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EXPERIENCING REALITY: THE CULTURE INDUSTRY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND IDENTITY

The culture industry first came under attack when capitalist society began to experience what Hendrik de Man termed the "massification" of society: the standardized production of goods and services in a world of interchangeable individuals stripped of their identity. Few on the left initially believed that the Enlightenment was the source of the problem and even fewer believed that "mass education" is the equivalent of "mass deception." But the interwar period saw the individual subordinated to the collective, public opinion shaped by propaganda, responsibility identified with obeying orders, tastes structured by the media, sacrifice for the masses perceived as a good unto itself, and the encounter with death become the hallmark of authenticity. The universal subject——nation, party, class—seemed to lend itself to this new form of mass society. That is the reason for what in the postwar period would become a general artistic and philosophical preoccupation with authentic experience and the "end of the individual." On the left, however, only *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would pit subjectivity against the liberal subject, modernity, and the Enlightenment. The issue here involves the success of that undertaking.

The new form of critical theory, from the first, retreated from politics. Its authors had little to say about new issues pertinent to the political legacy of the Enlightenment such as the struggle for civil rights or national self-determination or imperialism. Capitalist *culture* was perceived as the problem and the metaphysical response, the assertion of subjectivity, was demanded by the all-encompassing system of reification that it nominally wished to oppose. In spite of its self-styled radicalism, therefore, this new stance reflected what Daniel Bell called "the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties" and—with an eye cast on the prewar years—the pervasive belief of the time that any attempt to change society would have to take place "without me" (*ohne mich*). The point is not that Horkheimer and Adorno feared rocking the boat, which they did, or that they should ultimately have

distanced themselves from their own radical followers like Hans-Jurgen Krahl and Rudi Dutschke in the 1960s. It is rather their attempt to recast what had been a materialist theory of society, committed to realizing the interests of the exploited and disenfranchised, into pure philosophy. The aesthetic-philosophical intensification of subjectivity became the fulcrum of resistance against the incursion, not only of political or economic forces fostering reification, but especially the "culture industry."[1]

Volumes have already been written about this extraordinary idea. Whether in terms of ripping a work from the context of tradition, thereby eradicating what Walter Benjamin termed the "aura" of an artwork and the unique experience it generated,[2] or subverting the possibility of emancipation supposedly preserved within the aesthetic realm,[3] the "culture industry" was seen as changing public life in advanced industrial society. Modern culture now required its own administrative bureaucracy as its producers sought the largest possible audience, which meant finding the lowest common denominator for each product, and searching less for the next Dostoyevsky than the next bestseller. Cultural production fits into the production and reproduction of the whole and thus, the extent to which a work becomes popular, becomes the extent to which its radicalism—or its ability to affirm the "non-identity" between subject and object—is promised. The point for Horkheimer and Adorno was never that the culture industry will only present "conservative" works, or even that it mechanically serves only the interests of the ruling elite,[4] but rather that any work it does popularize will become conservative, stripped of its liberating character, and affirmative of the status quo *by definition.*

Looking backwards: all of this was less a problem for philosophes intent upon educating the rabble than for their conservative critics. Even before the Enlightenment, however, certain intellectuals were already drawing a radical

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, Herder & Herder, 1972), 120ff. Note also the useful little collection of supporting essays by Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991).
2. See the ground-breaking essay by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217ff.
3. On the roots of this assumption, see Kai Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
4. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002); Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of New Media* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993).

distinction between "art" and "popular culture." [5] Where "art" was seen as offering catharsis, genuine experience, education, reflection and a sense of the "beautiful"—even if only as an illusion (*Schein*)—popular culture was believed to provide only spurious gratification, prefabricated experience, regression, emotional identification, and entertainment. The puritanical roots of this distinction are fairly obvious. It revolved around whether culture should amuse or instruct. Pascal held the position that culture must intensify his own version of "pure experience" deriving from Jansenism while Montaigne, the great humanist and skeptic, believed that amusement might offer everyday people some relief from the misery of their lives: it is noteworthy that he should have refused to privilege any particular style let along some prescribed purpose for art.[6] Another version of the same controversy occurred in the debate between Rousseau and Voltaire over whether a theater should exist in Geneva. Their differing views took on a symbolic character for the different social groups in the city: patricians, bourgeois, and the great host of the disenfranchised.[7] Rousseau maintained that the theater corrupts by its very nature while Voltaire emphasized its enjoyment. There is, however, a political issue of some importance hidden in this ongoing debate over culture.

Montaigne and Voltaire believed that the variety provided by the arts was the antidote to dogmatism. Their critics emphasized, by contrast, the way in which a "deeper" truth was undermined by the plurality of experiences that entertainment or theater might provide and their corrupting influence on public morals and the reigning cultural niveau. Such corruption aided by a burgeoning set of capitalist entrepreneurs was what Goethe and Schiller castigated in their "Schema on Dilettantism" (1799). In contrast to Flaubert who claimed —anticipating much of later critical theory—"the time for beauty is over," these two giants recommended neither resignation nor withdrawal. They did not envision the end of civilization: the assault upon the imagination by the supposedly unthinking masses should only intensify the commitment of the genuine artist to preserve it in public life.

Attempts to establish some deep-seated difference between the collective cultural unconscious of France and Germany reach back to the nationalist response against Napoleon and the *Addresses to the German Nation* by Fichte. It

5. Note the classic essay by Leo Lowenthal, "The Debate over Art and Popular Culture: A Synopsis," in *Literature and Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1984), 19ff.
6. Ibid, 22.
7. Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics*: The Poet as Realist (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 195–16.

was carried over into the twentieth century by pitting a heavy-handed romantic belief in the profundity and "depth" associated with *Kultur*—the inner torment of the genius, the revelatory quality of truth, the paintings of Casper Friedrich, and the operas of Wagner—against the skeptical lightness and rationalist "superficiality" of *civilisation*: that was associated with the Enlightenment and, in particular, the wit and cosmopolitanism of Voltaire. Both *Kultur* and *civilisation* can, of course, be employed in a stereotypical fashion and manipulated for nationalist aims as was the case during World War I. Its aftermath indeed witnessed the famous battle between Thomas Mann, who justified the German war effort as an unsuccessful attempt to protect *Kultur* from the appeal of *civilisation* in his *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*,[8] and his far more progressive brother, Heinrich Mann, the incarnation of the *Zivilisationsliterat*, who responded with a ringing endorsement of the Enlightenment and its democratic legacy in his *Reflections of a Political Man*.

The author of magnificent works like *Death in Venice* and *The Magic Mountain* never looked worse in print. He trotted out every reactionary cliché about the Enlightenment, portrayed the Dreyfus Affair as little more than a mob spectacle, and barely mentioned the material interests generating the "great war." Thomas Mann was concerned with cultural traditions and attitudes: Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche thus confront Rousseau, Zola, and Romain Rolland.[9] The issue in his view was whether the "apolitical" commitment to culture should be compromised by a democratic commitment to politics;[10] whether the "lonely" individual and the intensity of the intuitive moment should be prized over public life and a concern with social reform; whether irony should take precedence over the pursuit of "abstract" ideals;[11] whether traditions rooted in time should be celebrated over the more facile universal and instrumental use of "reason"; whether metaphysical experience should be privileged over and against the material concern with a better life; whether the *Volksstaat*, a state in which the "people" disregard their private interests and essentially want what their cultural "destiny" requires of them,[12] should take precedence over the pursuit of particular interests under the liberal rule of law embodied in the *Rechtsstaat*. [13] There is no

8. Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1988), 160ff
9. Ibid., 94ff
10. Ibid., 21ff
11. Ibid., 14
12. Ibid., 259
13. Ibid., 141ff, 23

need to look further for the cultural foundations of the "sensible republicans" (*Vernunftrepublikaner*) who, enthralled with the "moderate liberalism" of Goethe, were willing to accept the new regime in Weimar but not genuinely embrace its values. Indeed, the debate between Heinrich and Thomas Mann exposes the difference between the cultural vision of the Enlightenment and that of its romantic and neo-romantic critics.

Democracy requires conviction. It also requires *Civilisation* with its emphasis upon reflection, recognition of the "other," and what the Enlightenment understood as "progress."[14] *Kultur*, by contrast, speaks to something experientially fixed, ungraspable by the "other," and—by implication—a nationally or ethnically determined form of understanding.[15] The former involves public life, enjoyment, and what Voltaire correctly called a "softening of customs" while the latter is cultivated inwardly against the public. Where *civilisation* is often criticized for its Eurocentric, and elitist connotations, this idea actually projects the possibility of educational reform, seeks the point of intersection between cultures, and elicits the contributions of the "other" non-western societies. *Civilisation* retains a democratic and cosmopolitan quality that is missing in the existential exaltation of a unique and rooted subjectivity by *Kultur*. [16]

Kant would have had no trouble choosing between the two: he understood aesthetic experience as a form of "purposeful purposelessness." Often it has been noted that this view attacked those intent on viewing art as the handmaiden of religion, politics, or community morality: its utopian impulse, however, was to divorce it even from existential self-affirmation. It instead highlights the moment of joy. Moral education can, of course, change what brings enjoyment. It should: people used to enjoy watching a hanging and there is still the bullfight and the cockfight. But, for all that, the great insight of Kant was that aesthetic experience, as against the work that elicits it, is not a matter of ethical judgment. Aesthetic enjoyment, in contrast to matters of morality or science, need follow no rules. "Taste" is relative: its affirmation presupposes tolerance. The experience of Emma Bovary reading her trashy novels is, according to this logic, no less "pure" than the connoisseur reading *Finnegan's Wake.* Kant understood what was at stake: profound love for an artwork is not something one can teach, and it does not need justification,

14. Norbert Elias, *Uber den Prozess der Zivilisation* 2 Bde. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 1:91ff.
15. Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, 23ff.
16. Ibid., 31

while respect for the innovations made by an artist can be taught and might even provide new ways of appreciating his or her creation.

Interesting about most critical writings on the culture industry is the refusal to consider aesthetic distinctions between different traditions of mass culture and the differing importance of different works. Also too often ignored is how the culture industry, while itself often expressive of capitalist interests, provides new experiential opportunities for its audience. Later critical theory, by contrast, preserves genuine aesthetic inquiry only for works capable of intensifying the non-identity between subject and object, and essentially dismisses the need for categories capable of distinguishing between Louis Armstrong and Kenny G, or Charlie Chaplin and the Three Stooges; postmodern theory, for its part, will generally view any work or inquiry as just another form of signification. Critical theorists and postmodernists have evidenced a virtual obsession with how high can turn into popular culture without recognizing what is perhaps even more important: that the reverse is also possible.

According to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* in any event, attempts at "mass enlightenment" can now only produce "mass deception." The Enlightenment—as usual—becomes the source of the problem. But little acknowledgement is given to the pedagogic heritage associated with Locke's attack on rote learning, Voltaire's contempt for the authoritarian curriculum, Rousseau's emphasis on the need for practical education, Kant's concern with public debate, and Goethe's insistence upon developing the individual "personality." These ideas remain at the core of any progressive notion of education. But, then, they cannot be implemented anyway what with the corruption of the public sphere by the culture industry and the transformation of "engaged art" into a self-defeating enterprise. [17] No less than for conservatives, therefore, left-wing proponents of later critical theory must also view education as an elite enterprise. Any critique of the establishment and any expression of a utopian possibility, after all, will necessarily be reconfigured by the culture industry to reinforce the "happy consciousness" of the status quo: Herbert Marcuse would term this process "repressive desublimation."[18]

Eliciting the unique experience—whether aesthetic, philosophical, or even religious—becomes the mode of resisting reification. It is not a mat-

17. Theodor W. Adorno, "Engagement," in *Noten zur Literatur* III (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965), 109ff.

18. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon:, 1964), 56ff.

ter of preparing the individual for the practical exercise of freedom. Education *should* retreat from the public sphere and, because the possibilities of solidarity have been exhausted, it should project only what might be termed a permanent revolution of subjectivity. Trying to situate this new subjectivist stance politically or in terms of a "new enlightenment" is useless given its indeterminacy and purposeful ambiguity. There is also little sense in speaking about democracy as an "aesthetic form of life" when reference is not made to the articulation of particular interests or the institutions capable of protecting them.[19] The result then is little more than a pale imitation of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) with its claim that the establishment of political freedom exists when life becomes art and that to solve the problems of politics, the "road of aesthetics" must be pursued."

In contrast to the old stance, however, the new one is usually unconcerned with solidarity: it privileges esoteric and nonrepresentational art and it lacks categories for differentiating between different works and traditions of mass culture. It simply ignores how the culture industry has expanded the knowledge of the average viewer, brought genuine classics to more people, and heightened the demand for "transparency," thereby making institutions and politicians more accountable. Emphasizing any of these themes would have tied the original critique of the culture industry to the legacy of the Enlightenment. As things stand, however, only the terms by which subjectivity is threatened distinguishes this supposedly immanent critique from phenomenological and postmodern rejections of the Enlightenment *tout court*. The attack on the "system" in the name of the individual can occur from the right, by T.S. Eliot, just as easily as from the left. There is no institutional orientation for what Nishida, the great Japanese philosopher of the 1930s, termed the "pure experience."

What results is a new theory justifying an old practice: withdrawal from the embattled world of politics in the name of an inner resistance. Cynics might look back to Luther, the "un-political German," and even the "inner emigration" undertaken during the totalitarian era: Lukacs indeed put the matter most dramatically by accusing the Frankfurt School of "watching the demise of civilization from its grand hotel abyss." Its most important representatives certainly developed perspectives that bear a marked affinity with

19. Cf. Morton Schoolman, *Reason and Horror: Critical Theory, Democracy, and Aesthetic Individuality* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 230ff.

Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Bergson, Nietzsche, Spengler, and—even more ominously—Martin Heidegger. [20] These thinkers, again, have nothing to do with the historical phenomenon or the political values of the Enlightenment: they prize experience without a discursive referent, which allows for the incursion of ideology, and they have little sense of the utility provided by the indeterminate subject for liberal institutions. They also share a sense of the futility in contesting society. Each is clear about the inability of theory to grasp the irrational sources of suffering and the need to supplant history with "historicity," the lived life, of the individual. The crisis of civilization is seen by all of them as having less to do with the disenfranchised masses than with the marginalizing of "authentic" or "pure" experience. Such are the tenets of a tradition, extending from romanticism to the more avant-garde forms of modernism, whose importance for his own project was noted by Max Horkheimer when he wrote:

> To the artists of the *fin de siècle* the goal was not art but truth, which has no end except the refusal to abide by the bad, the lopsided, the untrue. They wanted to say it as it really was, and the 'it' is always the experience that aims at the whole and can claim no legitimacy before the forum of public knowledge.[21]

This tradition would profoundly influence *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in its struggle against the "ontology of false conditions." But the inability to render its concerns communicable within a public forum, whatever the commitment to an endangered subjectivity, rendered suspect the claims that a radicalization of the Enlightenment heritage was actually taking place. Reacting against this ontology would lead Horkheimer and Adorno to reject any "positive"—determinate, institutional, or "objective"—understandings of freedom in favor of the "non-identity" between subject and object, the individual and the world, and the inkling of "what is not." But this sundered the original attempt of Enlightenment thinkers to make the unknown visi-

20. Max Horkheimer, "Die Aktualitaet Schopenhauers" and "Schopenhauer's Denken," in *Gesammelte Werke 7*: 136ff and 252ff; also note the oddly favorable essay by Theodor W. Adorno, "Spengler after the Decline," in *Prisms,* trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 51ff; with respect to Heidegger, Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity,* trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (London: Routledge, 1993).
21. Max Horkheimer, "Decline: Notes 1950–69," in *Dawn and Decline,* trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Continuum, 1978), 204.

ble. Thus, the political world falls back into darkness and, stepping back from Hegel, progress loses any institutional referent.

Conceptualizing subjectivity in this way would involve the Frankfurt School in attacks on virtually every major philosophical school. None were left unscathed: not phenomenology with its ontological flattening of the very experience it claimed to valorize; not empiricism with its blindness to the context of oppression; not positivism with its expulsion of normative values; not instrumentalism with its sanctioning of what exists; and not even Hegel or Marx with their teleological commitment, their affirmation of progress, their preoccupations with revolutionary change, and their belief in the "negation of the negation." None of this makes any sense from a standpoint based on the assumption that "the whole is false." Discussion of the preconditions for exercising freedom or the constraints placed upon it becomes irrelevant. It is enough to note that the truth of freedom is found in its ability to escape all historical and institutional determinations.

This is as much the case for Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Buber, or Rosenzweig as for Horkheimer and Adorno. All of them consider the determinate "negation of the negation" insufficient and one-sided.[22] Freedom cannot present itself in positive terms or receive any form of historical determination. Subjectivity must be understood in experiential terms very different from those offered by reason with its technical fetish. It also doesn't help matters to claim that the "the longing for the totally other" highlighted by Horkheimer or the tensioned-filled "force-field" of aesthetic experience articulated by Adorno, which can only appear as "illusion," are somehow really determinate because they contest the totality. Both the religious and the aesthetic experience exist outside history. They are both products of an "intentionless" mode of "non-identical" thinking that militates against the hierarchical and linear style of academic philosophy. Such concerns might justify understanding *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a composition of "fragments," but it does not justify the attack on the "jargon" of all those other major thinkers with whom its authors claimed to have so little in common. To be sure:

> . . . we must not confuse a heartfelt defense of the old order with an apology for disorder: a solicitude for the individual who risked becoming lost

22. In this regard, it might be useful to compare Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Concept of Experience,* trans. Kenley Royce Dove (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) with Theodor W. Adorno, *Drei Studien zu Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974 ed.)

> in a nascent mass society, with a glorification of the superman; mistrust of the new morality of the flock with an acceptance of the morality of the masters; fear of the plebs with a call for a despot; a theory of political class or of the elites with magnification of the aristocracy (indeed, of a bellicose aristocracy); a defense of civilization feared on the brink of disappearing with heralding a new barbarity'[23]

But the battles between the supporters of late critical theory and postmodernism and those of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the rest—when it comes to the subjectivity of the subject—are so esoterically ferocious precisely because they reflect little more than what Freud termed "the narcissism of small differences." Other than for academic pedants, it is immaterial whether subjectivity is secured through a fleeting moment of aesthetic-philosophic experience in resisting the "totally administered society," the experiential moment fueling the "eternal recurrence," the "insight into the essence" of reality, or the feeling of angst in the face of death. Whether the culprit is "herd society" or "mass society" or the inherently mediocre "public" or the "culture industry" is actually far less relevant than academic philosophers make it out to be. Strange is how the left critique of Enlightenment, supposedly undertaken from the standpoint of Enlightenment itself, should wind harboring affinities with the thinking of right-wing irrationalists and neo-romantics.[24] But stranger still is how, using the original willingness of critical theory to lump opposites together, it becomes evident that "the battle against positivism was common to all the various spiritualist currents that put their stamp, positive or negative, on the culture of the time . . . and that criticism of positivism, whether it came from 'noble' culture or lower quarters, was always accompanied by criticism of socialism, democracy, and political radicalism of all varieties."[25]

Too much time has been spent by fashionable philosophy on the evils of neo-positivism and positivism, which is mistakenly identified with the philosophical spirit of Enlightenment, and too little with whether an imperiled subjectivity is indeed the central problem of modernity: this has, in my

23. Norberto Bobbio, *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy,* trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 34
24. Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures,* trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 106ff.
25. Bobbio, Ideological Profile of Twentieth Century Italy, 33.

view, had a disastrous impact on the critical tradition.[26] Plato had already recognized that politics should not attempt to "care for the soul." But that warning was ignored. Even Herbert Marcuse, whose radicalism contradicted the politics of his more cautious friends in the Frankfurt School, showed little awareness of the dangers in privileging subjectivity and the importance of fostering what Karl Popper termed "the open society." This, indeed, is where the genuinely new efforts in radical thinking should begin.

Reinvigorating critical theory calls for asserting its public aims, reconsidering its understanding of subjectivity, and beginning the critique of those romantic and metaphysical preoccupations that seek to present themselves as political.[27] The problem of subjectivity has concretely—that is to say historically and politically—had far less to do with some utopian transcendence of the given order, or the potential integration of reforms, [28] than the demand for including the excluded, extending the rule of law, civil rights, and economic justice to those suffering the arbitrary exercise of power. The disempowered and the disenfranchised wished not to cultivate their subjectivity like a hothouse plant, but exercise it in the public realm. They wished their unheard voices to be heard and their ignored interests to be articulated: the critique of the culture industry should begin where it contributes to the repression of these voices, the misrepresentation of their interests, and the vulgarity of the life they live.

Rendering media more accountable to the public and expanding the range of what is shown or broadening the spectrum of debate, however, never seem to enter into the discussion. It is for the Frankfurt School, as usual, a question of all or nothing: and, as Brecht liked to say, when called upon to make such a choice, the world is always quick to answer—nothing. But that's all right: such a response only justifies the claim that the whole is false.

26. A case in point is the introduction to *Rethinking the Frankfurt School: Alternative Legacies of Cultural Critique*, eds. Jeffrey Nealon and Caren Irr (Albany: State University New York Press, 2002), 5.

27 . Stephen Eric Bronner, "Points of Departure: Sketches for a Critical Theory with Public Aims" in *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* 2nd Edition (Routledge: New York, 2002), 231ff.

28. The possibility that the "whole" or the given order might qualitatively change for the better is always underestimated with claims like "the liberalization of the Establishment's own morality takes place within the framework of effective controls; kept within this framework, the liberalization strengthens the cohesion of the whole." Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 9

There is no need to offer an alternative to television, high-tech movies, sports, and the existing enjoyments of everyday life. Better to remain content with warning that nothing is safe any longer from the clutches of Hollywood and that, in principle, Beethoven or Schoenberg is as susceptible of manipulation as Elvis Presley or Bruce Springsteen. Better to remain a scold and insist only upon the need to read works—such as the poems of Paul Célan or the plays of Samuel Beckett[29]—that require inordinate concentration and that strengthen the tension between the individual and society or the nonidentity between subject and object. It doesn't matter that this stubborn elitism is but the flip side of postmodern aesthetic relativism. The stylistic difficulty of the Frankfurt School has justified itself by the all-encompassing notion of mass culture its philosophy seeks to contest. The difficulty, nonlinear quality, and fragmentary character of its texts enable them to resist integration by the culture industry and, through undercutting the existing communicative networks, serve the cause of freedom. This same logic, in spite of its oblique references to Martin Heidegger, carries over into a postmodern concern with resolving the supposed current "crisis of humanism" through a "crash diet of the subject" that—note the convoluted language—"would allow the subject to listen to the call of a Being that no longer arises in the peremptory tone of the *Grund* or the thought of thought (or absolute spirit), but that dissolves its presence-absence into the network offered by a society increasingly transformed into an extremely sensitive organism of communication."[30]

When considering the culture industry from the standpoint of a functioning democratic polity, it is less the extent to which the "pure" or "authentic" experience is imperiled than the degree to which the audience is exposed to different forms of aesthetic experience and the different purposes and possibilities attendant upon different artworks. Analyzing cultural life from the abstract and indeterminate perspective of "reification," "mass society," "the herd," or the *das Man* of Heidegger undermines the complexity of the culture industry and its usefulness. The real danger posed by the culture industry has less to do with the trivial character of its products, or the way it neutralizes all radical impulses, than its exclusion of important tradi-

29. Note the brilliant article, which provides an entry into the radical aesthetic of postwar critical theory, by Theodor Adorno, "Versuch das *Endspiel zu verstehen*," in *Noten zurLiteratur* II (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961), 188ff.

30. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture,* trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 47.

tions, its parochialism, and its false pluralism. Criticism of mass society should be focused on its narrowing of discourse, its preoccupation with consensus, its inability to depict meaningful forms of solidarity, and its lack of politics. New forms of critical theory should start highlighting the divergent "structures of knowledge production," using a term from Edward Said, in order to focus upon the differentiated political impact of different trends and worldviews generated by the culture industry. That would give radical cultural criticism a new sense of democratic purpose.

The repression of "individuality" and the need for "self-expression" have already become important themes exploited by the culture industry. Advocates of the "authentic" or "pure" experience have, in this sense, missed the boat. More salient is their preoccupation with the dangers posed by the culture industry and modern life to *their* established aesthetic prejudices and metaphysical preoccupations. Their concerns have a long history. Feeling his alienation from modern life, longing for the rebirth of an organic culture, seeking to "re-enchant" the world, and—above all— express his romantic yearning for religious revelation, Novalis identified philosophy with "transcendental homesickness." This view would, indeed, lay the groundwork for confronting both the anonymity and atomization of modern life.

The philosophical search for "authenticity," a form of insight grounded in the lived life of the individual, would only gain in popularity. Nietzsche insisted that the "will to power" was operating in the realm of nature and society; Bergson noted how the *élan vital* escaped the confines of both metaphysical and scientific categories; and Heidegger sought to overcome the divide between subject and object through his category of *Dasein*. It became a matter of recapturing the inner experience of time, what Bergson called (*la durée*), an attempt that would inform not merely the architects of modern critical theory but also thinkers like Heidegger and Rosenzweig, from the incursions of a mechanistic clock-time grounded in an external understanding of space. Or, more simply, in the face of a standardized and mechanized modernity, intensifying experience became an end unto itself.

Critical theory was not the only attempt to walk a path between metaphysics and materialism. This other existential-romantic tradition tried to do the same thing though, in contrast, it sought a new "foundation" existing beyond the limitations of language. Concern with the ability to intuit a more profound reality beyond all contingent socio-historical factors now appeared in the "insight into the essence" of Husserl, the revelatory unveiling of "Being"—as a "Being-unto-death" (*Sein zum Tod*)– by Heidegger and the illumination by Nishida of a "pure experience" inseparable from other em-

pirical experiences and yet irreducible to them. Only through a feeling of such intensity, or so goes the belief, can the individual find himself or herself "rooted" in the world. That there should have been an interchange between this form of primarily German philosophy and the Far East, or that this new perspective somehow mimics the "religiosity" of the believer against the petrifying rituals of his "religion," is not accidental. Christian mystics like Angelus Silesius, Jakob Boehme, and Meister Eckhardt—who would exert such a powerful influence upon modern subjectivism—have more than superficial affinities with the Buddha. A shared philosophical undertaking presented itself between the inheritors of Christian and Asian mysticism in the attempt to overcome the divide between subject and object, "re-enchant" the world, and explore a mysterious "experience" of phenomenal reality beyond the bounds of discourse that would not—necessarily—entail the introduction of God. Georg Lukacs indeed appropriately termed this entire modern trend of philosophy "religious atheism."

Logical forms of philosophical persuasion were employed to privilege the primacy of revelation. But there was always a sense in which religious atheism expressed less a concern for provisional, social or historical, "truth" than the quest for authenticity, the longing for certainty, and the faith that—perhaps through its re-enchantment—meaning might finally be found in a meaningless world. Common to the general approach, moreover, is the way in which the structures of social reality collapse into the individual's experience of them. The constitution of reality in its constraints no less than its options—the original concern of modern philosophy—becomes a secondary matter. The suffering experienced in modernity is thus projected upon reason itself and only emotional transcendence can contest the feelings of anonymity and superficiality engendered by modern life. Pure experience, however, is inherently contemplative. The world is what it is: best then to "let it be" and seek recourse in the revelatory aesthetic or religious experience that can occur in any moment and under any circumstances through the encounter with any phenomena.

There is no explaining the "pure" experience. There is only the completely unwarranted presupposition that others should somehow "understand" that it has taken place. But the judgment of whether a "pure" rather than a secondary "experience" has actually occurred can, by definition, only be self-referential. And that would be in order if, simultaneously, there were not the presumption that something objectively meaningful about phenomenal reality had been illuminated. Or, putting it another way, the problem is not what James Joyce termed the "epiphany," the momentary glimpse of

meaning experienced by an individual, but rather the refusal to define its existential "place" or recognize its explanatory limits.

Within the existential tradition, Kierkegaard had probably the best appreciation for the paradoxical character of truth associated with the subjectivity of the subject. His rendering of the story about Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* makes this clear. Kierkegaard describes how—having inwardly heard the word of God—the father stood ready to sacrifice his son. But intention was apparently enough for the Lord and so, just as Abraham was ready to strike down Isaac, He intervened. A lesser thinker would have left the matter at that. But Kierkegaard had a feeling for the ironic: he wrote for the individual in search of authentic experience and he knew the difficulties involved. But he also implicitly recognized the difference between public and private, and perhaps unintentionally the need for drawing that distinction, when he went on to ask what would have happened had Abraham actually struck down his son. He would then have had to bring the body back to his community, and tell its elders that the Lord had spoken to him and asked for a sacrifice. Here the more concrete experience of "fear and trembling" occurs: what the individual experiences as a "sacrifice" demanded by God can only be understood as "murder" by society. It becomes evident from Kierkegaard's discussion that, no matter what the good faith of the person hearing the divine word, the community cannot simply take the inner experience of the individual at face value. The discursive "truth" required by society is not the intense inner "truth" sought by the experiencing individual.

Harboring a belief in the absolute character of revelatory truth obviously generates a division between the saved and the damned. There arises the simultaneous desire to abolish blasphemy and bring the heathen into the light. Not every person in quest of the "pure experience," of course, is a religious fanatic or obsessed with issues of identity. Making existential sense of reality through the pure experience, feeling a sense or belonging, is a serious matter and a legitimate undertaking. But the more the preoccupation with the purity of the experience, it only follows, the more fanatical the believer. In political terms, therefore, the problem is less the lack of intensity in the lived life of the individual than the increasing attempts by individuals and groups to insist that their own, particular, deeply felt existential or religious or aesthetic experience should be privileged in the public realm. Indeed, this runs directly counter to the Enlightenment.

Its intellectuals did not insist that all should share the same religious, cultural, and personal interests and goals. Nor did cosmopolitans like Locke,

Voltaire, or Kant offer a single road to truth. Few of the more important philosophes actually believed in the existence of a "truth"—mathematical or otherwise—capable of informing all the different realms of knowledge; but even if Helvetius did harbor such a belief,[31] for example, he surely presupposed the right of others to challenge it. Most philosophes maintained that a diversity of interests and goals would enrich the public discourse and expand the possible range of experiences open to individuals. Agreement was demanded only on the right of each to pursue his or her beliefs or experiences and the need for institutions capable of guaranteeing that right.

Different ideas have a different role in different spheres of social action. Subjectivity has a pivotal role to play in discussing existential or aesthetic experience while the universal subject is necessary for any democratic understanding of citizenship or the rule of law. From such a perspective, indeed, the seemingly irresolvable conflict between subjectivity and the subject becomes illusory: it is instead a matter of which should assume primacy in what realm. When it comes to political power, unfortunately, even the best believers in the "pure experience" are usually blinded by the light while the worst use their trans-historical categories to obscure the workings of social reality. That a tension exists between the experience of the particular, whose specific identity is grounded in empirical attributes and unique historical traditions, and the universal is undeniable: W.E.B. DuBois, for example, spoke of African-Americans retaining a "double consciousness" while Lion Feuchtwanger in his *Josephus* trilogy highlighted the conflict between ethnic loyalty and cosmopolitanism.

From the standpoint of a socially constructed subjectivity, however, only members of the particular group can have the appropriate intuition or "experience," to make judgments about their culture or their politics. That is the sense in which Michel Foucault sought to substitute the "specific" for the "universal" intellectual.[32] But this stance now embraced by so many on the left, however, actually derives from arguments generated first by the Counter-Enlightenment and then the radical right during the Dreyfus Affair. These reactionaries, too, claimed that rather than introduce "grand narratives" or "totalizing ambitions" or "universal" ideas of justice, intel-

31. Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11ff

32. Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 205ff; also "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pg. 68ff.

lectuals should commit themselves to the particular groups with whose unique discourses and experiences they, as individuals, are intimately and existentially familiar. The "pure"—or less contaminated—experience of group members was seen as providing them a privileged insight into a particular form of oppression. Criticism from the "outsider" loses its value and questions concerning the adjudication of differences between groups are never faced.

Maurice Barrès, had already linked what he called the "cult of the self" with a fear of *les déracinés*. He and his comrades saw genuine interaction as taking place less between strangers confronting one another in a public sphere than between "brothers" or "sisters" or any group whose members shared a common background and "destiny." Only those experiencing themselves as members of the French community, for example, were considered capable of fully understanding why Dreyfus must be guilty: his defenders were simply deluded by universal notions of justice that derived—and this is crucial for the present discussion—more from the intellect and the democratic tradition than from the "experience" of being French. "Intellectuals" could now be derided for their critical rationalism and universalistic ambitions and for placing reason above experience, evidentiary truth above tradition, and human rights above the national community. "Authenticity" and cultural "roots"—what a genuine fascist, Mercea Eliade, termed the "ontological thirst" for primordial belonging—thus became the crucial criteria for judgment.

Not every person who believes in the "pure experience"—again—was an anti-Semite or a fascist. But it is interesting how the "pure experience," with its vaunted contempt for the "public" and its social apathy, can be manipulated in the realm of politics. Utopia doesn't appear only in the idea of a former "golden age" located somewhere in the past or the vision of a future paradise. [33] Freedom also shimmers in the "pure experience" whether in the sophisticated critical version offered by Adorno or the revelatory unveiling of Being in the late Heidegger or the experiential insight of Nishida. Each expresses the longing for that moment untainted by the evils of reification or modernity. But history has shown the danger of turning "reason" into an enemy and condemning universal ideals in the name of some parochial sense of "place" rooted in a particular community. Or, put another way,

33. Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 309.

where power matters the "pure" experience is never quite so pure and no "place" is sacrosanct. Better to be a bit more modest when confronting social reality and begin the real work of specifying conditions under which each can most freely pursue his or her existential longing and find a place in the sun.