradoxically loses part of its distinctiveness from privacy. For in its ubiquity, now without a mediating local public sphere, the distant or national public is flooded by energies earlier restricted to privacy or to the local, familiar public. Of course, for many Americans the local public remains crucial. But we are speaking here of tendencies, of the direction of change. For more and more, the local means less and less. And since it is inevitable that for the majority of Americans, and for an increasing number as we go down the economic scale, their primary "empowerment zone" of interest, expertise, and likely political action is in fact local, this shift has a profound antipopulist effect: the ceding of more political clout to the upper classes and to the professional politicians—not only electoral candidates, but bureaucratic officials, nongovernmental experts, and the journalists that manage their interaction.

But it is the effect on culture that is our main concern. Here we face a basic distinction. On the one hand, the systemic "mediatization" of culture *is* the mediaculture. This is in effect the creation of a new market, which Adorno and Horkheimer called "the culture industry," a collaboration of capitalism and culture that follows its own rules as a market subsystem. On the other hand, what remains of culture outside the media, shared across the locales that constitute America, is not colonized or shrinking; rather, it is increasingly rendered *obsolescent.* In late modern or postmodern America we witness the progressive displacement of non-media-culture from an influential role in social life. This is to say that experience, the social regulation of behavior, and the sense and significance of human life cease to be guided by a teleologically thick layer of society's hermeneutic horizon, an inherited, shared public repertoire of interpretive processes rooted in socially projected ends, and especially any symbolic reference to icons, rituals, and metanarratives. To some extent these decay, but to a greater extent they simply become irrelevant, in Wittgenstein's figure, a wheel that plays no role in the mechanism. We will trace the forms of this obsolescence in the next chapter.

The obsolescence of culture can indeed impact political discourse. Cultural obsolescence deprives political discourse of a teleologically laden medium, a set of culturally shared figures, standards, or narratives for social decision making. Even the "default" values of life, health, physical beauty, and sensual pleasure, which are always compelling regardless of the lack of more symbolic cultural agreement, must be deliberated and adjudicated according to some shared notion of equality, fairness, rights, justice, and so on. As Michael Walzer has argued, every scheme of distributive justice must presuppose shared notions of the meaning and value of the things that are to be distributed (Walzer 1983). How are such issues to be discussed, weighed, or measured, how are their patterns of distribution to be considered, how are they to be connected to fairness, survival, community, happiness, and tracked across different spheres of life without the employment of shared, moderately thick patterns of interpretation? As MacIntyre argued, such discussion becomes a sheer tallying of preferences in which discourse among opposing-preference groups has no convincing power (MacIntyre 1981). Without a shared, substantive cultural vocabulary, political actors may be free to speak, but have less to say and even less to agree on. This need not—indeed, in a free and pluralistic society it *cannot*—imply a short list of ultimate values to which all members must sign on. It implies rather that there

must be an overlapping, thick-but-vague cultural consensus, as described in Chapter 1, implicating at least some substantive, more-than-default values shared by most social members.

Thus, among its other roles, I am suggesting that culture is *the stage-setting for political discourse.* Without it, we are condemned to communicate without the ability to presuppose end-signifying motifs, concepts, and values in common. Political discussants without overlapping cultural inheritances are reduced to only the most rudimentary considerations, like default values, and even regarding them citizens will be unable to resolve conflicts except by the most rudimentary means. Certainly with Habermas I hope for a reinvigorated discursive citizenship, but without a shared culture those public-spirited citizens will not have anything to say to one another. Even if we accept the whole machinery of Habermas's discourse ethics, with the later emendations of his epigones, can respect for the other be maintained, even conceived, without respect for what the other *values or stands for?* Habermas continues the error of egalitarian liberals who regard the democratic association of citizens in the present, the political forum and its presumed instrument, the state, as an adequate answer to the problems of a market-driven society. But I believe a third thing is required, beyond the market *and* the forum, namely culture, the inheritance of meaning-patterns that *inform the forum.* It is the colonization of culture, not the forum, that undermines the meaningful discourse among citizens. For solidarity presupposes culture.

Modernizing Culture

Among the various distinctions modernity enjoys, and suffers, is that it is the first civilization to *make culture a problem.* In perhaps its most famous strain, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment involved a self-conscious break with the past on the part of educated, political, and commercial elites, in which a putatively universal, impartial mode of validating human judgments in terms of Reason, Experience, and Nature (REN for short) replaced the prior standards that, from the perspective of the new mode, appeared dependent on Culture, Authority, and Society (or CAS). Reason is to operate on the data of Experience in order to ascertain the truth of Nature, or the natures of things. All three of these norms for cognition and practice are suprasocial and supracultural. REN aims to supplant what it now finds to be the merely traditional trappings of an unself-conscious soci-

ety. While "cultural" in the sense of being a cultural development expressed in artifacts and historical metanarrative, it is nevertheless largely *anticultural.* For whatever else we may say about culture, it certainly has something to do with generationally transmitted interpretive networks, hence traditions (the Latin *traditum* meaning simply what is handed down), which operate with the force of authority to bind society together through compulsory norms from the past. Culture is, among other things, the storehouse where all the impediments to progress, all the customs and superstitions to be undercut by Reason, all the hoary forms of authority to be replaced by democracy, all the collective beliefs to be weighed in the scales held by liberated individual experience, are kept. The new, modern culture is a culture of *individualism,* where persons are both granted a degree of liberty from inherited custom and encouraged to "question authority" and create novelty, and *progressivism,* where for the first time in human history the past is officially denied its normativity and the future is supposed to diverge from it. Modern culture then presents us with an *antitraditional tradition,* a generationally transmitted message not to conform to generationally transmitted messages, an authoritative command to question authority, a collective commitment to the individual's right to violate collective commitments, a call from the (recent) past to ignore the past.

Let us explore this a bit more carefully. REN is asserted to be the new method and norm of judgment. Universal Reason, understood as a capacity that, while inculcated by particular cultures, rejects their authority; Experience, understood as a field of evidence that was always before our eyes but heretofore unseen because we saw as through a cultural glass, prejudicially; and Nature, the great object of our experience and reason, whose lawfulness provides the order we seek to know—these are understood to be independent of religion, society, and authority, even if they now will provide the validity of the latter. God may well stand behind them all, but the only public access to Him is through REN. REN must dislodge social, cultural, traditional forms of authority and belief. It is not an ideal on a par with the monotheistic God of Agraria, because REN is first of all a method, not a content, understood as progressive and fully differentiated from social, salvific, practical, and aesthetic norms. Skirmishes over Darwinism in American public schools aside, our commitment to REN is unshaken by conflicts with religion and authority.

But at the same time, in another of its strains, the Enlightenment invented the notion that each "people," understood as a homogeneous, territorial,

endogamous group, characterized by some fundamental weltanschauung or virtue or capacity, ought to be equally free to express its portion of the divinely created Whole. Originally voiced by Herder and eventually motivating Romanticism, this notion became dominant in, of all places, our politics, creating nationalism. If the Enlightenment was the first century to claim to have transcended culture, it is also the first age to *define* culture. Romanticism and nationalism then became the carriers of a countertradition which is inevitably the obverse of orthodoxy. In its pure form nationalism claims that for each culture there must be a state, and for each state, a culture. This promoted egalitarianism and democracy, as I claimed earlier. Nationalism entails the *three-way convergence of state sovereignty, social order, and high culture.* As Gellner argues, modern industrial society evolved within states that declared the official status of one language, literature, history, or culture, thereby providing a "context-free" communications sphere across which freed labor, capital, and cognition could move.

But along with this, culture is made not only political but *philosophical.* The idea that deep presuppositions, worldviews, and cognitive habits, shared regardless of class by peoples, the notion that thought is social, historical, and particular is a modern view which in effect *semiotizes* or *cognitivizes* ethnicity, construes what it means to be "a people" through a socialized cognition. The more well-known Enlightenment of Reason may have intellectualized morality, made human reason the judge of norms, but it also, in this second strain, achieved a *becoming-philosophical* of social membership. To this day contemporary relativists and social constructivists regard culture as that-to-which knowledge is relative. This is a high compliment that the ancients and medievals would never have granted folk or popular culture. It remains relativism's strongest suit. Even epistemic realists, denying that culture goes "all the way down," nevertheless grant that culture is that deep structure of human belief whose determinative meaning must be undercut. In each case social membership is intellectualized.

At the same time, as Habermas argued, particular spheres of social life were granted charters to independence from culture, hence tradition. But surely this release of spheres cannot have been a simple jailbreak. Culture had to *vet* those incipient spheres as at least partially fulfilling its own norms. *Culture must have agreed to its own dismemberment,* granting at least limited permission for growth to science, markets, politics, law, and eventually art and mass culture, to pursue their logics. The spheres were *ambivalently,* never utterly, freed. But with their limited charters they nevertheless reconstructed

each other and the cultural background from which they ever more confidently distinguished themselves. The payoff came readily: modern society achieved unheard-of levels of prosperity and power. Culture was not merely circumvented; it did not remain an authoritarian traditionalism somehow attached to exploding functional spheres. It cycled between accommodation-incorporation of the progressive spheres and an ostrich-like refusal to recognize reality, alternately cutting deals and digging in heels. But by the time everyone realized that what they thought was their culture was no longer, the benefits had become too great to give up. And they remain so.

The point is that culture was destined by Western modernity for a permanently ambiguous status. The rationality and differentiation that the released spheres of activity achieved became a part of culture generally, although never absolutely. A dialectical relation of mutual support and opposition was set up between each emerging, quasi-independent sphere and the background culture which is now a culture-that-permits-and-vets quasi-independent spheres. The spheres then do the driving. Culture doesn't drive. It never learned to drive because it never had to *go anywhere before.* In its history, it has mostly sat still, sometimes walked, in a crisis rode a horse or camel, but the speed of rail, liner, and the individualized transport of the horseless carriage was beyond its powers of adaptation.

Once ambiguously released, however, the scientific or cognitive, economic or productive, political-civil spheres, by expanding and rationalizing themselves, push society and culture forward. This reinforces both the sense in which they are, and are not, a part of culture; are not because they repeatedly violate cultural norms, yet are because they constitute so much of our way of life. Later, in postmodern society, culture becomes paradoxical in a new way. For, as should be evident, in so far as culture provides the context of teleological intelligibility in which social spheres are demarcated it can never become *a* sphere, a particular social context among others. That would violate *its* logic. But as we shall see, in the twentieth century to the extent that mass mediaculture becomes most of what members imbibe *as their culture,* culture then does become a sphere, indeed a commercial sphere, *within* social life, thus a part of the whole it is supposed to condition.