5 POSTMODERNITY: TOO MUCH CULTURE OR NOT ENOUGH?

Let us hope that the passage of time has shown that the controversial term "postmodern" means neither everything nor nothing, that it has settled down to the normal, imprecise, contested linguistic life of meaning *something.* That contemporary society is postmodern is arguably true, but only if we accept that the postmodern is merely the advanced course in modernity, not its end. The break or discontinuity it claims obtains *within* the modern, sociologically and cognitively defined. For it is implausible to claim that the recent ("late" or "post" modern) world represents a break from the nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries comparable to the break between, say, the eighteenth century and the Middle Ages. Recent decades have not overturned the most novel features of the modernity that was born in the Enlightenment, became a strapping youth in the second half of the nineteenth century, and whose adult personality, if not future antics, were clearly discernible by the early twentieth. Whatever one's favorite account of the modern period, no one can deny that it introduced the science, technology, capitalism, industrialism, social egalitarianism, and cultural pluralism that remain daily lessons. Nothing more recent can match that break with earlier social history, not the eclipse of metanarrative, Newtonian physics, or European imperialism, not the rise of electronic media culture, quantum mechanics, or the knowledge-and-service based economy. Once we accept its location within modernity, "postmodern" can nicely indicate the recent deinstitutionalization or decontextualization of key elements of modernity, whereby more traditional features of early modern society, themselves holdovers from the agrarian world, which had balanced or harmonized the modern elements, have been undermined. It is then a plausibly decent name for the recent acceptance of the increasingly complex and troublesome nature of the modern, for a permanently problematic modernity, a postutopian worry that we all now imbibe as if with our postmodern mothers' milk. So "postmodern" will do, at least until something better, or

just newer, comes along. Our current job, at any rate, is to identify some of the characteristics of this postmodern world and its relation to culture.

The Not-so-New Class

We have mostly been concerned with the structural changes of modernity. But if the postmodern brings a novel form of life, there is still a class which, if not the creator or producer of cultural change, is nevertheless its most important carrier. Just as the bourgeoisie and its attendant classes arguably brought us the modern world, the postmodern is carried by the New Class. It is admittedly not so new. Woodrow Wilson warned against handing the country over to "experts," James Burnham's 1941 book *The Managerial Revolution* recognized the increasing prominence of the layer of managers, lawyers, and information professionals, and Milovan Djilas's *The New Class* argued that Stalinist-era socialism had spawned a new bureaucratic management with its own class interests. Then came the "postindustrial" knowledge-economy diagnosed independently by Alain Touraine and Daniel Bell, and adopted into postmodern theory by Jean François Lyotard. If anything, the New Class has grown in importance in the last decade, swelled by the computer and telecommunications revolutions. Two recent discussions are the late Christopher Lasch's *Revolt of the Elites* and David Brooks's delightful *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There.*

A particularly useful investigation is Alvin Gouldner's largely neglected *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class.* Gouldner identified the Western version of the New Class as the highly educated possessors of "cultural capital," including college faculty, engineers, managers, accountants, government officials, attorneys, media personnel, and human service and medical professionals. He divides them into humanist intellectuals and technical intelligentsia. Together they form the "cultural bourgeoisie." They are most importantly marked by a linguistic practice, the Culture of Critical Discourse (CCD). This "grammar of discourse" is characterized by a concern to justify assertions in terms of truth or rightness in order to obtain the "voluntary consent" of addressees without invocation of authority. The New Class's ideology is an ideology *about* discourse, about how beliefs and language are to be treated and handled, accompanied by the conviction that social action is *rightly* steered by such discourse. CCD conceives "pure" speech to be status- and situation-independent, reflexive and self-monitoring,

hence devoid of the contaminants of inequality, status, authority, force, and tradition.

Gouldner's point first of all is that the New Class *is a class,* hence primarily interested in its self-promotion vis-à-vis competing classes. The cultural bourgeoisie is a *guild*. But "unlike the old working classes it is basically committed to controlling the content of its work and its work environment, rather than surrendering these in favor of getting the best wage bargain it can negotiate" (Gouldner 1979: 20). Its members must professionalize as they bid to claim superiority to the "old class," the capitalist bourgeoisie. Their medium is not money (like the old bourgeoisie) or land (like the yet older aristocracy), but *speech*. The new class is committed to autonomy, inner-directedness, the "chosen rather than the imposed," the self-moving rather than the "externally driven." Rationality is then conceived as autonomy: arguments must "stand on their own legs," one must "consider the speech not the speaker," undetermined by the external forces of authority and tradition, or impulse and nature. The New Class accepts, unacknowledged, the bourgeois inheritance which holds that doing and producing are the supreme human functions and proper legitimation of social status, the banner under which the bourgeoisie had fought the aristocratic conviction that status lies in sheer being or birth. But the New Class's version of doing and producing is *semiotic.* Doing things with words, or other signs, is their business, and the *creative* use of signs their goal. We may say, stealing from Habermas, that the New Class is the *linguistification of the bourgeoisie.*

Gouldner does not fail to notice the virtues of the New Class. It is probably a better master than most elite classes, especially given its liberal commitments to procedural equality. But its members are prone to resentment over their "blocked ascendance," namely, that at the end of the day they have less money, status, and power than the business class. And their power is limited. They are generally a managing, not an owning, hence ruling, class (although there is nothing "petty" about a bourgeois class that includes the richest man in the world, Bill Gates). But despite the lack of ultimate proprietorship, their level of control is profound. Gouldner tellingly remarks, "CCD treats the relationship between those who speak it, and others about whom they speak, as a relationship between judges and judged. It implies that the established social hierarchy is only a semblance and that the deeper, more important distinction is between those who speak and understand truly and those who do not. . . . To participate in the culture of critical discourse, then, is a political act" (Gouldner 1979: 59).

The New Class thus tends to merge two ideal models of cognitive and political responsibility: *judge* and *scientist,* importing a scientific model of knowing into a juridical model of decision making and conflict resolution, emphasizing rule-governed presentation of evidence and impartiality. For the New Class, Gouldner writes, "Speech becomes impersonal. Speakers hide behind their speech. Speech seems to be disembodied, de-contextualized and self-grounded" (Gouldner 1979: 29). Their universalization of their method, CCD, is the universalization of their own power. "This inflexibility and insensitivity to the force of differing contexts," he tells us, "this inclination to impose one set of rules on different cases also goes by the ancient name of 'dogmatism'" (Gouldner 1979: 84). This may sound odd; as lovers of discourse, the New Class is committed to the open-ended nature of dialogue. But in this very "openness" Gouldner finds a set of abstract rules that ignore or prohibit important modes of identity and tradition from appearing in their "open" forum at all. We shall return to this.

Let us amplify three key components of Comprehensive Critical Discourse. First, the *denial of incommensurability.* All that is meaningful and cognitively valid is believed to be translatable into a single neutral idiom of culturally, historically, and geographically decontextualized, impersonal utterance, or what Gellner calls context-free communication. Meaning and validity are delinked from status and social role, so that content of statements can be judged independent from context of utterance and the social standing of the speaker. Second, the *ubiquity of justification.* All belief that seeks public expression or enforcement must be legitimated by inquiry and evidence, subject to highly stringent justificatory demands rather than vetted by authority, faith, or tradition. Last, *value-relativism and value-skepticism.* Value-questions are undecidable by the rules just described, hence are *surds* asserted by individuals. They are to be treated equally as data. This very fact guarantees liberty and toleration. As factual claims that persons do value certain things they can be registered by preference-counting (democracy) or negotiated by discussants (liberal capitalism).

Expanding on Gouldner, the New Class's unique concern with status over money likens them to another class familiar in Western history. If, as Gellner has argued, modern society involves the *universalization of the clerisy,* the education of all citizens into literate high culture to establish the necessary universe of communication for a mobile work force, the New Class of CCD constitutes its *high priesthood.* Like the feudal clergy, the New Class discovers that given the proper bureaucratic conditions, power and influence

can accrue to learning itself. Members of the New Class are the finest products of contemporary education, the best students in class, who most thoroughly master the context-free cultural semiotics delinked from place, peoples, and past that is our ruling discourse. They are the vanguard of the universalized culture of semiotic homogeneity.

It may come as no surprise that the New Class tends to have political views that befit its status. The New Class is progressive, cosmopolitan, and potentially internationalist. It tends to neutralist, rationalist liberalism, whether libertarian and antigovernment or egalitarian and committed to redistribution and government control, and in the past two decades has absorbed a strong commitment to cultural diversity under the neutralist umbrella. It is no coincidence that neutralist liberalism and the New Class matured together in the 1970s and 1980s. The egalitarian or welfare-state sector of the New Class accepts its role as the defender of the victims of the bourgeoisie, that class whose thunder it has always hoped to steal. Politics is primarily a matter of setting up Good-neutral rules of right which can be justified by a culture-neutral inquiry. Christopher Lasch contrasted its values with those of the petty bourgeoisie, skilled workers and small business owners, who prize the virtues of loyalty, responsibility, and above all, a sense of limits and hence the fragility of life and achievement. He remarked of New Class members, "They find it hard to understand why their hygienic conception of life fails to command universal enthusiasm. They have mounted a crusade to sanitize American society: to create a 'smoke-free environment,' to censor everything from pornography to 'hate speech,' and at the same time, incongruously, to extend the range of personal choice in matters where most people feel the need of solid moral guidelines" (Lasch 1995: 28). As Galston argues, those petty bourgeois commitments, which formed the historic basis of self-respect for the traditional clients of the Democratic Party, were devalued in the 1970s by neutralist egalitarians in their overweening concern for the least advantaged (the underclass) and marginalized social groups (such as homosexuals), shifting the petty bourgeoisie to the Republican Party in the 1980s, most notably as "Reagan Democrats" (Galston 1991: 162). The standoff has remained ever since. The "culture wars" of the 1990s were then largely battles between New Class and the spokespersons of petty bourgeois values.

The New Class adopts a series of positions that are self-undermining or at least self-threatening. Perhaps this is inevitable for a class that claims to

transcend class. Given its role as vanguard of the postmodern era, these paradoxes tend to be suffused throughout our society.

First, the commensurability of communication and justification requires compartmentalization. Understanding utterances outside context in effect places them in one communicative mode, as constative utterances or truth-functional claims that can be justified by evidence or argument. But whatever cannot fit under that rubric must then be excluded. Incommensurability then returns between the truth-functional claims and all other utterances, particularly those expressing value-orientations. For CCD these cannot be adjudicated. In other words, to paraphrase a Weberian point, *rationalization entails the refusal to treat ultimate questions, question comparing contexts, rationally.*

Second, cultural self-determination is justified by equality and freedom. No one, no people, is to be ruled by another; the only legitimate rule is self-rule. So liberal rationalism justifies both individual rights and national or tribal self-determination. Units should be autonomous, be they individuals or societies. But the autonomy of individuals and the autonomy of groups threaten each other, as we saw in Chapter 1. So, autonomy is in conflict with itself. That is, *the autonomy of individuals and the autonomy of collectivities are both mutually necessary and antithetical.*

Third, while authority is rejected as a legitimation of truth, it returns in the form of *expertise* in the methods just described. Liberal society is managed by authority in the form of rationalist expertise. The New Class says: "In a free and equal society, *I* will rule." This is a kind of meritocratic egalitarianism. Lasch called it the new paternalism of allegedly neutral experts and bureaucrats, which replaces the patriarchs of old (Lasch 1979). For the *anti-authoritarian society has to be authoritatively managed.*

Fourth, in a culture of criticism everything is questioned. But as Adorno and Horkheimer argued, if everything is subject to open-ended criticism, so is any critical ideal. The objection to the status quo turns out to be as indefensible as the status quo, which leaves the status quo standing as that to which we are no longer, to be sure, naively committed but *ironically resigned* (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). Equidistant between carrots, the critical donkey stays where it is. So, *the critical devaluation of everything leaves us with a postcritical acceptance of the given.*

Fifth, since it claims to be neutrally all-inclusive, CCD insists that it is commensurable with any culture. Liberal rationalism is a culture of universal tolerance which claims it can incorporate all other cultures. Now there

are lots of cultures on earth that are not liberal, reject CCD (at least on ultimate matters), hence enforce thick cultural values and practices. CCD is committed both to granting these validity—thereby tolerating them—and to asserting its own superiority and universality—thereby being intolerant of them. *It must, and it cannot, tolerate the intolerant.*

Sixth, CCD claims to be an idiom, mastery of which can resolve all resolvable issues because it is impartial regarding whatever claimants come before it. The proper response to conflict is to rise above it. Issues unresolvable in that impartial idiom have no claim on rational human attention. But if rationality is impartial, all partiality is irrational. That is, *CCD is partial to impartiality, hence partially condemns all partiality.*

Last, as we said, the New Class is by virtue of its mandarin status the educated or *semiotic bourgeoisie,* a cultural clerisy. But at the same time it insists that its methods, and the world it imagines as "the True and Only Heaven," is a world devoid of cultures in the sense of distinctive peoples with substantive, intransigent commitments. Its anthem, featured as the soundtrack of corporate commercials, is John Lennon's *Imagine:* "Imagine there's no heaven. . . . Imagine there's no countries. . . . Nothing to kill or die for. . . . No religion too. . . . Imagine no possessions"—the call for an egalitarian utopia whose only remaining social inequality, one suspects, would be that between the highly educated and creative cosmopolitans who most identify with that message and the unenlightened. The New Class accepts the liberal notion that the more one learns the less one embodies, that education makes one less committed to the superiority of any form of life, that "acculturation" and "cultivation" are antonyms. Thus, *the height of human culture is to have no culture.*

Members of the New Class thus tend to be emancipatory dogmatists, elitist egalitarians, self-styled princes and princesses of the anti-authoritarian society. In a conflict with their opponents they sincerely offer themselves as neutral judges to adjudicate the matter. Now, if you must fight with someone, it is true that you are probably better off fighting with someone sincerely devoted to truth and justice, as members of the New Class are. They may fight fair, and may even compromise, or admit your victory once the competitive process has produced its results. But if you become their intractable opponent, watch out. For they must regard your opposition not merely as a conflict of interests—since they believe they have no interests—but as your opposition to truth, justice, and reason *per se.* You must then be

"irrational" or "uneducated" or "politically incorrect," which is to say, *immoral*. As Carl Schmitt put it, those who claim to represent humanity as a whole must regard their opponents as *inhuman* (Schmitt 1996: 54).

Leibnizian Postmodernism

One structural disagreement between the analyses of our time proffered by postmodernists (such as Lyotard or Luhmann) and promodernists (such as Habermas) is a social version of the old philosophical problem of the One and the Many: do we witness today the deconstruction of society into a (postmodern) multiplicity of social "language-games" or rather the coalescing hegemony of a unitary (modernist) "system" or "empire" of money, power, and mass culture? Putting it this starkly makes each side sound rather simplistic; certainly there are aspects of unity *and* difference in our world. Nevertheless, a real argument exists between those who see in the present a tyrannical unitary technical-economic system that they hope to oppose with a renewed social solidarity, and those postmodernists who see instead disintegration and pluralism, for good or ill. I suggest that we can produce a model that harmonizes these two claims, with the not inconsiderable additional benefit of being true.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Habermas argued that in late modernity the lifeworld of human communication is progressively replaced and colonized by the "system" of money and power. As implied there, we can now say that this metaphor rightly captures a *static* picture of local communities facing the network of nonlocal capital and nonlocal administration, mediaculture, and law. What Habermas called the system is actually *the process* of interaction among vast markets, fields of activity, and the collective agencies acting in them, each composed of competing/cooperating individuals in functional roles, engaged in rational improvements in the context of overlapping and mutually impacting "games," or rule-governed contexts of mostly agonistic social activity and discourse. The total interaction among these social contexts is fluid, although at any one moment there is a constellation of games and their agencies with which all lesser games, agencies, and players must contend. What we call *the* market is nothing but the interlocking interactions among a huge number of subprocesses, each attempting to survive by the rules of its own particular game in the market-

administrative-legal-mass cultural environment. The postmodern society of autonomous contexts *is* this environment; it is what the globalized process looks like at the level of individuals, agencies, and roles. This claim simply expands the Weberian differentiation thesis, the breaking apart of social spheres from tradition and into internally commensurable, rationalizable spheres. Each context—science, economics, politics, and even art—freed to pursue its own logic, reorganizes itself by internal rules. This is what made progress possible. The meta- or supracontext is the environment formed by the collection of all social contexts. Each faces the environment constituted by all.

The key to this view is that social agencies and contexts are simultaneously autonomous *and* interdependent. Autonomous in that they develop according to internal rules, expressed in the theory of *autopoiesis* or self-making systems (Luhmann 2003; Maturana and Varela 1980). But at the same time all generate externally relevant effects, hence constrain one another, to varying degrees of salience. None is independent of the outside constituted by the other agencies and contexts; each represents those effects in its autonomous internal rules and problems. Continuing the metaphysical metaphor, this is a roughly Leibnizian picture of monadic social contexts, each with its own inner principle of growth and each reflecting changes in all relevant others. The element of Leibniz's metaphysics that is missing here, of course, is his notion of a prearranged harmony created and sustained by God. The combination of autonomy and interdependence implies that more and more games become internally rationalized and progressive *and* there are fewer and fewer boundaries to the effects games have on one another. Every game and agency expands, rationalizes, in relation to its internal goals and rules, but every game tends to take on technologies of the environment that is the sum of all. All are transparent, nothing is hidden.

What must be added to this roughly postmodern view is the fact that the most dominant economic games, along with the progressive research games of technology-creation, and the administrative games with their legal rules, are the progressive driving forces of the process. Rather than describe this as system hegemony we ought to recognize that this "multiheaded" progressive force pluralizes all social activity into autonomous language games or contexts. The metaphors of sovereignty (from politics), mechanical regulation (as in systems theory), and difference (from semiotics) do not hold here. What we see is a burgeoning set of internally normed, interlocked, practical-linguistic games, which, in their explosive progress, force

pluralization and contextualization on the rest of social life. These driving contexts do not establish unity or empire or system or hegemony; on the contrary, *they continuously break down any substantive metacontext of social activity,* the cognitive representation of which Lyotard called metanarratives. The network of driving forces is not a *thing;* it is a process that *erodes all things.* The total complex of these complexes indeed forms a "reality" or "environment" for all other social contexts and individuals at any moment. Like the physical universe, the social universe is expanding from every point (with exceptions to be noted below). I am suggesting that the postmodern condition is merely the advanced course in Weberian modernization. We are still working out the implications of a society of "spontaneous order" in which units are free to rationalize themselves, first initiated and conceived in the eighteenth century.

The relevant categories of social contexts are then three. First are those that constitute the progressive economic, technological, administrative-legal games, and some components of mass culture. This is the *driving sector,* the core of the process. It is driving, not determining; its members push against, rather than rule, other contexts, creating continual pressure for change. Second are the non-driving contexts that are nonetheless progressive and rationalizing, like art, intellectual culture, other parts of mass culture, and a host of voluntary and political associations which seek rational improvement or advantage according to their own norms and hence create novelty. This is the *riding sector.* Third are the social contexts that are outside the dominant network most of the time, and are in themselves nonprogressive, like the normative institutions of family, friendship, certain voluntary and interest associations, and local economic, politics, and culture (indeed, I have argued, civil society itself). They constitute the *by-standing sector.* They may or may not be, to use Peter Berger's terms, "de-" or "counter-modernizing" but they are at least nonmodernizing, not internally normed by progress or rationalization, and thus are usually under threat from the first two sectors.

We may profit from Charles Jencks's claim that postmodern architecture, rather than abandoning nostalgia or metanarrative, incorporates traditional gestures into an otherwise modernist frame through "double-coding," the combination of signs from two opposed languages. The agencies of the progressive sectors of postmodern society do not forsake unity or metanarrative. On the contrary, as Leibnizian monads, each represents or projects a vision or goal of expansive unity, or metanarrative. One might say that each context facing out into the environment understands other contexts through

an at least projected unity, employing George Herbert Mead's figure, a "generalized other." The postmodern condition is not one in which we abandon metanarrative but in which metanarrative and rationalizing instrumentality, unity and difference, the language of tradition and the language of progress, are mixed together and the inconsistency fails to be problematic. Everybody is free to project what metanarratives they like, and free to notice that shared metanarrative does not matter. *The process works regardless.* We follow the contextual rules of particular functional linguistic-practical contexts while simultaneously spouting grand narratives belied by our performance. Weber argued that the differentiation of spheres and values made us no longer agroliterate monotheists, but "polytheists." In the postmodern condition we are simultaneously polytheists and monotheists *without the worry.*

For there certainly are metanarratives in postmodern society, most notably in the United States. But they subsist in a distinct fashion. First, there are the official and public metanarratives of society that everyone takes seriously: progressivism or the commitment to social progress as the meaning of existence, and individualism or the view that human individuals are the centers of value and the ultimate court of true judgment in the world. They are powerful, broadcasted by mass culture, flown on banners, and sworn to as oaths. But they are thin and procedural; their narrative structure underdetermines questions of the meaning of human existence and any hierarchy of values. What gets invested with effective loyalty is a *how,* not a *whither* or *why,* a common pragmatic attitude, ability to adapt to novel contexts, context-free problem solving, as well as a remarkably open cognitive system. Genuinely thick metanarratives, on the other hand, are still held by perhaps most citizens, and metaphors and references to these litter our public life. But they generally have practical consequences only in private life or in voluntary associations. When citizens announce thick metanarratives in public, everyone recognizes them as socially unnecessary, to be taken with a grain of salt, that is, tolerance. Thus, what the "loss" of or "incredulity" toward metanarratives means in fact is not their absence but their ambiguity or social impotence when substantive. If thick and determinative, metanarratives are merely private or contextual; if public or universal, they must be thin. Social actors themselves recognize that coordinated social action does not require thick belief. Thus, most Americans may endorse conservative rhetoric, but it is precisely at the point that conservative political groups seek to establish nativist or Christian policies that they back away.

Now, the Leibnizian picture presented above may seem too fragmented. The modernist is right to say that we cannot conceive of ongoing social action that is not rule-governed or meaningfully contextualized. So it would seem the differences can only obtain against a background unity. But the postmodernist retort (or, what the postmodernist *ought* to retort) is correct: while every interaction must be rule-governed or backgrounded, there does not have to be *a* context of contexts, a rule of all rules. Agencies bootstrap themselves into temporarily and contextually rule-governed interactions with one another. A set of rules Q, projected by individuals or agencies R and S in certain of their context-dependent roles, provides the background against which R and S have a meaningful interaction. But when S turns to interact with an individual or agency Y, another background Z will be invoked, and so on. There is in each case a "third thing" but not *one* third thing for all cases. My point is not the metaphysical claim that there are no supracontextual norms, only that contemporary society has no need of that hypothesis. No doubt many people accept as given that there is a common generalized other or, more subtly, that the metanarratives projected by the various contexts of society are converging or will converge. But we do not see evidence of that in contemporary society. The demands of the driving sector are cognitively and culturally minimal and, if you will, falsificationist: they rule out thick metanarratives, but don't mandate any. The open-ended issue, which each generation will have to recalibrate for itself, is how to make sense, or coherence, of the differentiation of the progressive, single-stranded, rationalized sectors and the nonprogressive, multistranded, nonrationalizing sectors of human life.

Is Culture Obsolescent?

During the Soviet era Czech émigré novelist Milan Kundera argued that in contemporary Europe culture had "bowed out" (Kundera 1984a). After a friend's manuscript was confiscated by authorities in communist Prague, he and Kundera wandered the city discussing which great cultural figure in the West they could contact to take a public stand. Despairingly, they could think of no one who was not compromised by sectarian politics. Europeans had ceased to believe in the moral autonomy of cultural creation, Kundera lamented, in the intrinsic values constructed by learning and writing. For in

Soviet-dominated Europe there was no independent culture, while in the West nobody—including the intellectual-cultural elite itself—valued culture except as something to be consumed. The great modern "age of culture," which had, for Kundera, replaced religion as the repository of European ideals in the eighteenth century, was retreating like a melting glacier. That we occupy a vastly different geopolitical environment today does not gainsay Kundera's question: do we now live in a postcultural era, a time beyond culture?

Some may respond that this question is absurd; surely today we are not devoid of culture, we are inundated with it! The sheer volume of cultural artifacts and cultural producers, the enormous industries devoted to producing and selling culture in the broad sense—film, television, radio, books, news and entertainment weeklies and monthlies, all manner of toys and print reproductions, fashion, sports, the ubiquity of journalistically transmitted political discourse, and so on—is unprecedented in human history. Likewise, in our pop version of poststructuralism we seem more concerned than ever with cultural signs, with images of reality rather than reality itself. But the point is not the absence of cultural activity or artifacts; it is whether our *attitude toward* them renders them incapable of doing what cultural activities and artifacts have traditionally done. Indeed, a changed function of culture may be the requisite precondition for massive cultural output. Still, if not absurd, talk of the end of culture is at least politically suspicious. Presumably it is an elitist Eurocentric conceit, a lament over the decline of a high culture that was the property of mid-twentieth-century upper-class whites in the towns and suburbs of London, Berlin, Paris, and New York in the face of an upsurge of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural pluralism from below. But the issue here is not the replacement of one culture by another, or the lack of unity in culture. It is whether the meaning and experience of *culture per se* has undergone a structural change. Here there is good (or at least plausibly good) news, and bad (or at least sobering) news.

The bad news first. There are indeed a series of contemporary effects, more complex than the "colonization" Habermas suggested, that arguably undermine or encroach upon cultural practices, artifacts, and narratives *per se* in a variety of ways. First, there is *decontextualization,* the splitting-up of shared cultural contexts that roughly backgrounded all social action, leaving, so to speak, bits and pieces of culture stuck to particular social contexts and practices to operate without any shared, cross-contextual background, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued (MacIntyre 1981). In moral life it

leads individuals to turn to purely vocational, bureaucratic, or role-specific moral rules, having no other reliable and shared basis for moral judgments. Second, there is *de-culturation,* the simple elimination of cultural elements as unnecessary or incompatible with gains in efficiency or cost, as when pushing buttons on a bank machine replaces small talk with a teller. Where cultural elements are not actually eliminated, they tend to be reinterpreted in a way that costs them their cultural function, which can happen in two ways. They can be *functionalized,* regarded as publicly valuable only in an instrumental sense, or *privatized,* regarded as meaningful or valuable in a purely private sense that has no legitimacy in public. What then remains of publicly shared culture often approximates a *default culture* focused on those values which remain when other public values are undermined, in particular the *biovalues* of life, longevity, health, pleasure, and physical beauty.

The social reproduction of culture has changed dramatically. For the first time in history people get *acculturated at a distance,* not primarily by kin and locale. Throughout history family and neighbors were the sole means of inculcating the majority. The sources of high culture were nonlocal, extending from cultural elites in cosmopolitan centers, but the agents of acculturation were always local. To be sure, today kin and locale continue to work their socializing magic. But now, even if the familial and local culture are idiosyncratic, or largely fail, the media, plus the schools, plus big business and government, will train the child in the wider culture. While this may have its benefits, it must give us pause, not only because it means the continued erosion of locale, as noted earlier, and a running battle between parents and the New Class culture-makers, but because it presumably must alter the acculturation process itself, the way the young come to be cultural members and what their "culture" means to them.

Last, contemporary culture exhibits as a prominent component an *anti-culture,* in which culture depicts itself as anachronistic, trivial, merely private or merely functional (Cahoone 1988). For among the things represented and interpreted by the cultural medium is *the cultural medium itself.* Both at the level of intellectual culture and the popular mediaculture one can encounter the message that all cultural practices serve economic or political purposes, the evaluation of cultural products solely by financial criteria, and campy cynicism regarding the ultimate meaninglessness of narrative representation. Again, the point is not a turn from high to lowbrow or popular culture; it is not that today our children prefer the sitcom to Shakespeare. It is rather that part of their acculturation, their medicultural training, is

learning that *culture does not matter,* that inherited literatures and the wisdom of the past serve no purpose. It is true that Shakespeare will suffer from this trend more than the sitcom, since Shakespeare demands more effort and education. Nevertheless, people do not avoid Shakespeare merely because it is hard, but because it is hard *and* because we feel Shakespeare has nothing important to teach us, just as the sitcom has nothing important to teach us. We don't take Shakespeare seriously, *and we don't take the sitcom seriously either.* Shakespeare is a joke, like the sitcom is a joke; but the latter is an easier joke. In fact, the sitcom is happy *to consider itself* a joke, to wink at us in ironic self-comment and acknowledge its merely economic function. The media-constituted public realm thus becomes saturated with nonmeaning, open lies, and frank calculation. We train ourselves to regard what are on their face cultural forms—dramatic narrative, images, rhetoric, artifacts—*as nonmeaningful and nonvaluable.* We get used to discounting, ignoring, and trivializing cultural things.

Now, all that is on one side. Yet there is some good news about our postmodern culture that makes it impossible to say, with Kundera, that culture has "bowed out." Certainly mass electronic culture does not exhaust our culture; there remain minority ethnic, regional, and local cultural eddies and inlets. Perhaps most people live double cultural lives, moving between the local and communally inherited on the one hand and mass culture on the other. Nor is mass or mediaculture simply empty; the cultural obsolescence just described is a powerful component of its description, but it would be foolish to argue that it exhausts the whole. Certainly culture is bigger than ever. In our age of universal literacy, universal schooling, an ever rising number of college attendees, and the postindustrial swelling of the "semiotic" spheres of the economy—from knowledge to entertainment to news—we virtually swim in signs, spoken and written words and images and narratives. To this is now added globalization after 1989, which has tended to spread the mass culture of the countries with the largest economies, the United States above all, over the globe. So the critic ought to be cautious about any simplistic condemnation of the novelty and complexity of postmodern culture.

First and most obviously, postmodern mediaculture is the first culture in history that is *commercial* and *built to change.* These two traits go together. Certainly earlier cultural artifacts and practices had economic value. But only today is the constant creation of cultural artifacts, as Adorno and Horkheimer lamented, an *industry.* Marx's analysis that under capitalism "all that

is solid melts into air," like Schumpeter's attribution to capitalism of the method of "creative destruction," fits mass culture more than any aspect of social life. The result is, as noted, a source of despair for many critics, but with its economic and fluid nature goes the malleability and diversity of our culture. Whatever postmodern capitalist culture is, it is not rigid. As they say of New England weather, if you don't like this culture or the role it bequeaths you, wait five minutes.

Second, our culture is arguably more *egalitarian* than at any time since the agroliterate revolution. The distinction between high and low culture has virtually disappeared. All cultural products live in the same semiotic dimension, self-consciously accessible to more or less all consumers. In retrospect it seems that the construction of national high cultures in the nineteenth century, with the drive toward universal literacy, set the stage for the twentieth's "revolt of the masses," meaning the repeal of class (and in the United States, racial) exclusions. The upwardly and outwardly expanding lower-middle and working classes had an appetite for culture. When the distinction of high and low culture was deconstructed, roughly at the same time as the post–World War II expansion of higher education, the result was a more and more homogeneous cultural environment in which all classes absorb the same media in all regions, their local and historical cultures taking a back seat.

Third, this equality extends beyond consumption to *production*. The making of culture is no longer in the hands of a tiny educated elite. Almost anyone can contribute to culture today. Of course regarding distant or mass culture there are vast concentrations of power in the giant media conglomerates; the elites of New York and Los Angeles, with some canny spinning by Washington, D.C., mostly decide the mass media topics of the week. But tally the number of writers of books, movie scripts, reviews, letters to newspaper editors, callers to talk radio, and posters of internet material. Then add to this all contributors to *local* culture across the country, from people who create programming for public access cable stations to the participants in town, county, and neighborhood ethnic festivals, the designers, gardeners, and home decorators that display their wares in local fairs, in public venues, or even on the public face of their property. I hazard the sum is a larger percentage of the populace than any time since the dawn of stratified society. Ours is an *open* culture, no longer controlled by authority.

But we must close with more sobering news about a structural phenomenon implicit in what has been said. As noted, in the twentieth-century

culture, or a large part of it, became an *industry.* The critique of this development has mostly concerned the economic attitude to which this subjects culture. But there is another effect: for the first time in history *culture gets framed.* Part of what we mean by culture is the interpretive horizon of teleologically connected meanings in terms of which the frames or boundaries of social contexts are set and understood. As such it cannot be *one of* those contexts. But in so far as postmodern mass culture is a business, culture becomes one of the industrial spheres of rationalizing activity. Electronic mass culture is not all of our culture, but it is a very significant part and it certainly offers itself as the whole. We thus face the following ambiguous condition. We have, and inherit, a horizon of meanings which valorize the construction of differentiated social frames within some of which progress can occur. But as mediculture this background of social action becomes one sphere of the foreground. This denies us the employment of culture as background while permitting us to examine our own culture as an object, which paradoxically makes the *whole* of our social world into a *part* of our social world. This is characteristic of our postmodern predicament.

The Postmodern Cognitive Predicament

Modern Western society signified a break with all previous social orders. There is an "asymmetry" of human cultures. The failure to recognize this signals a self-reflexive inconsistency on the part of the theorist and obscures one of the largest facts and problems about the contemporary world. If symmetry or relativism were true, then no culture would contain cognitive assets that put it in a general position of advantage with respect to all other cultures. If that were so, then modernity would present us with *no* new fundamental issue that has not been faced by any other historical period. If you can't quite bring yourself to believe that, then relativism must be false on this point.

So let's face facts (yes, actually, there are a lot of them). A novel cognitive style has evolved over the last three centuries which yields unprecedented and undeniable results. The style is epitomized in science, but it spreads over other forms of practical endeavor. Let's call its yield *knowledge,* at least tentatively, absent a full epistemological justification. Certainly if pragmatic capacity is any evidence of knowledge—we don't have to agree that it is the sole or primary evidence—then this new cognitive style yields a tremen-

dous amount of knowledge. It is also true that a productive-industrial mode of organization of material life linked to that cognitive style yields unprecedented and undeniable material gains, including weapons technologies, so that the societies possessing the noted cognitive style tend to become dominant world powers. We can philosophically question the validity and doubt the ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual benefit of these gains, but we are not at liberty to abandon them. As Marion Levy Jr. wrote, modern techniques are irreversible; they cannot be discarded without tremendous suffering (Levy 1972). The provision of perennial human needs is in our age dependent on modern bureaucracy, industrialism, technology, science, and advanced communications. Cultures that have not fully embraced these developments face an environment in which others have them. Nothing in the contemporary world, not its material life, its politics, its cultural conflicts, can be understood if we deny the *prima facie* advantages of science, technological innovation, and industrial production. Certainly the last century has exposed plenty of troubling implications of life on the new side of history's Big Ditch, from nuclear weapons and global warming to the evening commute.

Modernity thus implies a commitment to the scientific method, broadly construed, a search for publicly available evidence, the rejection of the influence of other sociocultural norms on cognition. This is a procedural commitment, not a substantive one. Modernity primarily entails a *way of seeking* truth, not the truth of a given world-picture, or the latter only secondarily. For the former inevitably upsets the latter. Gellner notes the remarkable fact about our society that we accept that our ontology is *flexible,* that it rightfully changes with the science of the day or decade. Indeed, the revolutions of twentieth-century physics seem to guarantee that our "official" ontology will never again be capable of social assimilation, as both Aristotelian and Newtonian physics were. The account of the universe based in relativity and quantum theory cannot be integrated into the worldview of even educated citizens, cannot be put together with commonsense experience. It is unthinkable that future scientific advances will do other than widen that gap. Just as our procedural commitment to emergent order based on autonomous rationalization of spheres in other areas of social life upsets any vision of the future, cognitive progress prevents the secure imagination of the whole.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, Enlightenment culture attempted to reorganize itself around, and judge itself against, Reason-Experience-Nature or REN, rather than Culture-Authority-Society or CAS. But when

this cognitive form *observes itself,* it generates a host of philosophical or hermeneutic problems. First, it comes to recognize itself as one function among others each engaged in its own business, like politics, art, economic production, and so on. Second, the cognitive function cannot legitimate itself, because legitimation would require justification through reference to an outside, including a practical justification in terms of scientific cognition's social benefits. Third, this leads to constructivism, which is arguably the trend of post-Kantian philosophy, although its roots are in Hume. A cognitive examination of the cognition of nature progressively reveals the cognitively self-constructed nature of that cognition, reveals, to use older languages, the operation of "custom" or "transcendental" machinery or "*Geist*" or the theory-ladenness of observations or the "historical" or "linguistic" constitution of the alleged object. It discovers, as William James put it, that "the trail of the human serpent is over all." If the Enlightenment, in one of that brilliant century's modalities, had announced that REN, not CAS, would be the norm of and constraint upon cognition, then its later modern progeny discovered that Culture, Authority, and Society had *reappeared within* those norms. The post-Kantian claim—continued by idealism, phenomenology, pragmatism, Wittgenstein, philosophy of science from Kuhn to the social constructivists, and postmodernism from Derrida to Luhmann—that the world we encounter is our product, concurs with Promethean capitalism, modernism's conception of the task of art, and our Baconian conception of science's power. Not only on the factory floor and in the executive suite, but in the seminar room, the SoHo loft, and the Oval Office as well, the model of the human is *homo faber.*

I will argue later that constructivism, in anything like a literal form, is untenable. Nevertheless, it is the spirit of the age, and this is revealing. For my point is that the self-observation of REN returns us to CAS, as Richard Rorty has argued. From "objectivity" we turn to "solidarity" as the ground of our cognitive strategies. Rorty's opposition is telling, but its application is not. For solidarity is first and foremost the apt term, not for our "postmodern," postobjectivist condition, but for *premodern* epistemology. As we have argued, before modernity society was virtually everything for almost all human beings in history (and prehistory). Social convention and authority have been the virtually ubiquitous determinants of belief-acceptance and language-use, openness to nonsocialized or anomalous experience being strictly limited. The widespread acceptance of the rightful distinction of *true*

from *socially legitimate* is very recent. The aim of logical coherence inherently violates social coherence. Now, we might say that rational inquiry has always had as its inherent possibility from the time of Buddha and Plato that it progressively abstracts from culture. But it never fulfilled that possibility until modern science, which is indeed virtually neutral with respect to cultures. It is not, of course, *strictly* neutral. Like every symbolic form, it has its presuppositions. But it is precisely the development of a systematic procedure of cognition that is *maximally* independent of culture, including the culture in which it arose. It is a cognitive institution which pursues truth and *technē* by isolating them from all other cultural norms. Its development required and enabled a movement from omnivalence to differentiation, the separation of inquiry from the soteriological, aesthetic, practical, and social concerns in which it was traditionally embedded.

In this respect Rorty is right that the postmodern involves, again not inescapably, a resocialization or reculturation, a rediscovery of Culture, Authority, and Society beneath the (at least self-reflectively available) layers of Reason, Experience, and Nature. But the second time around, as Marx said of the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, is different. Rorty, Berlin, and others call this difference irony. I think this is too precious. More broadly and straightforwardly, the return to the social is *procedural*. The solidarity that Rorty claims as our cognitive commitment is a procedural solidarity, a commitment to liberal, bureaucratic, and scientific rationality, accepted as the critical mesh through which our continued reference to the real must be strained. In postmodern cognition we return not to the thick inherited cultural narratives of earlier social history, but to justificatory procedures that are social but thin. We are self-reflexive and pragmatic, rather than naive and theocratic. Nevertheless, such commitments are strictly held: constructivists and postmodernists do not suggest a return to religion or faith, even ironically. Cognitive closure may be impossible, but some roads are closed off. We doubt our ability to justify the binding nature of our practices, but remain bound to them nonetheless. We bang out another critique of the "myth" of scientific objectivity on laptops created by that "myth," and call engineers and not shamans when they break down. Arguably it is our very realism, our science, our rejecting of omnivalence in favor of the differentiation of logical or cognitive from social norms, which leads to procedural commitments ever in search of an unavailable foundational content. For refusal to identify social convention with truth is the hallmark of

modern cognition. We reject the "primitive" segmentary identification of culture with nature, and the Agrarian cultural assertion of divine or transcendent norms, in favor of a purely noncultural constraint, whose precise determination escapes us. Differentiating logical from cultural validity takes away the possibility of completing our circle, of justifying our inquiry within a graspable whole. Hence our, apparently permanent, paradoxical position.