

ANTINOMIES OF "CULTURE"

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Our notion of culture, which has a foundational significance for most of the humanities disciplines, is a typically modern concept. To formulate it in a preliminary and intentionally paradoxical way: this concept to a large extent reflects the ambiguities, uncertainties and contradictions that pertain to modernity *as culture*; it articulates and simultaneously veils or masks the difficulties and the precariousness of the very project of cultural modernity. These ambivalences and difficulties manifest themselves not only in the now familiar observation that "culture" gains its meaning from an opposition to "nature", an opposition as necessary as it is conceptually untenable, self-deconstructing. For, in fact, each of these two conceptual extremes is equally rent by multiple (interrelated, but irreducible), explicit or implicit oppositions of the same character: each of them possesses meaning through a series of systematic distinctions that in no way can be brought to coherent unity. We are, however—and this is the most important point to make—not dealing here only with the systematic ambiguities of a *static* semantic-conceptual field, ambiguities quite common in the case of concepts constituted by "family"-type relations. For these become transformed into active contradictions—*dynamic antinomies*—around which two opposed tendencies, cultural processes and programs centre, each of which attempts to resolve these ambiguities in its own way. The culture of modernity is imprinted and defined by the irreconcilable co-existence and struggle of these two projects. I shall call them "Enlightenment" and "Romanticism", using these terms merely as abstract ideal types: the concrescence of these opposites is manifested, among other things, in the fact that it would be difficult to think of any significant thinker of the modern age who could in all respects be unambiguously situated on the one side of this divide.

In speaking about *our* concept of culture, I mean a use of this term that no longer refers to a state of (individual or collective) cultivation—in its opposition both to the savage, primitive and to the overrefined, decadent—but designates all that as inheritable work and accomplishment fundamentally distinguishes the human way of existence from that of the animals: “culture” as embodied in those results of social practices, humanly made material and ideal objectifications that—in opposition to the senseless facticity of the phenomena of “nature”—are endowed with, and transmit, meanings.

There is a well-known narrative that explains the emergence of this conception (which actually took place around the end of the eighteenth century). An instrumental-pragmatic conception of knowledge as power, as tool of mastery—itself, of course, conditioned by those basic social changes which inaugurated early modernity—destroyed the traditional conception of nature as meaningful cosmos or divine creation, as the source of norms. It was henceforth no longer possible to understand the propriety or value of human actions on the basis of their correspondence or non-correspondence to assumed “natural laws”. From now on it is nature (a mere “standing in reserve” for all forms of human making) whose meaning for us must be understood in terms of the requirements and potential of our activities. This transformation alone, however, would leave human actions without any common, binding standard and orientation. The concept of “culture” is invented in order to make up this deficit of norm and value. It also simultaneously consummates the self-understanding of human beings as makers. We not only transform nature according to our ends, but sovereignly create these ends and, indeed, the whole system of meanings in terms of which we interpret and direct our activities. We are not only the masters of all that is external to us, but of our very lives as well.

This is, no doubt, a great story (today largely appearing as the story of a fateful illusion), and I would not attempt to deny its enlightening power. But it is also a quite simplifiatory narrative that glosses over important ambiguities and complexities, both historical and conceptual. By way of introduction, I would like to begin their schematic presentation not from the side of “culture”, but from that of its antithesis, the comprehension of “nature” in modernity.

Concerning the historical aspect of these complexities, I must restrict myself to a bare reference. To make the desacralised, scientific/instrumentalist conception of nature the direct, inevitable

consequence of the idea and attitude of innerworldly "mastery" is to overlook those powerful *religious* motivations which significantly contributed to this development. For not only was man's dominion over nature the fulfilment of his scripturally revealed vocation, but—from Galileo on—the "new sciences" were conceived and legitimated as readings of the second book of God. At times of religious uncertainty, when the interpretation of God's first book—that of the revelation—became a matter of sectarian conflicts, the sciences promised to provide, by disclosing the secrets of nature, a rational access to the divine plan of creation, to God's ultimate intentions for the world and for man. This belief in the religious and moral significance of science dominated not only the French Enlightenment, but was much alive in Victorian science as well. And when the sciences of nature are regarded as the source both of a manipulative power and moral-religious insight, their object, "nature itself", acquires contradictory features. One needs only to read Bacon: nature is both what is to be subdued, "vexed", "put to the rack" and what is to be listened to with humility, "courted" to be won over for a chaste and lawful marriage—in his writings the attitudes of a violently aggressive domination and empathic responsiveness constantly alternate.

We are not dealing here, however, merely with matters of a bygone age, even if we disregard the fact that quasi-religious interpretations of science are hardly a thing of the past. For when nature is understood in terms of the potentialities of human activity, it necessarily acquires antithetical determinations that can be correlated in opposed ways. Nature is, on the one hand, the matter to be formed and the energy to be harnessed; being without its own ends, it is the plastic *material* for our ends, the inexhaustible reservoir of the undreamed-of possibilities of human productivity and control. On the other hand, nature is at the same time the general name for all that *resists* our intentions, for the infinity of a power whose inexorable laws are beyond the compass of our will and, in their totality, beyond our comprehension—it is precisely what has escaped our control.

There are two ways in which these opposed determinations can be interconnected. One—corresponding to the familiar image of modernity—is the tendency of "Enlightenment", perhaps best summed up in the Marxian formula: *Zurückweichen der Naturschranke*—the idea of constant progress in the transformation of blind, resisting nature into tamed nature, nature as material—

a step by step approximation to the infinitely distanced goal of absolute mastery. But however dominant this notion may be in practice, we should not forget that *cultural* modernity is characterised by a no less constant countertendency. We are told again and again that the idea of drawing nearer to an end situated in infinity makes no sense, and with every triumph of control also the risk and the fear of its unforeseeable consequences grow. And they are answered by the no less modern demand to restructure, actively and consciously, our relation to nature on the basis of an alternative science and practice: to *make* again, but now primarily *ourselves*, to live in accord with nature. This is the response of "Romanticism". At least since German Romanticism (but we should add here also the names of Fourier and the early Marx), there has been a continuous tradition of utopias of reconciliation, plastic adaptation and dialogic communication with nature, counterpoints to the utopias of domination and mastery. The task is not to conquer and exploit nature—which for us finite subjects means not the universe, but this earth and its environment—but to make it (perhaps, make it once more) our home. Nor were these projects merely utopian dreams. The tradition of Romantic philosophies of nature—for example, A. von Humboldt's integral science of concrete natural environments—after having been neglected for so long, was rediscovered only quite recently, not only as precursors of contemporary ecological thought, but also in respect of their cultural impact, including their contributions to the "hard" sciences themselves (to theories of electromagnetism, chemistry, cell theory and so on).

The Romantic idea of reconciliation with nature is, however, not only a subordinate countercurrent of modernity; the image of nature that guides it is a fundamental, organic constituent of its culture. For the image of, and attitude to, nature, which is opposed to its comprehension as an alien, endless and valueless objectivity, is not only a survival of pre-modern, religiously coloured ways of its understanding. A particular form of it has been produced on the proper, entirely secular grounds of modernity itself. This is the idea of nature as a self-presencing normative ideal which, at the same time, does not dictate or impose upon us fixed rules: of nature as another subject, the ultimate partner and respondent in the most human of all our activities, in the various forms of play. This is a nature which in its beauty and sublimity meets our deepest human needs (to use Kant's words) with favour. It is neither the tamed, nor the wild

nature, but the *free nature* of aesthetic creativity and attitude. As Lukács, Ritter and Marquard have convincingly demonstrated, the conception of a cosmic or divine natural order does not come to be simply *replaced* by that of an infinite universe whose lawfulness is merely a matter of brute facticity. In modernity the first idea actually *bifurcates* into the objectified scientific and subjectivised aesthetic conceptions of nature.

This observation leads us directly to an important aspect of the antinomistic character of the modern conception of *culture*. It would be apposite—before attempting to characterise this latter in its broader context—to discuss the point at which the nature/culture dichotomy inevitably unravels: the notion of *human* nature. Such a discussion would, however, transgress the permissible limits of a paper. I must therefore confine myself again to the bare indication that this notion now takes on the character of an undisguised paradox, superbly expressed by Ferguson: “We speak of art as distinguished from nature; but art itself is natural to man”.² The concept of culture simultaneously denaturalises humans as beings of culture *and* significantly contributes to their naturalisation, since it no more locates their distinction from animals in some supernatural capacity which pertains to them “by their nature” (such as the rational or immortal soul, and so on). Here again there are two opposed and recurring ways in which this paradox can be dissolved: by disclosing nature in culture *or* culture in nature. The first is exemplified by attempts—from Tylor to sociobiology—to assimilate cultural development to the laws of organic evolution, and equally by theories which locate the basic preconditions of all cultural behaviour in some natural givenness, like the wired-in neural program of the brain in Chomsky or Lévi-Strauss. The second is present in the variously formulated (from Herder through Engels to Gehlen) understanding of humans as *Mangelwesen*, beings of lack (in respect of natural-instinctual determinations), whose biological characteristics themselves (including the cortical development of the brain) are to a significant extent the outcome of prehistoric and historical processes of acculturation.

If from these preliminary remarks we now turn directly to the human world as the opposed supplement of “mere” nature, it again appears to us under a double and contrasting conceptualisation, corresponding to the bifurcation of the concept of nature mentioned above. The world of human existence presents itself, on the one

hand, as a vast *causal-functional complex* of patterned actions and interactions with their more or less stable institutions and objectivations: as *society*. On the other hand, it appears as the totality of enacted, materially or ideally embodied meanings, a *Sinnzusammenhang*: as *culture*. The typically modern disciplines of sociology and anthropology emerged simultaneously and from that time on have persisted in an uneasy, competitive relationship. It is "society" which must deal with resisting nature, with nature as resistance. It is, however, "culture" which is called upon to provide our activities that transform and utilise nature as *material* with sense and a definite direction.

This latter, the modern concept of culture, is itself characterised by a systematic ambiguity. The term has two distinct and, at the first glance, completely unrelated meanings. On the one hand, in its *broad* or *anthropological sense*, it designates some all-pervasive aspect of the biologically non-fixed forms of human behaviour—in its dominant contemporary understanding: the meaning-bearing and meaning-transmitting, or "symbolic" dimension (Geertz) of human practices and their objectivations—all that allows individuals of a community to live in a life-world, the interpretation of which they share to a significant degree, and thus to act in it in ways that are mutually comprehensible. On the other hand, however, this very same term is used—in its *narrow* or *value-marked* sense—to designate a circumscribed and narrowly specific set of social practices, primarily the arts and the sciences: activities and their objectivations which under conditions of modernity are generally regarded as autonomous, that is, as being valuable in themselves.

The conflation of these two apparently unrelated meanings in a single term is, however, not accidental. It is rooted in the origin of our concept of culture in the historical Enlightenment. The Enlightenment invented the broad, anthropological notion of culture in its struggle against particularistic traditions, which in their sacrality or antiquity were binding upon, and constraining of, individuals: traditions, which it summarily regarded as mere prejudices. "Culture" was a battle-cry in the project to transform all the inherited/inheritable accomplishments and works of human past—from the most humble to the most sophisticated or exquisite—into a storehouse of *possibilities* to be used freely and selectively for the creation of something new, for rationally meeting the demands of changing conditions of existence. But the Enlightenment organically connected such a non-imitative, innovative attitude to life with the idea of human *perfectioning*.

Not simply unstoppable change, made possible by the ever renewable use of (broad) culture as a social resource, but the conferring of a unique direction upon change towards the realisation of humanly created, but universally valid, ends; ends which can be provided only by culture in its *narrow* sense, by "high" culture as the complex of *sui generis* value-creating activities—this constituted the project of Enlightenment. Just as the broad concept of culture was to replace the idea of fixed and binding traditions, "culture" in its narrow sense aspired to replace the spiritual, but irrational power of religion as the ultimate orientation concerning the ends of life. Only scientific and/or aesthetic education can render the people capable of rational self-government—so declared both Condorcet and Schiller. The two meanings of culture necessarily belonged together: culture as the human way of collective life ought to be guided by the "high", authentic culture which is directly rooted in man's creative freedom and rationality.

The adhesion and interdependence of these two analytically unrelated meanings of "culture" is again not merely an accident of history or an illusion of our past. For modernity itself reconfirms and again necessitates this connection by its own immanent logic. Paradoxically, modernity—regarding all historical societies as forms of culture—can conceive itself as a single culture in the *broad* sense only if it relates the complex everyday activities of modern individuals (this primary subject-matter of anthropological interests) to the autonomous or institutionalised fields of culture in the *narrow* sense: to high culture and its shadow, mass culture. Because under contemporary conditions these everyday activities do not have—as a rule—*both* a socially shared/shareable *and*, for the acting subject, experientially transparent meaning. The work activities of the majority become *technicised*. They have for this majority no inherent sense: their meaningfulness and rationality reside in the sciences applied, which underpin the organisation of the process of production as a whole, but which do not exist in the head of the labourer (and in their totality do not exist in anyone's head). The broadly conceived consumptive activities, on the other hand, become to a large extent *individualised* and *aestheticised*—they appear as matters of personal taste. No doubt, these seemingly so individual, inchoate adumbrations of meaning are in fact organised by prefabricated and manipulable social codes; for the individual consumer, however, these remain opaque and veiled. The narrowly conceived, high or institutionalised

culture of modernity objectively plays a larger role than ever before in the organisation of the broad, everyday culture, but it is definitely not the highest expression or systematisation of this latter. The two must be thought of both as necessarily interrelated and as quite incongruent.

The most important consequence of this state of affairs is the frequent, or even dominant, self-perception of modernity as *culturally deficient*, as a world lacking in meaning. And this deficiency can again be articulated from two opposed viewpoints, depending whether "technicisation" or "pseudo-aestheticisation" of worldly activities is regarded as the defining symptom of its malaises. From the first viewpoint, modernity appears as a world of incomplete and imperfect demythologisation or *disenchantment*: a state of one-sided, truncated rationality that reduces everything to the status of mere means, to a system of universal fungibility which ultimately leaves the individuals at the mercy of forces—a kind of "second nature"—created, but uncontrollable by them. From the second viewpoint, modernity appears as a world of manipulated *re-enchantment* in which things are enveloped by a fabricated halo of pseudo-aesthetic significations mobilising unconscious impulses—not in order to unify, but to reinforce the individual's competitive isolation and incapacity for genuine communication.

The first diagnosis may then lead to the "Enlightenment" project of carrying through the task of full rationalisation, of mastering now the course and powers of history itself, to the utopia of a *rational*—and rationally designed—*society* of the future. The second may give rise to a yearning for the spontaneous cultural unity of a nostalgically evoked past and to the "Romantic" idea of the willed advent of a "new mythology", or—in a more pragmatic vein—to the fabrication of "traditions" that would allow the individuals to regain the security and warmth of some particularistic *organic community*. For, from this latter standpoint, only such a community could provide the social preconditions of an authentic individuation and stable personal relations based on shared values irreducible to mutual egotisms and interchangeable functional roles.

These two meanings/notions of "culture"—the broad and the narrow—are, however, themselves—each separately—exposed to considerable conceptual stress and paradoxes. As far as the first, anthropological, concept is concerned, I will restrict myself to some very broad remarks—the bare minimum that the logic of this exposition would seem to demand, since concerning this topic I am hardly competent.

"Culture" in its broad sense is both a universal and a differential concept. It designates, on the one hand, that general attribute or generic realm that all humans respectively share, in which they necessarily participate. On the other hand, it signifies precisely what distinguishes temporarily and/or spatially distinct societies from each other: the complex of characteristics that unifies a particular social unit in its contingent difference from the others. In both of its aspects the concept is beset by problems. I have already referred to the aporetic character of the idea of "cultural invariants": it seems that empirically oriented theories of "cultural universals" must ultimately locate them—precisely to ensure and legitimate their universality—in "nature" as the opposite of "culture". But there are difficulties in the particularising use of the culture concept as well. The idea of culture as the specific difference that identifies one social unit in its distinction from others runs counter to the fact that every socially significant unit is itself culturally differentiated, or at least contains a set of specific and distinct, often opposed socio-cultural positions and roles. The differential notion of unique and unitary cultures again proves to be an instable idealising construct hypostatizing the idea of macrocultural identity.

There is, however, another and more specific aspect of these latter difficulties, concerning the comprehension of one specific culture (or rather a set of such cultures sharing some basic generic characteristics): that of modernity. I have already argued that, from the viewpoint of the broad concept of culture, modern society appears as essentially deficient. But at the same time—and from the perspective of this very same concept—modernity takes on the character of the paradigmatic or "most fully developed" culture because it is the culture which self-reflexively knows itself as culture. By recognising all others as equal cultures, cultural modernity posits itself as more equal than others. It is its very particularity—that is, its self-reflexive character—that makes it universal: the recognition of other societies as "cultures" confers upon it the task and the right to assimilate/acquire/take into possession their "cultural achievements" (what it qualifies as such, of course).

This leads back to the question of the *relation* between these two aspects of the broad culture concept—the universalistic and the differential—the manner in which they can be thought and brought together, and not only theoretically, but also in practical attitudes, ideologies and projects. I shall mention here merely the fundamental

types of opposition that emerge in this respect. *Theoretically*, a straightforward evolutionism (a unifying reduction of differences through their temporalisation) stands opposed to cultural relativism (the codification and fixation of differences through their spatialisation) as the two poles of anthropological theorising. Then, as far as *ideological attitudes* are concerned, an "enlightened" cosmopolitanism stands opposed—within the history of anthropology itself—to recurrent forms of Romantic-nostalgic primitivism, and—in everyday social consciousness—to various shades of ethnic or cultural nationalism. Lastly, in terms of projects and *strategies of action*, the levelling idea of a general modernisation squares up to programs of socio-cultural separatism. These pairs of opposites, though in some respects analogous, are not identifiable with, or reducible to, each other. Nor can one attach a single unambiguous content and social significance to them. "Modernisation" can be equally an externally imposed, coercive force obliterating all differences, and an indigenous impulse to improve one's lot and the standing of one's country. In a great many cases it is a mixture of the two. "Separatism" can be the expression of efforts to create a consciousness of collective solidarity for a disadvantaged or stigmatised group in its striving for recognition and autonomy. On the other hand, however, it can equally be an attempt to conserve ossified power structures by insulating them from the potentially destabilising effects of foreign contacts, not to mention that it may well be a mere façade for policies of apartheid or ethnic cleansing.

These opposed trends and tendencies are, however, not restricted to the comprehension and practice of intersocietal relations alone. Analogues of them are operative and effective also *within* modern societies. Modernity can equally be conceived (and, of course, criticised) as a society of universal levelling, whose mechanism effaces all differences, *and* as a society that externally imposes fixed differences upon the individuals, confining them to ethnic zoos or social ghettos, and forcing them to accept restrictive and exclusive, non-communicating group solidarities. By dissolving the ascriptively pre-set, "in-born" as it were, identities and forms of solidarities, modernity transformed them into something to be created, but this leaves open the question: created by whom? No doubt, under its conditions, identities can be achieved, chosen or at least freely and consciously accepted: I *am*, and choose to be, an Aborigine, a Jew, feminine or working class. But how much more often and more decisively are such identities

imposed by others: you are—and don't try to hide or deny—an Abo, a dirty Jew, merely a woman or just a crude upstart from the working class. If culture is that reservoir of meanings in terms of which identities and solidarities are formed, modernity cannot escape the double bind: in its self-reflexivity it cannot fail to recognise how far and how radically its own culture is something made and re-makeable, and simultaneously, how little can it be formed and even chosen by the individuals.

This is perhaps the appropriate point at which to turn from this rhapsodic digression, loosely connected with the broad, anthropological notion of culture, to its conceptual supplement: culture in its narrow, value-marked sense of "high" culture. For it may be thought that at least in this more restricted sense cultural modernity escapes the double bind. Because, according to its very concept, high culture is precisely that which can only be genuinely created, on the one side, and freely accepted, on the other side, since its appropriation is nothing else but the act of its selective understanding.

The first thing, however, which strikes us if we turn our attention to "high" culture is the fact that its notion emerged simultaneously with, and makes sense only in relation to, a new opposite. This latter may be called "popular", "commercial", "mass" and so on, but in general means *low* culture, for its essential contents are usually conceived of as (poor) substitutes for those of high culture. This is again a modern dichotomy. It is true that most hierarchically organised societies have made some distinction between activities befitting the gentleman or gentlewoman being worthy to exercise for their own sake, and those which are "servile", because valuable only in view of the utility of what they produce or make happen—a distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, between liberal and mechanical arts and so on. But not only is it the case that the actual composition of the concerned activities had very little in common with our divide between high and popular culture. Even more importantly: the "servile" or mechanical activities were in no way regarded as inadequate substitutes for (or, perhaps legitimate competitors of) "liberal" activities—they were codified simply as different in kind. What women sang in the spinnery or in the fields was not considered as comparable with a Gregorian mass in the church, just as the performance of the ballad-singer at the fair was classed together with that of the bear-dancer, juggler or beggar and not with what the clerk/cleric was doing when writing learned verses in Latin. And I

must say that, if these pre-modern segregations of human activities served only to reconfirm, as untranscendable, the boundaries of social inequalities, they also contained—in comparison with our own dichotomy—a grain of sanity. For there is, I think, something slightly absurd in the presupposition it suggests that liking rock music is in some way an alternative to listening to Schoenberg, or that reading a thriller is a substitute—worthless or healthy—for reading *Finnegans Wake*.

But, of course, cultural modernity makes the thriller and Joyce, the Rolling Stones and Schoenberg not only comparable, but actually a matter of alternative choice. It does so by means of the very process which first made the emergence of both these concepts, high *versus* low culture, at all possible: the process of *commodification*. In a bookshop or a CD-store the works mentioned are all there, stocked just a few metres apart—for you to choose. It was commodification that destroyed the network of patronage relations which directly conferred an instrumental functionality upon works of high culture, and just thereby made it possible for the Enlightenment to conceive of them as works of high culture: as embodiments of free, autonomous spiritual activities that alone can guide us towards universally valid ends. It was, however, this same commodification which immediately destroyed this illusion of the Enlightenment. Open competition on the cultural marketplace resulted in works that genuinely enlighten, or offer cultivated and cultivating pleasure, losing out to those which—from the viewpoint of the Enlightenment—expressed and merely reconfirmed the worse prejudices and the crude tastes of an uncultivated general public. To the ideal claim pertaining to the very notion of a high culture, the claim to universal significance and validity, stands opposed the undisputable fact of its highly restricted and socially conditioned spread and effectivity. If the idea of “high” culture originally expressed the hopeful project of the Enlightenment, the immediately following conception of a popular, in the sense of “low”, culture articulated its frustrated disillusionment with its incapacity to enlighten the “people”, who, of course, were then blamed for this failure as well.

As soon as this dichotomy became articulated, it was, however, reshaped and re-interpreted by “Romanticism”, which replaced “popular” with “folk”, or whatever other substitutes are found for it (for example, “working class culture”) in theories of cultural populism. Just as the individual can acquire a stable and harmonious self-

identity only if it is recognised by a supportive and cohesive community, the objectivations of an autonomous high culture have genuine value and significance only if they are rooted in the spontaneous and largely anonymous creations of the appropriate collectivity. Only then can the alienation of high culture, autonomously following the dictates of its own logic and thereby becoming ever more separated from the life-interests of the individuals, be overcome; only then can its creations again become relevant for the conscious formation of their self-identity. The struggle between the opposed understandings of the significance and potentialities of high and low culture does not begin with the dispute between Adorno and "cultural studies"—it goes back at least to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

At this point a historical remark may be apposite. It is evident that this dichotomy can be applied only to some components of the value-marked concept of culture: primarily to the arts (broadly conceived), to a lesser degree to the humanities, but not to the "hard" sciences. We ought to remember, however, that from the middle of the eighteenth century until that of the nineteenth, a struggle—and during the French Revolution, a bloody one—was also going on between two opposed conceptions of the sciences of nature: the science of expert specialists *versus* "popular" science, a science based upon everyday experiences or at least experiments performable as popular spectacles and so open to the judgement of all and to the active participation of amateurs. In this case, however, one side—that of the experts—irrevocably triumphed, a victory institutionally fixed by the destruction of local/regional academies and their replacement by the professional organisations of scientist specialists. Marat lost out—and not to Condorcet, but to Lavoisier. The latter won, because his science—while retaining its autonomy as pure science—acquired in the course of the nineteenth century a function indispensable for the survival and continuation of modernity: it became, in Marx's words of *Capital*, a "direct productive force". The permanence of the dispute between the high and the popular arts indicates that art, in all its varieties, possesses no such assured or presumed functions, that any social significance it can attain to has to be invented and probed out ever anew by the artist, the critic and the audience.

This is born out rather clearly by the very character of this dispute. For what is constant in it is only the general structure of the opposed evaluations and interpretations, not their actual contents,

which prove to be not only variable, but interchangeable, depending upon the current socio-political constellation and the strategies found appropriate by cultural specialists for pursuing their differing ideological objectives. Thus high culture can be upheld as a great conservative force being the embodiment of that "canon" which alone can ensure the preservation of an endangered national (or more broadly: Western) identity, in opposition to the fashion-driven instability of an ever more international, and thus "alien", commercial culture. But it equally can be presented as the sole bearer of a radically critical or utopian attitude, since its very principle—autonomy—essentially negates the universal domination of the profit motive that permeates not only culture industry, but all walks of life. And one can apply similar and similarly opposed characterisations to popular or mass culture as well. On the one hand, it can be portrayed as the mere instrument of cynical manipulation; on the other, it can be argued that it owes its effective appeal to those real needs and utopian impulses, which it unconsciously and unwittingly expresses. All these operations are, no doubt, facilitated by the fact that it is always the critical intellectual who actually defines which works of art are truly autonomous or genuinely popular.

Lastly, it is not only the opposed evaluations of this dichotomy that structurally pertain to cultural modernity—equally persistent are the attempts to overcome this divide, and again from opposite directions. The Enlightenment project of gradually raising the culture of the general public to the level of autonomously high culture still lives on, achieving a small victory in every *Pride and Prejudice* on the TV and in every blockbuster exhibition of impressionists. I should not, however, be too ironical in this respect, without confessing to my nostalgic sympathy with it: I still would like to believe that making universities socially more accessible does not necessarily mean their transformation into educational marketplaces providing "customers" with specialised training, in outright denial of their idea as institutions of general education.

On the other hand, efforts to overcome this divide by abolishing the autonomy of art through its reunification with life or by imploding it from within—from the historical Romanticism through Dada to post-modernism—have been no less vital and persisting. These recurring efforts have been no more successful than the first ones. The ability of institutionalised art to "musealise" (and to commodify) works of anti-art is truly impressive. Today not only are

Duchamp's "Fountain" or the exact replicas of Tatlin's projects hallowed museum exhibits, but, through photos and videos, "happenings" or Christo's landscape art have also taken their peaceful place in museums of contemporary art.

Here at last, at the end of this topographic survey, we have arrived at the narrow concept of culture, at high culture itself. One can distinguish schematically a fourfold accomplishment or outcome of this conceptualisation, or rather of those socio-cultural processes, which it actively expresses and articulates.

First, this concept unifies a number of social practices and their products that are quite heterogeneous in regard to both their immanent characteristics and their traditional social evaluation. It unifies them not simply by assigning them to a single general category, but by *conceptually homogenising* them in some essential respects. Activities are admitted to the realm of high culture only on the following terms:

1. If they can be conceived not merely as performative—as exercises of individual capacities—but as objectifying activities, producing "works" of some kind.

2. If they are not merely reproductive, but "creative", their "works" being novel and original.

3. If their objectifications, in whatever way be they materially embodied, can be regarded as having a general significance solely because they are essentially ideal objects: complexes of meaning.

4. If their significance, the validity of these meanings, can in principle be judged according to criteria wholly internal to these practices and, at the same time, directly related to basic human values—in the classical understanding, to beauty and truth.

It was the result of cultural transformations and struggles lasting centuries (a good example is the rise of opus music and the triumph of the idea of a "musical work of art" as against the understanding and practice of music as improvisatory performance) that some social practices became endowed with, and submitted to, these demands of objectivisation, novelty/creativity, idealisation/dematerialisation and autonomy, and only in this way was our idea of high culture formulable and comprehensible at all. Furthermore, not only did the general notion of high culture emerge through such a homogenising unification: its basic constituents are also the outcomes of similar processes of conceptual amalgamation. Not only is our concept of "art"—with its subdivision into its five classical kinds—the result of a post-Renaissance development that reached its

conclusion only at the end of the eighteenth century. The paradigmatic form and concept of "science"—that of the "hard" natural sciences—also came into being only by abolishing divisions that even early modernity—from Bacon to the French *Encyclopédie*—intended to preserve: the boundary line between deductive "natural philosophy" as the form of necessary knowledge and empirical "natural history" as the form of contingent, merely probable knowledge.

Second, by means of this homogenisation high cultural activities became demarcated from, and elevated above, other forms of social practices: they are posited now as activities whose works represent immanent values, which are valuable independently of any possible subsequent use. Their autonomy meant emancipation from any fixed and pre-set social task and it was realised through processes of social disembedding and defunctionalisation. This in no way implies the denial of their social significance, the negation of their ability to fulfil socially essential functions. Only it is not this latter which directly determines their value; it is the satisfaction of their immanent value-criteria that is thought of as endowing them with such a capacity.

This posited connection between the realisation of some fundamental values, on the one hand, and definite codified and specialised practices, on the other, resulted at the same time in an enormous *value reduction*. In a society that claims to be able to produce truth and beauty regularly in ever new objectified forms, *other values*—values which in pre-modern societies were certainly regarded as no less binding and fundamental—take on the character of a diminished or questionable objectivity. The "good" and the "sacred" retreat, on the one hand, into the interiority of private conscience and faith. On the other hand, they are now "up for grabs", they become objects for the contending forms and powers of institutionalised high culture, each promising alone to deliver, guarantee or substitute for them.

Because, and this is the third point to make, high cultural practices, despite, and against the background of, their homogenisation, are dichotomically organised into a conflictual field. High culture consists of the arts and the sciences codified as polar opposites, with the humanities in a no-man's-land somewhere in-between. In the sciences and arts respectively, reason stands opposed to sensuous imagination; impersonal and depersonalised objectivity to the irreplaceable self-expression of individual subjectivity; an institutionally restricted form of communication to an indefinite and culturally open one; novel discoveries surpassing and invalidating their own

tradition to original works which merely add to and extend this tradition, conferring upon it new meanings and renewed relevance; and so on.

At this stage it would be not only impossible, but hopefully also unnecessary and boring to elaborate the point that around these contrarities are formed the opposed projects of an "enlightened" scientisation and a "Romantic" aestheticisation of culture, or, more ambitiously, of life in general. Under the conditions of cultural modernity, the scientific and aesthetic "attitudes" have become universalised: they no longer have some pre-established domain deemed appropriate to the "dignity" of their interests. Anything and everything can, in principle, become the object of scientific investigation *or* of aesthetic experience (and artistic representation). Their requirements and criteria of validity, however, exclude each other. They enter into conflict, a Weberian war of the gods. The culture wars of modernity—some aspects of which have already been mentioned—are to a significant degree struggles for hegemony between these adversaries and for the relegation of the other to the position of a subordinate supplement. There is, however, one consequence of this on-going competition that pertains to the very nature of modern high culture and which deserves to be mentioned separately as the fourth aspect of its outcomes: the *progressive erosion of the substantive content* of the values that originally legitimated the autonomy of high cultural activities.

The modern sciences, emancipated from forms of direct social control, were originally presented as the cognitively and methodologically certain way, the sole safe path, to the discovery of objective truth. With the autonomy of their development, however, objective truth itself became identified ever more closely with what the sciences can actually deliver—and *what* they can deliver is precisely the bone of contention in our culture wars. Thus suspicion arises that, in fact, "truth" means no more than what is pragmatically serviceable to the general domination of those social powers which—indirectly at least—co-determine their development. The autonomous arts promised to create ever-new works of beauty, but their own evolution has outgrown and shattered this value concept. What their widely differing trends and practices can offer today is some illusive and contentless aesthetic quality in general, a mere name for what they deliver in common, if there is such a thing at all. They are therefore open to the suspicion that they merely provide

material to make old social distinctions in new and more subtle ways. As a result, the very notion of "culture" now appears in an ambivalent light. Is it something deeply important, the analysis of which is fundamental for any attempt to understand (and perhaps to challenge and change) modernity? Or is "culture" merely the "opium of the idle", and the preoccupation with it only a way of avoiding inquiry into "society"?

As this process of erosion continues, suspicion also falls upon the projects of "Enlightenment" and "Romanticism". This is, I think, a perfectly legitimate and sane suspicion. What they promised and tried to achieve—the idea of a scientifically designed, rational society *versus* that of the aesthetic realisation of imagined, close communities—are not so much distant utopias, but dystopias and dangers. Nor is it possible—as I tried to illustrate—to ascribe some stable, constant social-political significance to either of these tendencies, even as an open, uncompletable project. Neither of them is inherently progressive or reactionary, democratic or elitist, whatever these words may mean.

But the suspicion directed towards them, however legitimate it may be, is also futile. For "Enlightenment" and "Romanticism" are the two great projects and tendencies structurally related to cultural modernity. While both aim at overcoming the multiple ambiguities and antinomies of its constitution, their see-saw struggle is actually the mechanism by which this very structure is dynamically reproduced and owing to which modernity achieved and continues to achieve as much cultural integration as it is capable of accomplishing.

This summary statement is not, however, a conclusion that may legitimately be drawn from the present paper, which only aims at providing a conceptual topography: an idealising description directed mostly at the past. It merely expresses a personal opinion, something which—according to Hegel (and I concur)—has no place in philosophy. I could perhaps reformulate it to accord better with the modest claims this paper can raise. But since philosophy also demands from its practitioners not to hide behind an enigmatic *incognito* concerning their relation to the pressing problems of the present, I rather choose here, at the end, to go on with this mere opining, by trying to give some inconclusive answers to two possible objections against this illegitimate, but emphatic, non-conclusion that I have just formulated.

One objection that might be raised points out that the historical failure of all the great attempts to reconcile or synthesise "Enlightenment" and "Romanticism" in no way proves the illegitimacy or

impossibility of such an endeavour in general. This is certainly true—in fact, I doubt whether philosophy, with the inherent vagueness of its concepts, can provide stringent proofs of historical impossibility. Nevertheless, I would reply to this objection by indicating that such a desired or hoped for reconciliation is just what actually took and takes place in the on-going history of modernity through the very strife of these opposed tendencies. For “Enlightenment” and “Romanticism” not only consistently failed, they also consistently succeeded—though no doubt in unforeseen and unsatisfactory ways. Not only did the technicisation and scientisation of the life-world proceed together with its ever-growing aestheticisation, but it was also the successful advance of an “enlightened”, objectifying attitude to nature that simultaneously transformed the whole earth into a human habitat, the “home” for the whole of humanity—even if in a way that for Romanticism would be the mockery of this idea. But it was the growing “mastery” of nature which broke down the traditional division of the environments into the domesticated, befitting humans, and the spheres of an alien beyond: the wild, appropriate only for subhumans, and the sacred as the locus of the divine. Today, tourists trample where the gods once dwelt, and photographs, films and television bring every corner of the earth into our homes with reassuring familiarity. The idea of “reconciliation” certainly implies something other and more than this mutual advancement of opposed tendencies through the constant struggle of institutionally separated realms, each striving for exclusive universality. It demands the establishment of a well-defined and stable space for each within an encompassing, preferably moral, framework. For this very reason, however, this idea amounts not to the overcoming of the *contradictions* of modernity, but to the abandonment of modernity itself, for it denies that conflictual, agonistic pluralism that is the basic source of its dynamism.

Such an overcoming of modernity is, however, precisely what is actually happening, or has already happened, at least in respect of its culture—this may well be a second objection raised in the name of “postmodernity”. From the viewpoint of its representatives, the antagonism between “Enlightenment” and “Romanticism” has now become irrelevant, since the orienting categories in terms of which it has been and can only be formulated—the contrast between high and low, elite and mass, left and right, “real” and “virtual”—have in fact lost their validity. In so far as this is intended—as is usually the

case—to represent the description of what is the actual situation today, it seems to me (to put it mildly) a gross overstatement. Without question, there are signs of genuinely structural changes in contemporary culture: forms of scientific communication are changing due to the information revolution, and also in the arts tendencies may be observed towards de-objectivisation, dissolving the traditional concept of a work of art, towards rematerialisation, and so on. These are, however, still partial and by no means dominant trends, whose long-range consequences are exceptionally difficult to foresee.

If, however, what are actually utopias or dystopias of a future are now appearing in these theories as straightforward descriptions of the present, this is symptomatic. It is symptomatic of a state of affairs where the projects of Enlightenment and Romanticism are becoming increasingly irrelevant, but irrelevant for a very specific, single group of social actors: the intellectuals. This term usually designated not cultural specialists in general, but specialists in cultural critique and the critique of culture. Traditionally, it was the intellectuals who formulated, again and again reformulated, and spearheaded the feuding projects of Enlightenment and Romanticism. This is a role, however, which—in my judgmental opinion—is becoming ever more difficult to fulfil consistently with good intellectual conscience today. More importantly, however, intellectuals are no longer really needed for this purpose—this role has been taken over largely by the genuine experts: the managers and PR persons of various cultural institutions and media, and their patrons and allies in social and political establishments. In future, the traditional intellectual may become the new structurally unemployed of cultural life. And this is, I think, a *danger*, because it would undercut the uneasy, but—in modernity—persistent connection between culture and critique. One may even argue that this task has never been more necessary than now, when culture in its various meanings and constituents has become deeply entrenched institutionally: to raise the question of the *good* in relation to its separated, autonomous realms. Are they “good”—in what respect, for what and for whom? But the problem of whether there are still coherent intellectual positions which no longer subscribe to the illusions of “Enlightenment” and “Romanticism”, and from which such questions can be meaningfully and convincingly raised—this is a problem not for this paper, merely descriptive in its basic content, but perhaps for the collective reflection of all of us who live from, and perhaps to some degree also for, culture.

Notes

- 1 Some of the basic ideas of this paper concerning the constitutive role of "Romanticism" in modernity originated in conversations and correspondence with my Melbourne friends, David Roberts and Johann Arnason, who are presently engaged—together with Peter Murphy—in a large project about the "Dialectic of Romanticism". I am deeply indebted to them—though, of course, I am solely responsible for the way these ideas are articulated in this essay. And I have much benefited from the criticism and advice of Zygmunt Bauman, Agnes Heller and Janos Kis have offered in respect of an earlier variant of this paper.
- 2 Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980, first published 1767), I.i, p. 6.