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Birth of a Concept

I

It nowadays seems impossible to describe the most commonplace details of everyday life without using the word 'culture'. A report by government inspectors upon a school may refer to 'a culture of failure', upon a prison to 'a culture of secrecy'; sociologists, newspaper commentators, and moral critics may all happily refer to the 'consumer culture' within which we all of us equally live and move and have our being; anthropologists have for a century or more referred to the peoples they study as not just having but being 'other cultures' – for some writers 'primitive', even 'savage' (though *not* necessarily with a pejorative inflexion), frequently self-sufficient or autonomous. This way of using the word has, under the pressures of a globe more and more conscious of its own globalization, found its way into the everyday conversation of, inevitably, the culture.

Indeed, the idea of the conversation of culture as being what constitutes the very concept itself is one to which we shall later return at some length. Perhaps one of the deepest, certainly one of the most absorbing, puzzles in human enquiry is found in the mobile relations between our picture of social reality and the words (let alone the concepts) which assemble it for us.

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I say ‘assemble’; the more usual word is ‘construct’, not least because of a powerful book of 1967 famously entitled *The Social Construction of Reality*,¹ which became, quite rightly, one of the sacred texts of a school of social thought and a mode of analysis. This we might style the school of social constructionists, and by that would mean those who believed, and who practised their enquiries in the belief, that our real world is made up (constructed) by the collaborative efforts of a strictly human society. Thus, what we think of as the world-out-there is directly a product of complex interaction between the world-out-there and our language. Reality materializes at the moment when actuality meets the concepts and the self-understanding of human beings endeavouring to bring that world more or less under human control.

The argument was so taken to heart, both in and out of academic thought, that it became compulsory to enclose ‘reality’ within inverted commas in order to emphasize its constructed, even invented status as an object of enquiry. From this followed a view of the consequent impossibility of ever saying anything solid and enduring about a real world which could not be looked at and comprehended without the powers of human recognition. This attitude, it must be added, has become so exasperatingly pietistic that John Searle² wrote a revision of the argument showing how exactly true it is to say that the world-as-we-understand-it is unavoidably the product of exchanges between eyes, brains, facts, things, and words, but that the fact of those exchanges is absolutely no reason for putting reality in inverted commas. The thing we make up out of our perceptions and concepts as applied to objects and their properties is no less real because we have made it all up.

These clashes have coincided with the rise to universal prominence of the word ‘culture’, and whatever it is in human conduct which the word refers to. For when people say that a bankrupt corporation lived in ‘a culture of suspicion’, or that the business world itself is characterized by a ‘culture of aggression’, or even – as one celebrated anthropologist did of the groups he was studying – that a clutch of Hispanic American families occupied ‘a culture of poverty’,³ they are trying to catch hold of something as naturally human, as pressure-heavy but as invisible as air, which is at the same

time wholly an artifice, a human artificiality as natural and needful as the atmosphere.

People take a word and fill it up with certain meanings, such that it constitutes a concept. Now in order to discuss the concept of culture we shall be obliged to say something from recent philosophical arguments about what a concept is and does, and the use we may have or may not have to make of that daunting phrase, 'a conceptual framework', which has been with us since the Enlightenment shed its lights upon the systems of pure reason.

The philosophical support for this view of concept-formation provides a leading lesson in the intellectual method of this book. For in providing this history of our key concept 'culture' we cannot simply start out by discovering its earliest usage. This may be help or hindrance. The *New Oxford Dictionary* lists half a dozen entries, including Matthew Arnold's famous definition, made in 1876, to which we shall turn in a moment. But the early sightings are largely of the term as used in relation to horticulture and the like, even though Thomas More wrote of something being 'to the culture and profit of [people's] minds' as early as 1510.

But it is, as we would expect, in the nineteenth century that 'culture' is attached to the human condition, and not until Arnold's year that we find the usage of 'culture' meaning way of life lived.

These confusing conclusions serve at least to remind us that people may be using a concept before they have a word for it. Even 'using a concept' is not all that straightforward a business, as has been frequently pointed out,⁴ and before we can compile a history of the concept of culture, we had better clarify what a concept is, and how we know when we have one. J. L. Austin goes so far as to say that in 'discussion devoted seriously to the question of "origin" and "acquisition" and "formation" of concepts, "we are always told either nothing or nonsense".' But as usual in his philosophy, Austin is determined to turn enquiry away from so-called 'universals' (meaning definitions derived from what one may see and touch but then generalized into an abstract 'possession' of the mind). As far as an individual's understanding a concept goes, Austin thought that 'The origin of a concept is

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commonly admitted to be found, when I can say . . . *with knowledge*, “this is an X”’ (my italics).

Austin was convinced that the history of a word was the history of its uses and, as suggested at the opening of this chapter in connection with some of the vaguer contexts in which ‘culture’ appears, usage may turn into uselessness. Yet one cannot doubt the usefulness of the concept of culture, nor the fact that all important concepts swim slowly up from murky waters in which one knows there is a precious and useful treasure, but not yet what it is. Quentin Skinner warns us that ‘it cannot be a necessary condition for my possessing a concept that I need to understand the correct application of a corresponding term’.⁵ His illustration of this is to show how, in his poetry, John Milton was explicitly preoccupied with proving his creative originality, although entirely lacking the word itself to say so. ‘Originality’ did not enter the English language ‘until a century or more after Milton’s death’.

Moreover, Skinner continues: nor can it be ‘a sufficient condition of my possessing a concept that I understand the correct application of a corresponding term. There is still the possibility (explored by Wittgenstein as well as Kant) that I may believe myself to be in possession of a concept when this belief is in fact mistaken’. This is to claim that one may apply a given term such that one’s listeners approve but that the *content* of the concept is so varied that no-one could agree on the meaning in hand. Skinner’s examples are ‘being’ and ‘infinity’, but he could as well have named ‘culture’. He concludes: ‘A whole community of language users may be capable of applying these terms with perfect consistency. Yet it might be possible to show that there is simply no concept which answers to any of their agreed usages.’⁶ His advice to origin-hunters is that we can discover the advent of a new concept in social intercourse when we observe the development of a particular vocabulary, which is then used to discern and, gradually, to delimit the zone of application in which the concept makes consistent enough sense. (This is not to rule out contradictory senses: many strong concepts, including culture, enclose contradictory meanings.)

This returns us to the early appearances of culture in what we know as the Enlightenment, the unprecedented surge in

rationalism and theories of human affairs which took off after 1700 or so. But we should go back to the eighteenth century, however, armed with the truism drawn from Austin and Skinner that in using a concept we are doing just that: *using* it. It is not a neutral theory; it is an evaluative instrument, and carries its special charge. It appeals forcefully to both reason and rhetoric. (It is very hard, for instance, to use 'culture' in disapprobation.)

II

It was Immanuel Kant who first and most clinchingly tackled the mistaken idea that there was a world of material reality out there for which the God-given faculty of pure reason could find an exact linguistic or symbolic mirror (the most dependable set of symbols being taken to be mathematical). Kant pointed out that for the eye to *see* anything, the brain must have learned how to interpret what the eye saw. 'No percepts without concepts' is the label for this insight, but along with it was carried Kant's massive architecture of the mind, according to which we each turn the forms of our mental processes and observations into the foundations of our knowledge. The innate drive to understand provides us 'transcendentally' with the frameworks of comprehension. 'The understanding is itself the lawgiver of nature' is Kant's most famous maxim, followed by 'I must abolish knowledge to make room for belief'. The mind believes, since it has no choice, what it arranges to see.

As befitted a giant of the Enlightenment, Kant placed individual human agency at the very centre of creation. Creation, by this token, was creation of a world for human beings to find inhabitable, and culture, for all those of his contemporaries who began to grasp for such an idea (*not* including Kant among their number), was both form and content of 'conceptual frameworks'.

The Enlightenment, amongst the dazzling beams of which Kant was the brightest, suddenly blazed out and surged across Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century. It was then carried westwards from northern Europe across the Atlantic to strike deep roots among the wealthy

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English-, Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking settler-landowners of North America. But like all sun-bright explosions of human thought which illumine, dazzle and sometimes blind human vision, the Enlightenment caused its seers to set off in various directions, eyes fixed on diverse horizons. This coming-of-the-light towards which all intellectual figures of the day turned did not point along a single shining path of progress to the future. It was first a European and then an imperial phenomenon. When this light struck the frontiers of Islamic or Hindu thought, it went out. Its searing potency to burn up the principles and doctrines of theism was felt only in the original continent and subsequently in the geographical regions which Europe came to dominate. It was the Christian God which enlightenment most fatally wounded.

To make sense of this phenomenon, we shall follow it, as did the post-1750 thinkers, along two divergent paths. Each commits us to sketching an early definition of the word 'culture' as it came to assume the status of a coherent, if always disputed and often contradictory, concept. Any such definition, as we shall see, must rest, not on an imaginary distillation of a supposedly incontestable meaning but upon usage. A concept gathers (and loses) substance and essence according to the ways in which it is used. When people protest against the misuse of a concept, they are objecting to incipient changes in its application. This does not mean that such criticism is necessarily mistaken, only that any such objection must be made less on behalf of fixity of meaning, more in the name of what will be lost if the meaning changes.

So when the leaders of Enlightenment thought set off on their sunny road to progress, they did not so much invoke the antique word 'culture' to describe the spirit of an age, but they did configure an account of human being in which a way of thinking, feeling, and speaking would derive itself from a set of data about how the world truly is, allied to a list of precepts as to how it ought to be. This happy combination of thought and action would, they thought, in turn result in such social institutions as would conduce to the good society. Hence the newly emerging force, after the great Revolutions of North America and France, of the idea of a *constitution*.

The word is conventionally taken to be simply legislative in its associations, particularly so given the successful

longevity of the American original. But its etymological force is continuous. First, the word names the act of making or forming something; secondly, it names the nature of the thing's construction, the nature of its structure or composition; only thirdly does the *Oxford English Dictionary*⁷ acknowledge the political and legal definitions which customarily enclose the word.

When it does so, 'constitution' implicitly signifies the world-making property of this noun. That is to say, the legal rights and political principles set out in the American Constitution themselves devise, shape, and give embodiment to the moral agency of the state whose ideal abstraction forms, structures, and *constitutes* the civic life of the United States of America. It is in this sense that many contemporary human scientists use the word (and its derivative adjective) so frequently; language is by this token itself constitutive of human society. According to what we believe ourselves to mean when we use such key terms as 'reasonable', 'legal', 'promise', 'pay', 'citizen', 'justice', 'contract', 'rights', 'authority', 'evidence', 'believe', 'fact' and 'liberty', so we have thoughts, feel passion and order conduct. Thoughts, passion and conduct are only recognizable as what they are when framed and interpreted by the relevant concepts.

One way of identifying what culture is and means is to say it is the force at work which makes these human behaviours apparent and distinctive. Culture, that is, makes it possible for both the individual performing an action and a spectator interpreting it to characterize the action for what it is, *and* to perform it as such. More particularly, culture makes it possible to distinguish between different versions of the same sort of action, and so attribute it to different human groups. Culture, in other words, teaches us to discriminate between, say, English and Italian courtesies, Argentinian and Japanese art, American and Indonesian management, Chinese and Egyptian medical practice.

These are the fruits of cultural differentiation, and they are also examples of what it is for alternative conceptual systems so to *constitute* or to *realize* action that the idea embodied in that action is made visible in its conduct, movement, line, and sequence. But when the mighty evangelists of human reason set out to enlighten everybody after 1750 or so – when, that

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is, Voltaire, Goethe, Kant, Montesquieu, Hume, Condorcet, Hegel, Diderot and Berkeley together rode the tidal wave of the new thought which they believed would free humankind from its chains – they did so in the belief in a doctrine and a method which would be universal in application.

This is what is now known as the ‘Enlightenment Project’. It taught the basic precepts of science as generalizable to all physical objects, including people. Science, and its practical discoveries and instrumentation under the later heading of technology, represented humankind’s incremental victory over nature. Science itself was made possible by the discipline of the detached observation of phenomena and by controlled experimentation designed to test hypotheses intended to explain the phenomena. Such testing found its only absolute validation in the falsification of hypotheses, the only certainty to be found in what was consistently *not* the case (what *is* the case today, as David Hume so cheerfully pointed out, might not be the case tomorrow). Scientific knowledge advanced therefore in a slow series of speculations and tentative confirmations, of conjectures and refutations.⁸

The precepts of scientific method had begun to emerge from its first flowering in late Renaissance Europe. Galileo and Descartes will serve as first prophets of the way of science. They made it possible, by both argument and example, to evade the totalitarian demands of theology. The first displacing of the ancient regime of divine authority and questionless coercion was ratified in Britain when the King was dismissed by the people. It was wholly consistent that this blasphemous and lethal stroke was followed, after the Commonwealth, by the establishment of the Royal Society, an organization, as its first, prompt (1667) historian Thomas Sprat puts it, whose purpose was the ‘exantiation of truth’ (*sic*), and ‘sincere inquiry’ to ‘remove the rubbish of ages’, to effect the separation of poetry from Natural (or Real) Philosophy (by which he meant science), and to pursue the discovery of ‘the true channel of Natural Causes and Effects’. All this required the right ‘Manner of Discourse’ which is to be one of ‘primitive purity and shortness . . . a close, naked, natural way of speaking, positive expressions, clear senses; a native easiness; bringing of all things as near the Mathematical plainness as they can’.⁹

The zealots of Enlightenment charged their followers to read Descartes and learn from Galileo, to treat theology as a personal matter among gentlemen and not the object of science, and to do so in prose much influenced, even in France, by Dr Sprat's prescriptions. In this way, society itself would become the object of science; Descartes had written 'Ancient cities that have become large towns in process of time are as a rule badly laid out as compared with those that are laid out by a designer'; the Enlightenment saw the coming on stage of that familiar modern character, the social planner-engineer. Natural philosophy had taught, for instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to discern a common humanity in every manifestation of human being; this emblematic figure, necessarily male, was capitalized as 'Man' and discovered by Rousseau to live trapped in the potentiality of his full humanness, 'born free, but . . . everywhere in chains'.¹⁰

For these men, freedom was the supreme human value and the condition of human emancipation, science the method with which to supply reason with the knowledge whereby the free, the good society could be designed and assured for the future. When the 'disenchantment of the world' from the superstitions and fancies of heathen darkness was accomplished and, in the savage French Revolutionary joke, the last King strangled with the entrails of the last priest, then Man could enter into the inheritance of freedom and justice.

Such was the picture of the wide road and open gates which would lead to a rational and earthly salvation. The culture of the sacred city of reason would be a clean, well-lit affair; one in which being and becoming would be transparent, serene, rational; in which the streets would be marble-paved and spotless, human relations equable and equal in virtue of the freedoms of reason, and nature herself tamed, provident, and at the unexploited service of man.

Utopias, however, can only be imagined according to the varying historical conditions in which men and women make the effort to do so. The main energies of Enlightenment thinkers were such as to ignore this by now well-known truth about human affairs. The first supreme historicist was Hegel in Prussia, writing his main works as the century turned. But his fellow thinker-reformers were on the whole bent only to

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the task of cleaning out and cleaning up the old absolutist regimes, sweeping away dead superstitions along with those who promulgated them; in short, ensuring the advent of the society of reason. The main prophet of such reform was the Englishman, Jeremy Bentham, who in a long life astonishing for its compound of detailed and extended academic philosophizing allied to intensely practical proposals for public policy (the French revolutionaries invited him to write their new constitution), devised the principles of utilitarianism (the simple axiom of which was 'the greatest good of the greatest number'), still the foundations of most contemporary political planning.

The conviction of these men was that the good society would be rational in design, egalitarian in justice, comfortable in welfare, and universal in form. Above Bentham rose the towering edifice of Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason* and his *Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* '[It is] . . . man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another person . . . Reason has for its object only the understanding and its purposive employment'. Once Kant had systematized 'pure reason', the system could be set to work politics systematically. 'Coherence according to one principle',¹¹ where the principle in question was systematic reasoning, would order the world for the best, and unself-interested men like Bentham and James Mill showed with unhesitating clarity how to turn such principle into practice.

III

Opposition to systemic thought had been part of the Enlightenment from the beginning. One could also say that one of the concepts of culture was essential to making the objection. Enlightenment, in commending to humanity One True System, believed itself to have solved the problem of politics. Politics and social method were now coterminous, and once reason had taught this lesson to all human societies, then cruelty, want and war could all be eradicated. The noble science of politics (in the nineteenth-century phrase)¹² would bring paradise on earth and, in so doing, remove the need to

hope either for a paradise after life or the redeemer-gardener in charge of it.

The first concept of culture undoes all that from the start. Its prime mover was the German, Johann Gottfried von Herder, contemporary of Kant. Herder initiates that powerful Enlightenment tradition, today a commonplace, which believed in the *unalikeness* of human societies. He criticized the uni-dimensionality of systemic reasoning, unfastened the confident fixities of fact and method, and discovered in the infinite variety of history an unpredictable and contrary physics of human values, the unassimilable particles of which made life as interesting as it turned progress backwards.

The whole tendency of Herder's thought revolves around the concept of culture. The concept is knotted and complex, as we shall see, and he hardly ever uses the word but, as Skinner has taught us, that in no way debars him from deploying the concept, which he does extravagantly.

It is emphatically in Herder's writing that we can see the vocabulary which will eventually distinguish the concept of culture in one range of its applications. (A strong concept gathers to itself its typical idiom.) He uses such a vocabulary freely and passionately, contrived out of the multiple codes of scholarship of which he was, as far as his day permitted, so heterodox a master. He wrote poetry, philosophy, philology; he wrote *about* poetry and literature; like so many men of letters in the Enlightenment, he was much more than a mere dabbler at the frontier of the life sciences, and kept a small laboratory in his house. Like most of his coevals, even when they professed Sprat's principle of 'native leanness' of speech, he wrote volubly, enthusiastically, and with an enormous, impossible inclusiveness.

Herder's main concern¹³ is with the sheer variety of human experience and its absolute unamenability to the large and simple classifications of the Enlightenment. His strong nationalism, formed at a time when Germany was still an agglomeration of princedoms dominated by Prussia, led the nation when it *was* a nation into some dead and ugly ends, but in 1770 nationalism was one way of talking about the distinctiveness of cultures. Herder's words for what we would now call 'culture' were 'spirit', 'soul', 'Genius' and 'national character', as located in the 'folk' and made visible, above all, in their arts and crafts. In a rousing and indicative passage

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Herder celebrates several key features in the definition of culture: singularity, elusiveness, the totality of a way of life, and, for the scientist of human affairs, the absolute necessity for sympathetic feeling with and for the people:

How unspeakably difficult it is to convey the particular quality of an individual human being and how impossible it is to say precisely what distinguishes an individual, his way of feeling and living; how different and how individual everything becomes once his eyes see it, once his soul grasps, his heart feels, it. How much depth there is in the character of a single people, which, no matter how often observed (and gazed at with curiosity and wonder), nevertheless escapes the word which attempts to capture it and, even with the word to catch it, is seldom so recognizable as to be universally understood and felt. If this is so, what happens when one tries to master an entire ocean of peoples, times, cultures, countries, with one glance, one sentiment, by means of one single word! Words, pale shadow-play! An entire living picture of ways of life, or habits, wants, characteristics of land and sky, must be added, or provided in advance; one must start by feeling sympathy with a nation if one is to feel a single one of its inclinations or acts, or all of them together.¹⁴

Herder finds most of his variety in history; the anthropological record was at that date only just beginning to expand with the advent of empire. But the point he makes with historical and linguistic variety is to affirm – almost as an object of moral worship – the self-vindication of alternative ways of life not as stages toward the improvements of the present but as vital, seething, absorbing, and good in themselves for this very liveliness. Pagan societies, which he constantly invokes, like all eighteenth-century scholars, in the venerable forms of classical Greece and Rome, are not mere anticipations of Christendom but brimming with their own kind of beauty and creative vivacity.

He refuses on the one hand to praise the Greeks at the expense of so-called 'Dark Ages', and on the other to work up a state of romantic yearning (*Sehnsucht*) for the splendours of medieval chivalry or gothic art at the expense of a dismal and mediocre present. He is in no way progenitor of those routine culturalist positions which, as W. S. Gilbert put it in one of his wonderful patter songs, prefer 'every century

but this and every country but one's own?; his celebrations are for *things as they are* (or were). The sentimentality of idealization and the long complacency of denunciation are, at Herder's best, alike renounced. Talking of the Middle Ages, he writes: 'I am by no means disposed to defend the constant migrations and devastations, the feudal wars, the hordes of monks, the pilgrimages, the crusades. I only want to explain them: to show the spirit that breathed through it all, the seething of human forces.' The breathing spirit, the human seething – this is the content of culture: in this Herder was also a pioneer of what we would now call relativism and which has become an unexamined piety of present-day cultural enquiry.

The doctrine of relativism teaches that all human values are bedded in their own historical and cultural context, and can only have local and transitory meaning. There are therefore no universal values. Herder is a landmark in the establishment of the truths in relativism¹⁵ exactly because he wished to do justice to the exclusiveness and singularity of different ways of life, and to honour these by characterizing the aspects of life which made one people in one epoch wholly themselves: not signposts on their road to progress, not inferior versions of eighteenth-century scholar-gentlemen, nor equivalent representations of the great Enlightenment abstract, Man.

Thus Herder may be transformed into a seer of that latter-day anti-imperialism which detests the march of empire for its obliteration of native culture. Herder, one must conclude, could see all that coming. Isaiah Berlin, his great expositor, tells us that in Herder 'colonial subjugation of native populations, ancient and modern, in and outside Europe, is always represented as being morally odious and as a crime against humanity'.¹⁶

This is a crucial move in the definition of culture, in that any recognition of the actuality and separateness of a total way of life commits us to respecting it for itself. As I said, the concept enforces the evaluation by virtue of being used. So Herder, good relativist, defends *all* cultures against *any* detractors: on behalf of paganism against Christianity, on behalf of Christianity against atheism, on behalf of the Orient against the Occident.¹⁷ In two arguments, familiar to us, but

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entirely strange in 1774, Herder interprets the travellers' tales of shamans in exotic lands not as superstitious witch-doctors but as local poets, and the myths they sing¹⁸ not as blindfolds to prevent their audience seeing reality, but as coherent visions of natural being.

In all this vast enterprise, speckled, as one must admit, with incoherence, exaggeration, contradiction, and fulsomeness, Herder does insist upon one paramount value relative to all human necessity. For a people to be a people – Herder is an early and passionate populist – its members must be members one of another. They must *belong* to themselves. Applied to culture, this maxim defines a culture, whatever else it is, as circumscribable and exclusive and, consequently, as ascribing to those members an unmistakable and unshakable identity.

For Herder the philologist, the ultimate source of membership and identity is language. It was the language of a civilization which grounded its unity, and gave its way of life that identifiable but undefinable patterning and style, as well as shaping its modes of creative expression and its deepest feelings. 'We live in a world we ourselves create,' he wrote, and the maker's instrument is speech. All human beings are by this token makers, and as the great painter Matisse once put it – for our culture-seeking purposes, on behalf of all humankind – 'I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have for life and my way of expressing it'.¹⁹

IV

Herder stands in these pages as genius-pioneer of the first notes towards the definition of culture. For all the ardent exaltation of the importance of literature as the highest form of linguistic expression, the features of culture which his concept of it serves to highlight are *totalizing*. Culture is a whole way of life, caught and apprehended by its art and poems, for sure, but manifested all the time in 'the inevitable creativeness of ordinary everyday life'.²⁰ A culture by this meaning includes only its members and excludes its non-members. It is precious in virtue of its distinctiveness. It is not

necessarily going somewhere – towards progress or to the dogs. It *is*, rather than *is becoming*. Its only given is language and, since language is historical (Herder said that history is like a snowball), a culture develops by way of the thinking inseparable from using language.

To attribute this fairly simple definition to Herder is to ignore the tensions in even his approximation of the idea. For the Enlightenment was nothing if not evangelical, never more so than in its professions of atheism. As a result, even while thinkers alongside Herder commended the variety of innumerable ways of life and contrasted the different spirits of other ages, the might of old Christianity drove them on to find the cultural path leading to the perfectibility of man.²¹ Indeed, this is the moment at which paradise is unhitched from the pearly gates of traditional Christian thought, and serious thought is first given to the idea of utopia without a theocracy running things in the name of the Godhead.

One way of thinking such thoughts was provided by Hegel. He was the first to contend that the seeds of new social orders (political and cultural) lay germinating in the forms of the old. Hegel further suggested, unlike Herder, that historical development was and is innately progressive, and that all peoples were tending unevenly (Prussia in the vanguard) towards a realization of the good, because absolutely reasonable, society.

This high-handed vision of the perfectibility of man found a liveable version for itself in a new idea of culture. The rational society would aim to plan a political system which would realize its goals, and the first utilitarians, Bentham and James Mill, proposed as the answer to the question, ‘How will the rational polity act to maximise utility and welfare?’, their pet calculus, ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’, where ‘greatest good’ meant the happiest distribution of material welfare: food, shelter, health, fuel.

No-one, almost two hundred years later, can scoff at such sums. But the objection made by James Mill’s son, John Stuart, is completely irrefutable. John Stuart Mill laid the main charge against Bentham’s utilitarianism, when he wrote that Bentham simply could not recognize that ‘Man is a being capable of pursuing spiritual perfection as an end’, because

Bentham's conception of human existence is constrained entirely by his debit-and-credit ledger-book of life in which the only entries are under 'pleasure' and 'pain'.²² 'Spiritual perfection' is not a phrase to be used without a trace of embarrassment in the present, but it introduces that other realm of meaning latent in the gospel of culture from the start.

'Bentham committed the mistake of supposing that the business part of human affairs was the whole of them',²³ Mill wrote, and then gives Bentham, as well he might, all credit for the greatness of what he had done in this field: '[he] swept away the accumulated cobwebs of centuries . . . untied knots which the efforts of the ablest thinkers, age after age, had only drawn tighter.' But the deadliest criticism is made more personally in Mill's most famous single quotation. In the *Autobiography*²⁴ he recounts the deep emotional crisis which struck him down when, with the remarkable honesty and courage which so characterized Mill, he faced his father's and Jeremy Bentham's system for society with the devastating question, "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" A society run entirely on his parent's theory of business reasonableness would, Mill saw, be a null and deathly place.

Mill's medicine for his breakdown, as given in the *Autobiography*, was to read Wordsworth's poetry. Here, in perhaps his second most famous passage, he uses the word 'culture' itself to indicate the redemptive power of poetry for feelings frozen by the pedagogic march of instrumental reason. Wordsworth's poems, Mill found,

seemed to be the very culture of the feelings which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure . . . which had no connection with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed.²⁵

It is an odd way to put it, that Wordsworth's poetry 'seemed to *be* the very culture of the feelings', and the passage, plainly heartfelt and fluidly written, is not without its contradictions. 'Culture' in this sense and at that date meant the slow attentions of human labour as given to natural cultivation. Poetry could not *be* that culture without some kind of human intervention, nor is it quite consistent of Mill to say that poetry stands above the struggle of life but may still be enriched by human progress.

Nonetheless, what comes over here is Mill's invocation of great poetry as an exalted realm of culture, and this is the other meaning of the word and content of the concept which lends its semantic structure such high tension. This meaning is also there from the outset in the work of a German contemporary of Herder's.

Friedrich Schiller, the nearest equivalent to a German Shakespeare, author of a tremendous and exhilarating range of poetic-historical dramas from *The Robbers* and *William Tell* to *Maria Stuart* and *Wallenstein*, wrote in 1795 a series of *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* which makes a more-or-less direct identification of *Kultur* and the arts, especially literature. Not only that. Schiller aligns *Kultur* and the German noun, *Bildung*, usually translated as 'education' but 'formation' would perhaps be closer (at its most literal, *Bild* means a 'picture', as in 'self-imaging').

The continued force of the idea of a civilization as opposed to barbarity is indispensable to the very notion of human betterment, let alone of the good society. In the present state of world politics much is made of the phrase 'the civilized nations' and anybody would wish most urgently to be a member of one of them. The trouble is that the moment you hear the phrase, you also hear the warblings of propaganda and the arrogance of class.

These conflicting meanings are probably ineradicable from any strongly evaluative and nobly moral-political term. They are certainly present in the idea of art, as they are in that of democracy; the rich ambiguities of 'nobility', 'virtue' (with its etymological root in *vir*, the Latin for a male), 'liberty' and 'fraternity', all bear witness to the *contested*²⁶ nature of almost all the most important and high-minded of our moral and political ideals.

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Schiller was an Enlightenment didact all-through; he believed in the emancipatory precepts of freedom and equality, as well as in the liberating propensity of the new reasoning as applied to society; he was committed to the certainty of human improvement, and was among the first of those who countered the old conservative objection that human beings were determinately sinful, habitually indolent, and congenitally unimprovable, by appealing to literature and art as enshrining the innate human potentiality for goodness and beauty. So Schiller wrote: 'Every individual human being, one may say, causes within him, *potentially and pre-scriptively*, an ideal man, the archetype of a human being, and it is his life's task to be, through all his changing manifestations, in harmony with the unchanging unity of this ideal.'²⁷

We can attribute to Schiller the original Romantic identification of the artist in every human being, and each individual life as containing the perfect work of art the individual should strive to make of it. Schiller may also be credited with launching the idea of culture as meaning high art, and high art (whether or not the product of incomparable genius) as the domain of the ideal, because imaginary, account of how life could one day be. As Schiller sees it, culture has curative properties: by embodying the ideal, it provides a criterion for criticism of life as it actually is.

This meaning moves one part of the concept decisively away from and, at times, in opposition to the other. This is what it is to be a 'contested concept'. Culture-as-ideal-form criticizes cultures-as-the-teeming-ways-of-daily-lives in many different countries. Art the-mirror-held-up-to-life becomes art the-lamp-held-up-to-light-the-way-forward.

Schiller added to this meaning the dimension of playfulness. Art (and culture) would make possible that fulfilment of human potentiality impossible in the work of a civilization preoccupied by trade, exchange and commercial life in general. Hence, for Schiller, the dictum that 'the human being is only fully human when at play'.²⁸ Culture is then the non-purposeful, the imaginative, the anti-instrumental realm and fount of unproductive play.

V

Herder and Schiller, writing in the minor princedoms dominated by pre-German Prussia, announce in their contrastive ways the imminent victory of the *Aufklärung*. By the time John Stuart Mill faces up to his breakdown in 1834, the French Revolution is over and done with, the centre of both political and cultural action has moved to Britain, and their blazing hope for a utopian future, which had led the intelligentsia along the road to enlightenment, found itself at the gates of the new industrial city.

They did not like what they saw and reached for the weapon of culture with which to assault it. As they did so, the meanings of the concept whose origins we have followed began to solidify and to attach themselves by general usage to the word itself.

At first, in the clamorous argument since referred to as 'the condition of England debate', commentators largely used 'civilization' and 'culture' as interchangeable terms. Either one indicated that civility of public life which is embodied in a society's learning, entertainment, manners, and legislation, as well as in its systems of production and its conventions of exchange. If all these customs and practices were civilized, then the citizens would possess culture and be formed in cultivation.

Mill, as we saw, nominated Bentham as the great philosopher of successful social rationalization. In a brilliant insight, which captures in a single opposition those representative thinkers trying to enclose in a single theory the multiple currents of the century, he counterposes to Bentham the poet Coleridge. Coleridge's famous dictum, 'men ought to be weighed and not counted', similarly catches up the debate as a struggle between incommensurable kinds of enquiry: Benthamites count; Coleridgeans weigh. We might rewrite the same struggle as between politics (counting) and culture (weighing).

Coleridge's 'weighing' goes rather beyond mere *avoir-dupois*. It is more a matter of weighing up, of a judicious, intuitive, interpretative, sympathetic, and (in part) physical responsiveness to others in all their totality and (what came

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later to be called, in an important coinage) in their 'alterity' or 'otherness'. Herder's *Einfühlung* (now translated as 'empathy') and, a century or so later, Max Weber's *Verstehen*²⁹ (readily translated as 'understanding') are both surely present in Coleridge's methodical admonition, and the object of all these references is culture.

Coleridge is our first metaphysician of method in cultural enquiry. But by the time England approached her keenest political crisis since the Civil War, cultural enquiry was inseparable from political polemics, and culture itself had knotted together its threefold, contradictory meanings: culture as those presences, structures and formations moving through society which make for civility and civilization; culture as the specialized precipitation of these presences into what counts as high art; culture as the whole congeries of expressive customs and practices, the materials which comprise them, the passions which form and inform them, for good and ill.³⁰ By 1848, accordingly, culture was a blunt instrument in the waging of a new kind of social struggle between the different classes created and allocated by the mighty and unprecedented cities of industrialism.

'Industrialism' was a word coined by Thomas Carlyle although, like 'culture', the concept had been in formation for some decades. Carlyle was an early prophet of the coming class war; he published in 1829 his long essay, 'Signs of the Times' in which he identifies his day as 'the Age of Machinery', its absolute frame of reference as 'the cash-nexus' or the 'Religion of Profit', indicting its disregard of the importance of people's inner lives, its eradication of 'Moral Force', its brutal preference for 'mere political arrangements' over questions of culture.³¹

Carlyle inaugurated a long tradition in British society of criticism of blind and mechanical industrialism and profiteering, but he was himself far from being a reactionary opponent of the Enlightenment's ideal of progress. He put the rousing question: 'Is the condition of the English working people wrong; so wrong that rational working men cannot, will not, and even should not rest quiet under it?' The concept of capitalism was not yet available to him, but that of democracy certainly was. What Carlyle was able to see and name with a grand rhetorical force were those drives in culture

conceived of as his nation's way of life, which would work to destroy that culture conceived of as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world'.

This famous definition belongs to Matthew Arnold and is not voiced until he published his great classic, *Culture and Anarchy*, in 1869. But it is important to notice that Carlyle, like Arnold, was anxious to nourish the present with the best of the past. Both men recognized the reactionary repulsiveness of what Raymond Williams in our own day scornfully identified as 'the long sighing of the just; the mature, sad consciousness of non-intervention'.³² So when Carlyle turned to celebrate the living and exemplary culture of a long-dead monastic community in Catholic and medieval England, he did so with a pedagogue's eye on what it could teach England in her crisis of the 1840s. He rediscovered in St Albans and its abbot in the Middle Ages the necessary and sufficient conditions of living culture. Perhaps Carlyle may be counted the first of the Romantics to tell his country, in his stirring, pamphleteering way, that progress would turn to regression and decadence unless it held onto those forms of life which civilize people *of themselves*, which conduce to goodness and virtue because of the smallest details of everyday exchange.

In Carlyle's picture of the St Albans monastery, culture lives in the pious and gregarious lives of the brothers, their serene and unreflexive dedication of their lives to a larger significance than their individual goodness, easy balance between worship, study of the sacred texts, practical (and effortful) husbandry, robust but simple gastronomy, and in all these things as defining and shaping their responsibility towards the town and the peasant life around it.

Naturally, there is plenty of idealization in this contented fresco of English life a long way from Carlyle's present. But although Carlyle initiated a genre of wistful remembrances and reproachful nostalgia, his purposes were immediate. They were to criticize the unspeakably commercial present, with its filthy factories and starving work-people, for a lack of the conditions of a culture refusing profit, constricting power, affirming community. Such circumstances once obtained; they were recoverable.

We can give Carlyle the credit for first joining culture to community. We hand to William Morris the distinction of

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joining culture to politics. In his great fable of How Things Ought to Be, *News from Nowhere*,³³ Morris describes his communist utopia in terms comparable to Carlyle's St Albans of sixty years previously. Here, too, work is fulfilling, production cleansed, social relations equal because classless, and the beauty of an unexploited nature in graceful harmony with the truthfulness and loveliness of domestic furniture and adornment everywhere to be found.

By 1890, of course, it was clear to Morris that, in order to achieve such a cultural order, political revolution was unavoidable. Morris had absorbed Marx but without losing his hold on either the detail of everyday life or the need to ensure that the political power of the state was confined by cultural value.

Morris had grasped more clearly than any of his contemporaries³⁴ a lesson urgently needing to be relearned by the millenarians of today: that culture, whatever it is, cannot be planned but will have its way; that it both expresses and forms the hearts and minds of men and women; but that it is subordinate to (as well as insubordinate towards) politics, and that politics is the only instrument we have to turn hope into endeavour, desire into actuality. As he wrote with hot scorn: 'In the thirty years during which I have known Oxford more damage has been done to art . . . by Oxford "culture" than centuries of professors could repair . . . Those coarse brutalities of "light and leading" make education stink in the nostrils of thoughtful persons, and are more likely than is socialism to drive some of us mad.'³⁵ It was, Morris said, the helots of the bourgeois class and its damnable 'culture' which were destroying history while purporting to teach literature. Morris in his turn drew upon the divided meanings of the concept held within the structure of the word 'culture'; he turned his passionate and eloquent detestation upon what the commercial classes had made of the culture he saw about him, and he summoned up the powerful ghost of a redemptive art. For 'the cause of Art is the cause of the people . . . One day we shall win back Art, that is to say the pleasure of life; win back Art again to our daily labour.'³⁶ And, most moving of all, 'It is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him, a life to which the perception and creation of beauty shall be as necessary to man as his daily bread.'³⁷

The middle class (while counting himself a member of it) was for him as frequently dislikeable as it is now. For it protects itself with its money and its privileges from seeing what the commercial life it lives off does to other people whom it dispatches to live in 'slums, the squalor of a factory country', amidst drunkenness and brutalization. 'Culture' had and has done these things, and Morris's plea was not, as he said, on behalf of art, 'but for the lives of men'. If those lives were to be made good again, they might have to endure a certain temporary bareness as the love of art required the sweeping away of the unendurable shams of art which constituted so much of Victorian culture. (No-one can say – can they? – that Morris is no longer a relevant writer).

VI

We begin to approach the extraordinary explosiveness of the concept of culture. For by these tokens, as endorsed by Morris, when I encounter a piece of your culture, it will tell me what to think of you, and, in a polite and politic way, I may say what that is and judge you accordingly. No wonder that culture is, as Marxists say, a site of struggle, or as we might more familiarly put it, a touchy subject, and quite certain to be quarrelled over.

William Morris picked his quarrels carefully. His was with the ruling class and with what it had made of the promise of happiness held out by art on behalf of a common culture. Culture spoke of, to and for the soul of a people, certainly; but if it were appropriated by rulers and made to speak only of money, it became an abomination. Art, as Morris said, 'is the cause of the people' and will only speak well on their behalf when it belongs to them. Politics draws its figure upon the ground of culture; one cannot be seen without the other.

In taking this position, Morris sets himself against Matthew Arnold, the best-known cultural theorist in British intellectual history and certainly a paramount influence in the confection of our key concept as it exfloriates throughout the nineteenth century. The two men may be counterposed as advocates of culture on the one hand (Arnold) and politics

on the other (Morris), while both remained intensely aware of the other's weight in the balance. When Morris wrote this – 'if art . . . is to live and not die . . . it must be of the people, for the people, by the people; it must understand all and be understood by all' – he was writing a political manifesto on behalf of culture. When Arnold wrote in the conclusion to his mighty work, 'This [the doctrine of the redemptive power of culture] is the *social* idea, and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality', he was in contrast setting out a cultural bill of rights on behalf of the polity.

Culture and Anarchy is culture's first sacred book and, like most sacred books, not much read any longer. If one turns over its opening pages it is a surprise to hear again that excellently high-minded eloquence and to reflect that, for all its unfashionability, Arnold's combination of seriousness and combativity makes a much more immediate appeal than the book's reputation allows. Of course, to find an early definition of culture as, in the famous phrases, 'a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know . . . the best which has been thought and said in the world' is more than a little daunting, even for modern-day self-improvers, and downright ridiculous to contemporary relativism. But fairmindedness remains a value with a good deal of life to it none the less, and anybody with this book in their hands is not only pretty likely to agree with Arnold that one's life depends for 'solidity and value' on the company of the writers that one keeps, but that if one allows 'a fresh and free play of the best thoughts upon one's stock notions and habits, one has got culture'.

Arnold, devout Anglican, had the intellectual honesty to see that the established church in Europe was losing its authority as a guide to daily conduct, as well as its radiance in lighting believers to ultimate truth. Dutifully shaped by the high-minded absolutes of his public-school headmaster-father, he offered as the guide to, and shaping spirit of, social and personal redemption, 'the study of perfection' implicit in the greatest writings of the traditional syllabus of European universities since the Renaissance. Thereafter, culture in the Arnoldian sense contracts itself to a national literature. Arnold, schools inspector and son of a schoolteacher, understood that the best way to play freshly and freely with ideas

was in the immediately attractive forms of poetic and prose narrative.

Put like that, Arnold's culture is the same as Mill's: 'the very culture of the feelings' which Mill found in the beauties of Wordsworth's poetry and which rescued him from breakdown. Arnold's point is, however, more conscientiously educational. Religion's sources of spiritual irrigation are drying up; great poetry and its embodiment of high-mindedness allied to powerful feeling can be substituted for them to flow in one clear current through all the people. But Arnold's culture is not merely a guide to conduct for those faltering in religious belief. It is a secular church militant, and its satanic enemy is called 'anarchy'.

When Arnold sees anarchy, he finds not political meaninglessness (the usual meaning of 'anarchy') but a culture without standards. Picking up the language of Coleridge and Carlyle quite consciously (this is how a concept – as it was put earlier – binds its meanings about itself like strands on a rope), Arnold says that 'the whole civilization is . . . mechanical and external'. Its empire-builders are in Arnold's most famous coinage 'Philistines', and in a twist as typically English as it could be French, Arnold repudiates philistinism not by argument but by condescension.

It is at this point that we can say snobbery is decisively added to our pet concept, and continues to 'supercharge' its contemporary meaning, for

Culture says: Consider these people, then, their way of life, their habits, their manners . . . observe the literature they read, the things which give them pleasure, the words which come forth out of their mouths, the thoughts which make the furniture of their minds; would any amount of wealth be worth having with the condition that one was to become just like these people by having it?³⁸

One way of measuring a degree of social progress since Arnold wrote this would be the recognition that a majority of people would recoil from its supercilious tone, the confident presumptuousness about the lives and thoughts of so many other people.

The twentieth century provided a number of violent and horrific versions of an answer to this question which

presage ill for the twenty-first, and may make us feel better about Arnold's attitude. For those total theories-and-practices of society usually called 'totalitarian' set themselves to put down money worship, provincial small-mindedness, doing as one damn well pleases, and all the other disagreeable manifestations of philistinism in the name of a morally excellent system of politics-become-culture. With their grand parades and spectacular shows of military power and collective feeling, both Fascism and Stalinism held out the prospect of dissolving bourgeois self-seekingness and acquisition in the larger good of national identity, whether German 'blood and soil', Italian rediscovery of a fake Romanness, or Russian superman proletarians marching into the future behind tanks and tractors. In 2001, another local totalitarianism put on its own minor but appalling spectacle in order to prove that Islamic believers also detested the bourgeoisie, and would kill themselves in order to destroy the hateful pinnacles of world trade, the domination of the globe by godless American money.

In the face of these monstrous aesthetics, Arnold's culture, defined by him so variously and so vaguely, retains its dazzling potency, a characteristic it shares with the imagery of Platonism and Christianity, which can fill the gaze of humankind. For as the philosopher Wittgenstein asks, 'is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?'³⁹

Arnold's is certainly, in Wittgenstein's words, 'a concept with blurred edges'. There is no doubt, however, that Arnold's culture serves to pick out those features of life which either include the arts or provide their foundations, especially of a moral sort. He empties into the enormous capacity of the concept its power to help the human race 'make endless additions to itself', to achieve 'endless expansion of its powers . . . endless growth in wisdom and beauty'.⁴⁰ The generality of these terms does not detract from their noble seriousness and attraction to anyone today who, however averse to the phrase 'these people', still finds the hate-filled hypocrisy of the yellow press disgusting, or the delirious worship of manic celebrity on television demeaning and contemptible.

Arnold's culture continues to stand in fierce and intransigent hostility to that concept of culture which expresses itself in young British women shown on a TV holiday programme bawling drunkenly outside a Spanish bar, 'What do we want? Willies . . . How do we want them? Haaard.' It is almost too coarse a jolt to follow these little charmers with Arnold's addition of 'sweetness and light'⁴¹ to his 'pursuit of perfection', a phrase he took from Swift and by which he meant such abstracts as 'beauty and harmony', 'increased life, increased sympathy', something far greater than 'the blessedness of the franchise, of the wonderfulness of [our society's] own industrial performances'.

Arnold prescribes his wholesome medicine explicitly in opposition to political manifestos. What he refers to as 'Jacobinism' is the political zeal to work up indignation against the past, to renovate wholesale, to apply 'black and white doctrines for elaborating . . . a rational society for the future',⁴² all of which exactly match later totalitarianisms. His culture therefore has no programme; it is a secular version of the Anglican catechism's 'inward and spiritual grace', it seeks constantly to *criticize*, but only by way of indicating how far matters of fact fall short of fulfilment. When Arnold's many enemies among the Philistines deride the man of culture for his uselessness, Arnold offers the classic, iron-clad, and irrefutable justification of intellectual life, that 'where bitter envying and strife are, there is confusion and every evil work', that

the great men [let us add, as a safe measure of actual progress since then, 'great women' also] of culture are those who . . . have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the *best* knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light.⁴³

By such a token, Arnold cannot escape (and does not wish to) committing culture to the care of the good society's self-education. For all his very strong sense of his own Englishness,⁴⁴ Arnold is sharply aware of and eloquently outspoken about the truth that Victorian Britain is a pretty shabby

version of the good society. Beside the stifling omnipresence of the Philistines loom the self-satisfied 'Barbarians', Arnold's name for the aristocracy, convincingly damned by him. He accuses the class of a culture (and here Arnold uses the word to designate a way of life but adds 'to call it by that name' by way of indicating how far it falls short of the ideal) which is 'mainly exterior'; it consists principally in 'outward gifts and graces, in looks, manners, accomplishments', and he concludes by finding in it, as well he might, a lack of *soul*.⁴⁵

Faced by his grisly trinity, Barbarians, Philistines and a working-class Populace 'wholly occupied . . . with the things of itself and not its real self, with the things of the State and not the real State', Arnold can only commit his conception of culture to the various forms of self-education conceivable to the self-broadcasting of his society.

Hence both the vague but pervasive optimism which so strongly colours his concept of culture, and the admonitory tinge the word carries for us as a result. Arnold's culture, framed out of his inheritance from Schiller and Coleridge, Carlyle and Wordsworth, but given practical application and polemical edge by his own and his father's educational ardour, remains embedded in our contemporary and contested meaning. His culture, once realized, will be good for us; before that transfiguration, it is immanent in the actual world as something of which, if we attend to it, we shall one day be capable; it therefore identifies actual and noble possibilities in our lives, the best that we might truly bring to birth, and it consequently equips us with the criteria and weaponry of self-criticism. It connects desire with actuality, and provides a measure of the gap between the two.

VII

By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, culture is a concept armed and weighty enough to take on politics. But it had, as we see, a very confused provenance and lent itself to the rhetoric of entirely opposed political arguments. Speaking roughly, we can say that there is a convergence of reference between the two words, 'civilization' and 'culture', as

we approach the modern era which opened with such a bang in 1914. They also carry with them strong associations with community and with art.

At about this juncture, culture became what it remains: protean, enormous, inclusive, bloodily disputed. This is therefore the moment to insist on its one reassuring quality: its *ostensivity*. That is to say, we can only be sure what we are talking about when we can display it for inspection. This seems to be the easiest response to those who ask for definitions of culture or those who complain that they never know what theorists of culture are talking about. Nothing is dismissable for the culturalist. The casual observer asks, ‘Why bother with that shit?’, but the cultural archaeologist, down on his knees in the site of five-thousand-year-old latrines, takes up the fossils to discover in their petrification the cuisine, the physical strength, the mortality and the crops on the allotment of the stone-age original whose morning dump he holds in reverent tongs. Culture may be a vague enough concept but breakfast, fatal illness and crop yields are not. Culture, that is to say, is to be found in the *signs* of human action and the ideas that action embodies.⁴⁶ You can only find it insofar as you can interpret what people are doing when they express it. It is *embedded* in the contexts and settings of everyday life, and made visible in the *irreducible* nature of social exchange and interaction.

This way of expressing things was scarcely an option at the moment at which social science began. For Bentham, James Mill and the French social theorist Auguste Comte, the science of human affairs was a strictly factual, methodically empirical, and reductively computational practice. Their allies in the new, headlong and exceedingly self-righteous business of capitalism took a similar view. Hence culture, in the high-toned sense of Carlyle and Matthew Arnold, took on (as we have noted) an oppositional charge which always placed it in a critical location *vis-à-vis* both social science and the political economy which produced it.⁴⁷

Art, as the precipitate of culture, became charged in the same way and so, gradually, was the concept’s third zone of application, whereby the whole life of a single society could be circumscribed as its culture. For on the one hand, the new

scientists of industrial society, shown the way by Bentham and Comte, set about devising the techniques for the regulation of production, the legislation of behaviour, the instruction in skills, and the very ordering and classifying of passion and action⁴⁸ on behalf of all their fellow workers. On the other hand, however, a mixed and argumentative collection of critics set their faces against such an incarceration exactly because they could see and feel, with a mixture of horror and delight, just how intense, throbbing and vivid was the vulgarity of the way of life produced by the new industrialization, and the exhilarating, revolting city in which it thrived.

So it was by way of the monstrous and magical life of the street – in Paris, London, New York, Chicago, Vienna, Rome, Berlin, St Petersburg – that the concept of culture took on such a multi-coloured substance, and at the same time such a divided selfhood. The mighty novelists – Dickens, of course, along with Proust, Henry James, Tolstoy, Musil and several dozen others – saw the city's magic and its monstrosity as inseparable.

For its hostile critics, mostly members of a class which leaves town for the weekend, urban culture, irresistible as it is, debauches those who stay and estranges those who do not. The culture of redemption is then to be found elsewhere, by the oasis of community. This is the last departure of the century and it is, tellingly, to find such redemption far afield, in the territories of empire. Culture, long apostrophized as the source of human perfection, splits in two. The residue is found in the Cities of the Plain of Modernity: an unmistakably vital but frightful way of life. The distillation is to be found up in the hills or on the other side of the world in the self-enclosed lives of what are then depictable – literally so in the example of Gauguin's wonderful idealizations of the natives of Tahiti – as utopias.

The reality of utopia is elsewhere, whether in history or geography. Ruskin's Gothic Venice, Henry Adams's Mont St Michel and Chartres, Carlyle's St Albans, Morris's shining Nowhere set beside a Silver Thames in the perfect communist future, Saint-Simon's and Fourier's Golden Age of the Future, Marx's post-revolutionary egalitarianism, are all grasped and imagined as *beyond politics*.⁴⁹ Insofar as these are good societies, politics will have done its work and

dissolved into the perpetuity of culture. Thus politics is struggle and culture is harmony.

This is the last dimension of meaning which completes and complicates the concept in readiness for the twentieth century. Its advent may be said to mark the first anthropological moment. Anthropology is no doubt a science of human affairs but it has of late acknowledged what has been the argument throughout this chapter, that the concepts deployed in human enquiry are not only 'contested', ambiguous in meaning and enclosing the contradictions of differing usages, they are also heavy with judgement, past and incipient. When E. B. Tylor published his pioneering book *Primitive Culture* in 1871, the very title announced a judgement: that those who were once called 'savages' and were still called 'primitives' had a true culture of their own, that it was coterminous with community and exclusive of the outward world, and that – as anthropology developed – primitive culture taught its peoples a dignity, a self-reliance, and a narrative of living-and-dying that was untouched by the monstrosities of industrial modernity, and served as a moral lesson in the nobility with which they lived in a serene, unexploitative relation to nature.

Living in culture, primitive peoples had no politics. That was what made them primitives. They had a social structure – how could they not? – and every detail of culture, their weapons, their cooking, their kinship and their ceremonies confirmed and expressed that structure as giving their lives their enviable unity.

Anthropology was, no doubt, the science devised for the regulation of those peoples subordinated by empire.⁵⁰ It was also the critical method of those alienated from but academically employed by the imperial powers. The first explorer-anthropologists were no hired mouths of empire. Homesick and home-estranged, they saw the violent clash of old and new cultures, and the flow of blood and money which followed. The professional anthropologists followed the same trail, looking for culture, taking it with them in cameras, safari jackets, folding chairs and beds, wicker baskets, bell tents, revolvers and rifles.

Anthropology appropriates culture for its own; literary criticism tries to pull it back; novelists fill it up with all kinds

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of clutter from domestic life; political revolutionaries and reactionaries subject it to Five and Fifty Year Plans. By 1914 culture is become indispensable to theory, and Theory is the new muse of the totalitarian century.