II. Two Traps and Three Values

Weak thinking on the American left is especially glaring after September 11, 2001, as I'll argue in part III, but this is hardly to say that the right has been more impressive at making the world comprehensible. For decades the right has cultivated its own types of blindness and more than that: having risen to political power, it has been in a position to make blindness the law of the land. The neoconservatives' foreign policy is largely hubris under a veneer of ideals. The antigovernment dogma of deregulation, privatization, and tax cuts exacerbates economic and social troubles. A culture war against modernity—against secularism, feminism, and racial justice—flies in the face of the West's distinctive contribution to the history of civilization, namely, the rise of individual rights and reason.

To elaborate on these claims is the work of other books. The reasons for the right-wing ascendancy are many, among them—as I argued in letter 7 of *Letters to a Young Activist* (2003)—the organizational discipline that the right cherishes and the left, at least until recently, tends to abhor. The left's institutions, in particular, unions, are weak. But my focus here is another reason for the right's ascendancy: the left's intellectual disarmament.

Some of the deficiency is institutional. Despite efforts to come from behind after the 2000 election, there remain decades' worth of shortfall in the left's cultural apparatus. In action-minded think tanks, talk radio and cable television, didactic newspapers,

subsidies for writers, and so on, the right has held most of the high cards.[1] Left and liberal analyses and proposals do emerge from universities and research centers, but their circulation is usually choked off for lack of focus, imagination, and steady access to mass media—except in the cheapened forms of punditry and agitprop.

The right's masterful apparatus for purveying its messages and organizing for power is not the only reason why the left has suffered defeat after defeat in national politics since the 1960s. The left's intellectual stockpile has been badly depleted, and new ideas are more heralded than delivered. When the left has thought big, it has been clearer about *isms* to oppose—mainly imperialism and racism—than about values and policies to further. At that, it has often preferred the denunciatory mode to the analytical, mustering full-throated opposition rather than full-brained exploration. While it is probably true that many more reform ideas are dreamt of than succeed in circulating through the brain-dead media, the liberal-left conveys little sense of a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. While the right has rather successfully tarred liberals with the brush of "tax-and-spend," those thus tarred have often been unsure whether to reply "It's not so" or "It *is* so, we're proud to say." A fair generalization is that the left's expertise has been constricted in scope, showing little taste for principle and little capacity to imagine a reconstituted nation. It has been conflicted and unsteady about values. It has tended to disdain any design for foreign policy other than "U.S. out," which is no substitute for a foreign policy—and inconsistent to boot when you consider that the left wants the United States to intervene, for example, to push Israel to end its occupation of the West Bank.

All this is to say that the left has been imprisoned in the closed world of outsider politics. Instead of a vigorous quest for testable propositions that could actually culminate in reform, the academic left in particular has nourished what has come to be called "theory": a body of writing (one can scarcely say its content consists of propositions) that is, in the main, distracting, vague, self-referential, and wrong-headed. "Theory" is chiefly about itself: "thought to the second power," as Fredric Jameson defined

dialectical thinking in an early, dazzling American exemplar of the new theoretical style.[2] Even when "theory" tries to reconnect from language and mind to the larger social world, language remains the preoccupation. Michel Foucault became a rock star of theory in the United States precisely because he demoted knowledge to a reflex of power, merely the denominator of the couplet "power/knowledge," yet his preoccupation was with the knowledge side, not actual social structures. His famous illustration of the power of "theory" was built on Jeremy Bentham's design of an ideal prison, the Panopticon—a model never built.[3] The "linguistic turn" in the social sciences turns out to be its own prison house, equipped with funhouse mirrors but no exit.

When convenient, "theory" lays claim to objective truth, but in fact the chief criterion by which it ascended in status was aesthetic, not empirical. Flair matters more than explanatory power. At crucial junctures "theory" consists of flourishes, intellectual performance pieces: things are said to be so because the theorist says so, and even if they are not, isn't it interesting to pretend? But the problem with "theory" goes beyond opaque writing—an often dazzling concoction of jargon, illogic, and preening. If you overcome bedazzlement at the audacity and glamour of theory and penetrate the obscurity, you find circularity and self-justification, often enough (and self-contradictorily) larded with populist sentimentality about "the people" or "forces of resistance." You see steadfast avoidance of tough questions. Despite the selective use of the still-prestigious rhetoric of science, the world of "theory" makes only tangential contact with the social reality that it disdains. Politically, it is useless. It amounts to secession from the world where most people live.

Yet the audacious adepts of "theory" constitute themselves the equivalent of a vanguard party—laying out propositions to be admired for their audacity rather than their truth, defending themselves when necessary as victims of stodgy and parochial old-think, priding themselves on their cosmopolitan majesty. "Theory" dresses critical thought in a language that, for all its impenetrability, certifies that intellectuals are central and indispensable to the ideological and political future. The far right might be firmly in charge of Washington, but Foucault (and his rivals)

rules the seminars. At a time of political rollback, intellectual flights feel like righteous and thrilling consolations.

Masters of "theory," left to themselves, could choose among three ways of understanding their political role. They could choose the more-or-less Leninist route, flattering themselves that they are in the process of reaching correct formulations and hence (eventually) bringing true consciousness to benighted souls who suffer from its absence. They could choose the populist path, getting themselves off the political hook in the here and now by theorizing that potent forces will some day, willy-nilly, gather to upend the system. Or they could reconcile themselves to Frankfurt-style futilitarianism, conceding that history has run into a cul-de-sac and making do nevertheless. In any event, practitioners of "theory" could carry on with their lives, practicing politics by publishing without perishing, indeed, without having to set foot outside the precincts of the academy. As the revolutionary tide has gone out, a vanguard marooned without a rearguard has made the university into an asylum. As many founders and masters of "theory" pass from the scene, the genre has calcified, lost much of its verve, but in the academy verve is no prerequisite for institutional weight, and so the preoccupation and the style go on and on.

In *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (1995), I argued against one of the fixations of "theory": the strong form of identity politics, the aggrandizement of multiculturalism, which overstresses the fixity of segmented "identity" and the boundaries between social segments. There is no point to repeating those arguments here. Nearly a decade after writing that book, I would make virtually the same case about the intellectual slovenliness and political inconsequence (or worse) that runs rife with the hypertrophy of identity politics. My sense, though, is that in the interim, identity politics has sunk into a rut of normality. Hard-core exponents of identity politics have probably dwindled and certainly softened. Some die-hard opponents have also backed off, observing that as "identity" has been institutionalized in academic programs, it has lost a good deal of its bite. Today, at least in the vanguard elite institutions, "hybridity" is more honored than the fervent cultivation of difference. Diver-

sity is a goal that majorities or near-majorities can subscribe to. As Nathan Glazer, once one of the more cogent critics of affirmative action, put it in the title of his 1997 book, we are all multiculturalists now—at least rhetorically.

In the second part of this book, then, I address two related themes in the academic left's thinking since the mid-1970s: the overall postmodernist mood, especially as manifest in "theory," and the antipolitical populism of cultural studies. These tendencies were among the conditions for an intellectual default. Then I turn to conflicts among values—media, citizenship, and education—hoping to sketch where we might look for help in the realm of the higher learning.

Notes

1. On the right's investment in think tanks, college newspapers, right-wing attack media, and other nodes in a vast publicity grid, see chap. 6 of my *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why American Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan, 1995), and John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin, 2004), chap. 6. On right-wing domination of talk television and wholly owned newspapers, see Eric Alterman, *Sound and Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy,* paperback ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), and Alterman, *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News* (New York: Basic, 2003). On right-wing media generally see David Brock, *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-conservative* (New York: Crown, 2002), and Brock, *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy* (New York: Random House, 2004).
2. Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 372ff.
3. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), pp. 200ff.

4

The Postmodernist Mood

What was postmodernism? Commentators pro, con, serious, fey, academic, and even accessible seem agreed that something postmodern happened in the last generation or two, even if we were virtually all Mr. Jones, who didn't know what it was. The volume and pitch of the commentary implied that something about this postmodern something *mattered*. Something, it seemed, had happened in the world. It would be cute but glib and shortsighted to dismiss the talk as so much time-serving space filling, the shoring up of positions for the sake of amassing theoretical property, or propriety, or priority. There was anxiety at work and at play. I think it is reasonable, or at least interesting, to assume that the anxiety that surfaced in the course of the discussion was called for.

Though eventually journalists began to use *postmodernist* to label anything newfangled, in knowing discourse the term—*pomo,* for short—mainly referred to a certain constellation of styles and tones in culture: pastiche; blankness; a sense of exhaustion; a mixture of levels, forms, styles; a relish for copies and repetition; a knowingness that rejects authenticity and dissolves commitment into irony; acute self-consciousness about the formal, constructed nature of language, art, and other symbolic transactions; pleasure in the play of surfaces; a rejection of big ideas ("metanarratives"). In the pastures of theory postmodernism ran parallel to its swath through the arts, featuring the belief that discourse was central to the human situation and that indeterminacy was

central to discourse, and rejecting the possibility or virtue of reason. Pomo was Michael Graves's Portland Building and Philip Johnson's AT&T (later renamed for SONY when the building changed hands—an amusing pomo move, come to think of it); it was photorealism, conceptual art (however blurry the concepts), David Hockney, Robert Rauschenberg's silk screens, Andy Warhol's multiple-image paintings and Brillo boxes, Larry Rivers's erasures and pseudopageantry; Sherrie Levine's photographs of "classic" photographs and Richard Prince's photographs of ads; it was Disneyland, Las Vegas, suburban strips, shopping malls, mirror glass facades; it was bricolage fashion; it was news commentary cluing us in to the imaging-making and positioning strategies of the candidates; it was William Burroughs, Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Donald Barthelme, Monty Python, Don DeLillo, the Kronos Quartet, David Letterman, Paul Auster; it was Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard. What was at stake in the debate—and thus the root of the general anxiety—went beyond style: it was really a question of what disposition toward public life was going to prevail.

Postmodernism in the arts corresponded to postmodernism in life, as sketched by the French theorist Jean-François Lyotard: "One listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo, and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong."[1] The entire phenomenon called postmodernism is best understood as a way of apprehending and experiencing the world and our place, or placelessness, in it. (Just whose place or placelessness is at issue is a question to which I shall return.) So controversies about postmodernism were in no small part discussions about how to live, feel, think in a specific world, our own: a world of what David Harvey called "space-time compression," a world both alluring and nerve-racking, a world no longer swayed by the hopes and desperate innocence of the sixties, a world unimpressed by the affirmative futurology of Marxism.

The discussion of postmodernism was, among other things, a deflected and displaced discussion of the contours of political thought—in the largest sense—during the seventies and eighties. Postmodernism claimed to be a transcendence of history, but

its spirit was embedded—where else?—in history. Postmodernism was, in this sense, an extended deferral, an emptiness defined not by what it was but by what it followed. The very term had trouble establishing either the force or the originality of the concept. Why did this emptiness come to pass?

Things must be made to look crystalline for a moment before complications set in. Here is the first approximation of a grid for distinguishing among premodernist realism, modernism, and postmodernism. These are rough versions of ideal types, mind you, not adequate descriptions. They are not necessarily ideal types of the work "itself" but, rather, of the work as understood and judged by some consensus of artists, critics, and audiences.

The premodernist work aspired to a unity of vision. It cherished continuity, speaking with a single narrative voice or addressing a single visual center. It honored sequence and causality in time or space. Through the consecutive, the linear, it claimed to represent reality. It might contain a critique of the established order, in the name of the obstructed ambitions of individuals, or it might uphold individuals as the embodiments of society at its best. In either event, individuals mattered. The work observed, highlighted, rendered judgments, and exuded passions in their names. Standing apart from reality, the work aspired to an order of beauty, which, in a sense, judged reality. Lyrical forms, heightened speech, rhythm and rhyme, Renaissance perspective, and compositional axioms went to work in the interests of the sublime. Finally, the work might borrow stories and tunes from popular materials but it held itself (and was held by its audience) above its origins; high culture held the line against the popular.

The modernist work might aspire to unity, but it was a unity under construction, assembled from fragments or shocks or juxtapositions. It shifted abruptly among a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, materials. Continuity was disrupted, and enthusiastically: it was as if the work was punctuated with exclamation marks. The orders of conventional reality—inside versus outside, subject versus object, self versus other—were called into question. So were the orders of art: poetry versus prose, painting versus sculpture, representation versus reality. The work was apocalyptic, often fused with a longing for some long-gone organic whole

sometimes identified with a fascist or revolutionary present or future. Usually, though, the protagonist was not so much opposed to as estranged from or ambivalent toward the prevailing order. The work composed beauty out of discord. Aiming to bring into sharp relief the line between art and life, modernism appropriated selected shards of popular culture and quoted from them.

In the postmodernist sensibility the search for unity was apparently abandoned altogether. Instead we had textuality, a cultivation of surfaces endlessly referring to, ricocheting from, reverberating onto, other surfaces. The work called attention to its constructedness; it interrupted itself. Instead of a single center, there was cultural recombination. Anything could be juxtaposed to anything else. Everything took place in the present, "here," that is, nowhere in particular. The authoritative voice dissolved, to be replaced by deadpan mockery or bemusement. The work labored under no illusions: we are all deliberately pretending here, get the point? There was a premium on copies; everything has been done. Shock, now routine, was greeted with the glazed stare or smirk of the absolute ironist. The implied subject was unstable, even decomposed; it was finally nothing more than a crosshatch of discourses. Where there was once passion or ambivalence, there was now a collapse of feeling, a blankness. Beauty, deprived of its power of criticism in an age of packaging, was irrelevant or distracting. Genres were spliced; so were cultural gradations. "High culture" didn't so much quote from popular culture as blur into it.

All master styles aim to remake the history that precedes them, just as T. S. Eliot said individual talents reorder tradition. In one sense, then, postmodernism remade the relation between premodernism and modernism. In the light of postmodern disdain for representational conventions, the continuity between the preceding stages came to seem more striking than the chasm dividing them. If the phenomenon were more clearly demarcated from its predecessor, it might have been able to stand, semantically, on its own feet. Instead, *post*modernism defined the present cultural space as a sequel, in relation to what it no longer was.

So what was new? It has been argued, with considerable force, that the lineaments of postmodernism are already present in one

or another version of modernism, that postmodernism was simply the current incarnation, or phase, in a still-unfolding modernism. Roger Shattuck made the point that cubism, futurism, and artistic spiritualists like Kandinsky "shared one compositional principle: the juxtaposition of states of mind, of different times and places, of different points of view."[2] Collage, montage: these were the essence of modernism high and low. Then what was so special about (1) Philip Johnson's AT&T building, with its Chippendale pediment on high and quasi-classical columns below; (2) the Australian Circus Oz, which combined jugglers who commented on their juggling and cracked political jokes along with (its list) "Aboriginal influences, vaudeville, Chinese acrobats, Japanese martial arts, firemen's balances, Indonesian instruments and rhythms, video, Middle eastern tunes, B-grade detective movies, modern dance, Irish jigs, and the ubiquitous present of corporate marketing"; (3) the student who walked into my office dressed in green jersey, orange skirt, and black tights?

Put it this way: modernism shredded unity and postmodernism scampered among the shreds. Modernism tore asunder what postmodernism mixed in and about. Modernism's multiplication of perspective led to postmodernism's utter dispersion of voices; modernist collage made possible postmodernist genre splicing. The point of pomo was not only juxtaposition but attitude. Postmodern juxtaposition had a deliberate self-consciousness. The point was to skate on the edge dividing irony from dismay or endorsement. Picasso, Boccioni, Tatlin, Pound, Joyce, Woolf in their various ways thundered and hungered. Their work was radiant with passion and self-confidence. Postmodernists, by contrast, were blasé, bemused, or exhausted: they'd seen it all.

I have been pushing postmodernism into the past, but its recombinatory thrust, its blankness, its self-referential irony, and its play of surfaces are still very much with us. Architecture's pastiches may have passed into shtick, but what was interesting was not a single set of architectural tropes but postmodernism as what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling"—an interlocking cultural complex combining "characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone"—that colored the common experience of a society.[3] In this flickering half-light postmodernism

was significant because its amalgam of spirits penetrated architecture, fiction, painting, poetry, planning, performance, music, television, and many other domains. It was one wing, at least, of the zeitgeist.

Where did postmodernism come from? We can distinguish five approaches to an answer. They are not necessarily incompatible. To the contrary: several forces converged to produce the postmodernist moment.

The first is the bleak Marxist account sketched by Fredric Jameson and David Harvey.[4] The postmodernist spirit, with its superseding of the problem of authenticity, belonged to, was coupled to, corresponded with, expressed—the relation was not altogether clear—the culture of multinational capitalism, in which capital, that infinitely transferable abstraction, abolished particularity as such along with the coherent self in whom history, depth, and subjectivity once united. The universal exchange value overcame authentic use value. The characteristic machine of the postmodern period is the computer, which enthrones (or fetishizes) the fragment, the "bit," and in the process places a premium on process and reproduction that is aped in postmodernist art. Surfaces meet surfaces in these postmodern forms because a new human nature—a human second nature—formed to feel at home in a homeless world political economy.

Postmodernists ransacked history for shards because there really was no here here. In fact and not just in art or in theory, the permanent revolution that is capitalism shattered historical continuity. Uprooted juxtaposition is how people live: not only displaced peasants cast into the megalopolis, where decontextualized images proliferate, but also viewers confronted with the interruptions of American television as well as financial honchos shifting bits of information and blips of capital around the world at will and high speed. Art expresses this abstract unity and vast weightless indifference through its blank repetitions (think of Warhol or Philip Glass), its exhausted antiromance, its I've-seen-it-all, striving, at best, for a kind of all-embracing surface.

A second stab at explanation called attention to our political rather than strictly economic moment. In this light the crucial location of the postmodern was *after the 1960s*. The postmodern

was an aftermath, or a waiting game, because that is what we were living in: a prolonged cultural moment that was oddly weightless, shadowed by incomplete revolts, haunted by absences—a counterreformation beating against an unfinished, indeed barely begun, reformation. From this point of view postmodernism rejected historical continuity and took up residence somewhere beyond it because history *was* ruptured: by the bomb-fueled vision of a possible material end of history; by Vietnam, by drugs, by youth revolts, by women's and gay movements; in general, by the erosion of that false and devastating universality embodied in the trinity of Father, Corporation, and State.

Faith in progress under the sway of that trinity had underlain the assumption that the world displays (at least in the end) historical order and moral clarity. But cultural contradiction burst open the premises of the old cultural complex. The cultural upwellings and wildness of the sixties kicked the props out from under a teetering moral and intellectual structure, but the new house was not built. Postmodernism dispensed with moorings, then, because old certitudes actually crumbled. It strained to make the most of seriality, inauthenticity, and endless recirculation in the collective image warehouse because so much of reality *was* serial, inauthentic, and recirculated.

From this point of view postmodernism was blank because it wanted to have its commodification and eat it. That is, it knew that the cultural industry would tailor virtually any cultural goods for the sake of sales; it also wanted to display its knowingness, thereby demonstrating how superior it was to the trash market. Choose one: the resulting ironic spiral either mocked the game by playing it or played it by mocking it.

A third approach to explaining postmodernism was a refinement of the second: an argument not about history in general but about a specific generation and class. In a generational light postmodernism appeared as an outlook for Yuppies—urban, professional products of the late baby boom, born in the fifties and early sixties. Theirs was an experience of aftermath, privatization, and weightlessness. They could remember political commitment but were not animated by it—more, they suspected it; it led to trouble. They could not remember a time before television, suburbs,

and shopping malls. (Indeed, the critic Cecelia Tichi argued that the blank-toned fiction of Ann Beattie, Bret Easton Ellis, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Tama Janowitz, among others, was the anesthetized expression of a television-saturated generation.[5]) They were accustomed, therefore, to rapid cuts, discontinuities, breaches of attention, culture to be indulged and disdained at the same time. They grew up taking drugs, taking them for granted, but did not associate them with spirituality or the hunger for transcendence. Knowing indifference was their "structure of feeling"—thus a taste for sarcasm, snarkiness, and cultural bricolage. They were disabused of authority, but the fusion of passion and politics rubbed them the wrong way. Their idea of government was shadowed by Vietnam and Watergate. *Their* television ran from *Saturday Night Live* and MTV through *Comedy Central*. Their mores leaned toward the libertarian and, at least until the AIDS terror, the libertine. They liked the idea of the free market as long as it promised them an endless accumulation of crafted goods, as in the (half-joking?) bumper sticker: "He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins." The idea of public life—whether party participation or military intervention—filled them with weariness; the adventures that mattered to them were adventures of private life. But they were not in any conventional sense "right-wing": They floated beyond belief.

The aggrandizement of theory was class bound, though not only in the obvious sense. In France a mandarin class of intellectuals has a history going back to the Sorbonne of the fourteenth century and St. Thomas Aquinas. Leninism adapted the European mandarinate—slow to develop in Russia—into the idea of a vanguard class.[6] In the United States after the sixties Leninism survived in form as it withered in content. The clerisy would become the congregation. Jargon was a prerequisite for insight. If discourse was central to power, then the exposure and transformation of discourse was the left's central task, and academics would become indispensable. The university would become more than a comfort zone for left-wing intellectuals. (Irving Howe said that Marxism went to the university to die in comfort.) The university would become the main battlefield in the struggle for power. The struggle for tenure would be more than a parody

of class struggle: it would be Gramsci's dream, a mobilization of organic intellectuals. Tenure produced illusions of power, a surrogate for politics. Defeated in Washington, you could march on the English Department. Washington was, after all, Washington, with its victorious conservatives and clueless liberals; what better did you expect?

The immense scale of American universities takes us into a fourth approach to explaining the growth of postmodernism, which starts from the observation that postmodernism was specifically, though not exclusively, American. Postmodernism was born in the U.S.A. because juxtaposition was one of the things that Americans do best. It was one of the defining currents of U.S. culture, especially with Emancipation and the rise of immigration in the latter part of the nineteenth century. (The other principal current is the opposite: assimilation into standard styles or myths. But this penchant is not exclusively American.) Juxtaposition was the Strip, the mall, the Galleria, Las Vegas, Times Square; it was the marketplace jamboree, the divinely grotesque disorder, amazing diversity striving for reconciliation and resisting it, the ethereal and ungrounded radiance of signs, the shimmer of the evanescent, the good-times beat of the tall tale meant to be simultaneously disbelieved and appreciated; it was vulgarized pluralism; it was the cultural logic of laissez-faire and more—an elbows-out, noisy, jostling version of something that could pass as democracy.

We are, central myths, homogenizations, and oligopolies notwithstanding, an immigrant culture, less melting pot than grab bag, perennially replenished by aliens. As long ago as 1916 Randolph Bourne wrote that "there is no distinctively American culture. It is apparently our lot rather to be a federation of cultures."[7] Hollywood and the radio and television networks flattened the culture, but Bourne's vision retained life. The postmodernist, from this point of view, hitched high art to the raucous disrespectful quality that accompanied American popular culture from its beginnings. And indeed, the essential contribution of postmodernist art was that it obliterated the line—or the brow—separating the high from the low. What could be more American?

To lurch, in properly postmodern style, to the domain of high

theory: The forms of representation displayed in postmodernist art rhymed or dovetailed with—extended? extenuated? corresponded to?—a crisis of bottomlessness that ran throughout poststructuralist theory. Among the practitioners of artistic postmodernism were a generation schooled in poststructuralist theory: variously, Foucault, Baudrillard, Lacan, Derrida.

All theoretical maps have empty spaces; there are things they cannot disclose, even acknowledge. Why should it be any less so for poststructuralists? I think of a graduate student I once met in Montreal. She presented herself as a committed feminist working the deconstructionist beat. She was partial to the notion that the world "is"—in quotation marks—everything that is agreed to be the case. The category of "lived experience" was, from this point of view, an atavistic concealment; what one "lived" was "constituted by" a discourse that had no more—or less—standing than any other system of discourse. I asked her if she wasn't troubled because she rooted her politics in her experience as a woman, yet from the poststructuralist point of view her emotions were to be forbidden any primacy. Yes, she admitted, it chagrined her. As a feminist she was unwilling to make her commitments dissolve into ungrounded discourse. Yet as a theorist she was compelled to explode the very ground on which she stood as a political person—the very ground that had brought her to discourse theories in the first place.

This self-exploding quality was the fundamental anomaly for poststructural theories. One was drawn to politics out of a complex of understandings and moral feelings, which crystallized into an Archimedean point for one's intellectual project. Then one turned to negative methods: the language of unmasking. Ideology, one came to understand, froze privilege and encased it in a spurious idea of the natural. Now one set out to thaw the world, to show how the "natural" was situated and partial. Discourse, one discovered, is a means of domination. Top dogs name things. Bottom dogs collaborate with top dogs when they take for granted their language and their definition of the situation.

This made sense—as far as it went. Yet discourse theories could not account for the impulse that launched the politics in the first place. Indeed, they held that such impulses should not

be taken at face value. There *was* no human experience—at least none that deserved privileged treatment. Reality was discourse all the way down—analogous to postmodernism's endless play of surfaces. (David Hockney: "Surface is illusion but so is depth.") At the extremity poststructuralists were amused to flirt with the notion that not only social but natural reality was nothing more than a social—that is, ultimately, a linguistic—construction. In any event, most structuralist critics agreed that the concept of "literature," say, "assumes that something recognizable as human experience or human nature exists, aside from any form of words and from any form of society, and that this experience is put into words by an author"—thus Diane Macdonell, as if the idea that there is "human experience" were as dismissible as the idea that there is "human nature."[8] But then the ideal of a way of thinking that liberates was upended. What constituted liberation anyway, and who was entitled to say?

The impulse toward this sort of unmasking was certainly political: it stemmed from a desire to undo the hold of one system of knowledge/language/power over another. It followed from the sixties' revelations that various systems of knowledge were fundamentally implicated in injustice and violence—whether racist or sexist exclusions from literary canons or the language and science of militarism and imperial justification. But the poststructuralist move in theory flushed the Archimedean point away with the sewage of discourse.

If there was one theorist whose work seemed, at first, to be animated by the promise of the postmodern, it was Michel Foucault. Foucault's popularity in the United States stemmed in good measure from the flair with which he engaged "the politics of the personal" in a succession of tour de force studies documenting the ways in which institutions (psychiatry, medicine, prisons, sexuality) were encrustations of power and cultural assumptions. But perhaps something in his popularity suggested a radicalism of gesture more than action. Foucault's work was interrupted by his untimely death. But the last phase to reverberate throughout the Anglo-American world, the phase that culminated in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, outlined a world of power that not only instigated resistance but required it, channeled it, and

turned its energy back upon it. Power was everywhere, the tactics of "micropower" constantly "deployed" (to use the military language Foucault was partial to) against other tactics—apparently without a basis for solidarity or a strong reason to support resistance against power. Against Enlightenment ideas of universal rationality and normality, said to have justified the suppression of those found wanting in rationality and normality, Foucault enshrined respect for the principle of human diversity. But as he collapsed differences between structures of power, he neglected something essential. The liberal state was just another state, so there was no reason to prefer it to the authoritarian brand.

As Foucault said to a group of Berkeley faculty in November 1983, "There is no universal criteri[on] which permits [us] to say, This category of power relations [is] bad and those are good"—although Foucault the person had no trouble taking political positions. Why support some resistances and not others? He could or would not say. As we pressed him to articulate the ground of his positions, he took refuge in exasperated modesty—there was no general principle at stake and no substantial lacuna in his system. ("I know you support Solidarity against [the Communist Party chief Wojciech] Jaruzelski," I said to him. "But on what grounds?" "Why do you ask *me* this question?" he said indignantly. "Why don't you ask [another colleague present]?") This indignation at the very act of posing a question was nihilistic hauteur. How could there be an ethical basis for politics? How dare you ask?

This is not the place to hazard a solution to the formidable conundrum: how to elaborate a political point of view that would transcend anything-goes relativism without taking refuge in an artificial, abstract universalism? But one direction to look is toward an overarching concept of a politics of limits. Simply, there must be limits to what human beings can be permitted to do with their powers. The atrocities to which our species is prone can be understood as violations of limits. The essence of a politics must be rooted in three protections: The ecological: the earth and human life must be protected against the nuclear bomb, global warming, and other manmade depredations; the pluralist: the social group must be protected against domination by other social

groups; the libertarian: the individual must be protected against domination by collectives. A politics of limits would be at once radical and conservative—it would conserve. It would respect horizontal social relations—multiplicity over hierarchy, coexistence over usurpation, difference over deference: finally, disorderly life in its flux against orderly death in its finality. The democratic vital edge of the postmodern—the love of difference and flux and the exuberantly unfinished—would infuse the spirit of politics, as it deserves to. Needless to say, this way of putting the matter leaves many questions unsettled, most grievously, what happens when there are conflicts and internal fissures among these objectives? What kind of authority, what kind of difference, is legitimate? Respect for uncertainties is of the essence. This is the properly postmodern note on which I suspend the discussion for now.

Might there be a variant of postmodernism—hot, not cool—in which pluralist exuberance and critical intelligence reinforce each other? Consider Dennis Potter's 1986 *The Singing Detective,* for example. Here was postmodernism with a heart—postmodernist techniques placed at the service of modernist transcendence. Here was jubilant disrespect for the boundaries that were supposed to segregate culture castes. But disrespect of this sort did not imply a leveling down, profaning the holy precincts of high culture. Where fey, blasé postmodernism skated along the edge, cheerfully or cheerlessly leaving doubt whether it was to be taken as critical or affirmative, Potter's exuberant drama, for all its artful playfulness, respected narrative flow and honored the force of character in the form of Michael Gambon's Philip Marlow, whose imagination generated the many fictional and remembered sequences. The integrity of Marlow's passions distinguished *The Singing Detective* from the sort of postmodernist hodgepodge that decomposes the world rather than composing a unity. Ironies served—or masked—desires, but desires *mattered*.

Cool postmodernism was an art of erosion. Make the most of stagnation, it said. Give up gracefully. That was its defining break from modernism, which was, whatever its subversive practices, a series of declarations of faith, albeit nervous ones—suprematism's future, Joyce's present, Eliot's unsurpassable past. Postmodernism, living off borrowed materials, lacked the resources

for continuing self-renewal. It was a pale shadow—nothing but aftermath. A car with a dead battery can run off its generator only so long. Exhaustion is exhausting. But if deep currents have long been at work to generate our cultural anesthesia, then postmodernism is not going to vanish automatically. It will wear away in one spot while it hangs on in another—even if as no more than a set of stylistic fillips. Some of its gestures will outlast its spirit. It will attract epigones and endure, for a while, by default.

How does a culture renew itself? Not easily. At the least, artists—and theorists—would have to do something else. They would have to weary of weariness. They would have to cease being stenographers of the surfaces. They would have to decide not to coast down the currents of least resistance.

Notes

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 76.
2. Roger Shattuck, *The Innocent Eye: On Modern Literature and the Arts* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1984). See especially the chapter "Meyer Schapiro's Master Class," pp. 292–308.
3. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.
4. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (London: Blackwell, 1990).
5. Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 219–21. About Mason, Tichi writes (p. 221): "Mason is *within* the TV environment and presumes that *her* reader is also there."
6. For these observations on the theory class I am indebted to Marshall Berman.
7. Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," *Atlantic Monthly,* July 1916, pp. 86–97.
8. Diane Macdonell, *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction* (New York: Blackwell, 1986), p. 5.

5

The Antipolitical Populism of Cultural Studies

Perhaps it's not surprising that academic fields tend to be cavalier, or embarrassed, about their own origins. A surplus of self-scrutiny might undermine the confidence with which a field goes about its business—except perhaps for philosophy when it's in a rollicking mood. A sociology of sociology, a history of history—by and large, these flower only when flowers are going to seed.

During its period of giddy expansion, cultural studies proved no exception to this rule. Yet a moment's reflection should assure us that cultural studies did not spring full blown from its object of study, culture. It has a history. Cultural studies arose at a moment that, like all others, had political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. It survived and ballooned into a different moment. The relation between ideas and their settings is not one to be settled too easily. Still, students of cultural studies should not be surprised to discover that cultural studies is susceptible to analysis as an object of cultural study. For the field aggressively disbelieves in unmoved movers. This intellectual movement sees culture as a set of values and practices undertaken by particular people who live particular lives in particular settings and try to make sense of them, to express particular sentiments, solve particular problems, and reach particular goals. Then why should cultural studies refuse to see itself through the same lens? Cultural studies is itself a sort of culture performed by people who live particular lives in particular settings, trying to solve, or surpass, or transform particular problems.

I do not wish to dwell on problems of definition, whose tedium is matched only by inconclusiveness and circularity. The interminable examination of what exactly constitutes cultural studies—or its subject, culture—is itself part of the problem that I seek to diagnose. Rather, I hope to slip (if not cut) the Gordian knot with the simple statement that cultural studies is the activity practiced by people who say that they are doing cultural studies.

Stanley Aronowitz observed in 1990 that "cultural studies is a social movement."[1] If this was meant as a recommendation, I take it to be self-serving and tautological. But as a statement of fact, it was accurate. Something more was going on in cultural studies than the pursuit of the ordinary academic rewards by young and no-longer-so-young academics. Cultural studies was booming throughout the English-speaking world. Energy was at work, though the élan seems to be flagging at the moment. Evidently—or so cultural studies would tell us—cultural studies is a form of intellectual life that answers to passions and hopes imported into its precincts from outside. As a social movement cultural studies may not matter much beyond the precincts of the academy, the art world, and affiliated institutions, but it certainly responds to the energies of social and cultural movements—and their eclipse.

In part, the growth of cultural studies derives from the growth of its object of attention: popular culture, and its booming place in life, especially from the 1960s on. Measure the significance of popular culture in units of time (the average American watches television for more than four hours a day, and the citizens of most other developed societies are not far behind) or in the emotional loyalty of its audiences or in economic value, and the point is evident. No economic determinism is needed to sustain the observation that one necessary condition for the growth of the commercial youth market was the economic boom that followed World War II and hence the growth in disposable income among the young in the more privileged countries. Not only did the market in popular culture grow in scale, but the young came to define themselves by their taste, especially in popular music. They related not only to the music but *through* the music. Popular culture was tantamount to social membership. In part, too, the

bulking up of popular culture and celebrity stemmed from the declining grip of the institutions that traditionally imparted identity to the young: occupation, class, religion. The "other-directed" character first described by David Riesman, with the young taking their cues of membership and morality from the mass media and peer groups, has for more half a century been entrenched as the normal Western type.[2]

And popular culture has boomed outside the world of the young, too. One need not endorse the misleading slogan that we live in an "information society" to recognize that electronics and telecommunications are central to the industrial economies and, indeed, beyond economies, the very structure and texture of social and inner life overall. The transfer of images, sounds, and stories is a core feature in so-called advanced nations, not least the United States. I have tried to trace this development elsewhere and will spare the reader a recapitulation here.[3]

Politics, too, seems inconceivable outside the flows and eddies, the pumping stations and drains of industrialized culture. The intersections of popular culture and politics are so frequent, the interconnections so dense, as to spawn the exaggerated claim that the two domains have collapsed into each other. Politicians become stars and stars become politicians—Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger. At the margins, too, consider the U.S. counterculture: before it was a mark*et*, it was a mark*er* of collective identity. Loved by its partisans, loathed by its enemies, popular culture in the 1960s became a fulcrum of political debate. Questions of sexuality, abortion, drugs, multiculturalism became central in political debate, and the conflicts became normalized as "culture wars."

In the 1970s the new cultural tendencies fought for legitimacy as academic subjects. The premise of the insurgent style of thought was that human beings actively and collectively make sense of their world. Historians of "mentalité" and anthropologists of culture were already staking out the territory that cultural studies would claim as its own. "History from the bottom up" thrived—social history, especially the study of historically subordinated women, African Americans, workers, and the colonized. E. P. Thompson taught that classes were made, not born.[4] For

their part anthropologists brought ethnographic methods to bear on cultural life in their "home countries." Insurgent sociologists were turning away from the dismissive "collective behavior" diagnosis of social movements as, in effect, neurotic symptoms and taking seriously the professed intentions of activists, presuming them to be not only explicable but arguably rational. The early cultural studies group at Birmingham employed methods from all three fields to investigate the social history of the present—of working-class and dissident youth populations, television personages, and viewers, among others.[5] Popular cultural activity was, for all these researchers, *activity*—not the absence of something (civilization, literature, politics) but the presence of a form of engagement in the here and now. To these projects in the social sciences were added, crucially, the postmodernist turn in philosophy and "theory"—the rejection of hierarchies of value; the devaluation of "center" in favor of "periphery"; the emphasis on the active production (or "construction") of meaning; the search for "local knowledges" as opposed to truth; the insistence on self-challenging reflexivity.

The tenor of cultural studies was set, crucially, by the political circumstances of its first waves. The founding generation was deeply involved with the British New Left. Two of its founding elders, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, derived from the industrial working class, and so did many of their students. Others came from the once-colonized periphery (the Jamaican immigrant Stuart Hall) and/or were women and/or gays and lesbians. They were frequently the first members of their families at the university. Designated meritocratically for the replenishment of elites, they encountered condescension alongside encouragement. Especially in Britain, they encountered programs in literary studies that had little place for the culture that these students—let alone their families—actually lived. They did not see why they should have to check their form of life at the gates. Reverence for cultural authority was not their generational spirit. They had grown up in a youth culture of enormous ambitions and, let it be said, achievements. By the late 1960s they were imbibing a youth culture itself saturated by syncretic, high-cultural masterworks of modernism—the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and so on.

They may have been taught to revere Beethoven but equally came to revere Chuck Berry, telling him to roll over and tell Tchaikovsky the news. Into the universities they carried not only their cultural points of reference but a certain texture of popular-culture experience. If reading, study sessions, rallies, and lovemaking took place against a background of rock music, they wanted to know, why shouldn't the academy also pay heed?

They were saturated with popular culture at a time when radical commitments were tinged with poignancy. In the United States in the early to mid-1970s, many veterans of the American student movement found themselves at an impasse. In the late 1960s, riding the wave of the student movement, they had committed themselves to a revolutionary breakthrough in the politics of the Western world. As the tide went out, they now found themselves beached. Insofar as they had overrated the radical potential of the young or of students as such, yet believed in a radical transformation of social life, they sought to compensate for the error by seeking out surrogate proletariats among other social groups. Marxist traditionalists found hope in a redefinition, if not revival, of a unitary "working class"—a hope that events failed to reward. Theorists of a "new working class" were quickly outdistanced by theorists and advocates of a—or "the"—third world revolution, with the majority of humanity cast in the role of world proletariat.

The radical upsurge of the late 1960s culminated in a variety of separate insurgencies but also in anticlimax and undertow. In Britain, Labour, union, feminist, and antiracist momentum continued through the 1970s, though the visible manifestations masked the fact that they had become the property of a minority—which became clear with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. In the United States women and gays made huge gains, and the various identity-based movements—feminist, gay, and race based—emerged vigorous, but the general student movement was finished. Although the Vietnam War finally ground to an end, and Richard Nixon was forced to resign the presidency, the 1970s were largely a time of defeat when the right accumulated power. Labour and the Democrats were on their way into twilight. For radicals the spirit of an insurgent class fused from

its various fragments was no longer available. Instead, they were left with nostalgia for eras of struggle that they increasingly knew only at second or third hand.

The decay of the left's purchase on majoritarian politics helped rivet academic attention to popular culture. If one thought about youth culture properly, perhaps some sort of Marxist vision of history might be preserved! Perhaps youth culture would invigorate, cement, even ennoble the rising class bloc that would ultimately displace and overcome the ruling groups! At least popular culture was filled with oppositional spirit! If political power was foreclosed for the time being, the battlements of culture still remained to be taken! Or perhaps—if one really believed that the personal was the political—they had already been taken! Whatever the case, victories in popular culture might take the sting out of political defeat.

At the end of a decade of youthful rebellion, it was easiest to look to youth subcultures in the industrial countries for the emergence of disaffections that might amalgamate into an effective opposition to capitalism and racism. Culture, in this view, was a field of combat. The spirit of the moment was to define the combat in terms imported from political struggles. Cultural struggle was class struggle by other means. The grid of meaning that was discerned within (or imposed upon) popular culture was imported from radical politics. It had a teleology. It was not simply conflict but "contestation," a self-conscious means by which a quasi-class was becoming a quasi-class-for-itself. In fact, it was not simply contestation but *the* stark and classic contestation between forces of liberation and forces of repression. In the 1970s the early work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, especially its study of the "mugging" panic, concentrated on this coupled relationship: the meanings of rebellious youth activity experienced by the rebels themselves, alongside the repressive definitions imposed upon these activities by dominating media. If the bourgeois culture of the suites was hegemonic, and therefore oppressive, then the angrily antibourgeois culture of the streets was counterhegemonic, therefore resistant, and the class struggle was alive. Paul Willis's early work was saturated with ironic awareness that stances of dissidence among work-

ing-class boys might serve to integrate them all the more closely into lives of on-the-job subordination.[6] But the still-greater influence radiated from another Birmingham product, Dick Hebdige, who took a tendency already latent in earlier Birmingham work and codified it into a virtual equating of style with politics.[7] Hebdige's enthusiasm for dissonant symbolism refused to dampen radical hopes in corrosive baths of irony. In Hebdige style was insurgency because it was bricolage, and because bricolage pried symbols away from their original contexts, it was self-defining activity—"resistance."

From the late 1960s onward, as I have said, the insurgent energy was to be found in movements that aimed to politicize specific identities—racial minorities, women, gays. More generally, cultural studies set itself to discern "agency" among either marginalized or "ordinary" people—initiative and creativity on the part of people whom, it was said, academicians of conventional stripes overlooked or underestimated. If the "collective behavior" school of once-conventional sociology had classified insurgent movements as the functional equivalents of fads and fashions,[8] cultural studies now set out to peel movements away from fads, to take seriously what movement participants thought they were doing, and thereby to restore the dignity of the movements—only to end up, in the 1980s, reaggregating movements with fads by finding equivalent dignity in both spheres, so that, for example, dressing like Madonna or watching a talk show on family violence was upgraded to an act of "resistance" equivalent to demonstrating in behalf of the right to abortion. In this way cultural studies deepened the New Left symbiosis with popular culture. Eventually, the popular culture of marginal groups (punk, reggae, disco, feminist poetry, hip-hop) was promoted to a sort of counterstructure of feeling and even, at the edges, a surrogate politics—a sphere of thought and sensibility hypothetically insulated from the pressures of hegemonic discourse, of instrumental reason, economic rationality, class, gender, racial, and sexual subordination.

Cultural studies claimed that culture continued radical politics by other means. The idea was that cultural innovation was daily insinuating itself into the activity of ordinary people. Per-

haps these millions had not actually been absorbed into the hegemonic sponge of mainstream popular culture! Perhaps they were objectively dissident after all—even sitting at home on their sofas. If "the revolution" had receded to the point of futility, it was depressing to contemplate (in the manner of the Frankfurt school) the victory of the culture imposed by overbearing media. ("The closing of the universe of discourse" was what Herbert Marcuse had said we were up against in his influential *One-Dimensional Man*—hardly an invitation to activism, whatever Marcuse's personal enthusiasms. Marcuse's closed universe was like Foucault's ubiquitous power—an all-embracing fate that willy-nilly reduced resistance to a hobby.) How much more reassuring to detect "resistance" saturating the pores of everyday life, as if the struggle against fascism flickered even in the inner pulp of the couch potato. The spread of the jargon-term *agency,* an arcane synonym for will and potency, underscores the preciousness of the quest. Eager to believe that the populace retained a potential for the right—that is, left—political engagement, left-wing academics resorted to a word that to most people smacked of something else: advertising or employment or travel.

In this spirit there emerged a welter of studies purporting to discover not only the "active" participation of audiences in shaping the meaning of popular culture but the "resistance" of those audiences to hegemonic frames of interpretation in a variety of forms—news broadcasts, romance fiction, television fiction, television in general, and many others.[9] Feminists were fascinated by the fictions and talk shows of daytime "women's television," seeing them as furthering a "discourse" of women's problems that men derogated as "merely" personal. The conventional dismissal of these shows as banal soap opera was said to follow from the patriarchal premise that what takes place within the four walls of the home is of less public significance than what takes place in a public sphere not so coincidentally established for the convenience of men. Observing the scale of the audiences for Oprah Winfrey and other public confessors, many in cultural studies upended the phenomenon by turning the definitions around. The largely female audiences for these shows would no longer be dismissed as distracted voyeurs but praised as active partici-

pants in the politicizing of crimes like incest and spousal abuse. It was less inspiring to think of them as confirming their normality with a brief vicarious acquaintanceship with deviance than to think of them as an avant-garde social movement.

In a word, cultural studies veered into populism.[10] Having been found worthy of attention by its practitioners, popular culture became worthy of attention by its students. Against the unabashed elitism of conventional literary and art studies, cultural studies affirmed an unabashed populism that derived intellectually from a sociological tendency in which all social activities matter, all are comprehensible, and all contain clues to the social nature of human beings. But this tendency in cultural studies goes further than noting the flows of popular culture and interpreting them. It seeks a political potential—a progressive one at that.[11] The object of attention is certified as worthy of attention not by being "the best that has been thought and said in the world" but by having been thought and said by and for "the people"—by a vast population or a subculture that is often, though not always, the cultural student's own group or one with which she or he identifies.

So the popularity of popular culture is what gives it value—and not only as an object of study. The sociological judgment that popular culture looms large in the lives of people blurs into a critical judgment that popular culture could not be popular were it not also valuable. Analysis slips into advocacy. Cultural studies wishes to overthrow hierarchy, but it is closer to the truth to say that what it actually does with hierarchy is invert it. What now certifies worthiness is the popularity of the object among people who are on the right side. Since they are good, what they like is good. In this intellectual milieu defenders of quality go on the defensive. The very words *literature* and *art* stick in the throats of cultural studies advocates, who can rightly point to shifting definitions of high and low art in the work of literary historians like Ian Watt, to say nothing of Michel Foucault on the genealogy of discursive frames or Raymond Williams on etymology.[12] But of course, in its imperviousness to questions of quality, cultural studies has ample company.

Cultural studies lacks irony. It wants to stand foursquare for the people against capitalism yet echoes the logic of capitalism.

The consumer sovereignty touted by a capitalist society as the grandest possible means for judging merit finds its reverberation among its ostensible adversaries—except that where the market flatters the individual, cultural studies flatters the group. What the group wants and buys is, ipso facto, the voice of the people. Popular creativity is alive, and the people are already in the process of liberation! Where once Marxists looked to factory organization as the prefiguration of "a new society in the shell of the old," today their heirs tend to look to sovereign culture consumers. David Morley, one of the key researchers in cultural studies and one of the most reflective, has himself recognized and deplored this tendency in audience studies.[13] He maintains that to understand that "the commercial world succeeds in producing objects . . . which do connect with the lived desires of popular audiences" is "by no means necessarily to fall into the trap . . . of an uncritical celebration of popular culture."[14] But where does one draw the line against the celebratory tendency when one is reluctant to criticize the cultural dispositions of the groups whom one approves? No wonder there is an arbitrariness to the assessments embedded in much published work in cultural studies—as if the researcher were straining to make the results conform to political needs. But academic studies charged with boosting morale may not serve the cause of enlightenment.

The populism of cultural studies prides itself on discharging a debt to politics. In the prevailing schools of cultural studies, to study culture is not so much to try to grasp cultural processes but to choose sides or, more subtly, to determine whether a particular cultural process belongs on the side of society's ideological angels. An aura of hope surrounds the enterprise, the hope (even against hope) of an affirmative answer to the question: Will culture ride to the rescue of liberation? There is defiance, too, as much as hope. Cultural studies means to cultivate insubordination. In this view marginalized groups defy hegemonic culture. If most of the academy remains hidebound, cultural studies will pry open its portals. By taking defiant popular culture seriously, one takes the defiers seriously and furthers their defiance. Cultural studies takes inventory, assessing the hegemonic import of culture and pinpointing potentials for "resistance." Is this mu-

sical style or that literary form "feminist" or "authentically Latino"? The field of possibilities is frequently reduced to two: for or against the hegemonic. Or perhaps the prize goes to "hybridity"—as if subcultural combinations were automatically superior. But the nature of hegemony, in its turn, is commonly defined tautologically: that culture is hegemonic that is conducive to, or promoted by, "the ruling group" or "the hegemonic bloc" and, by the same token, that culture is "resistant" that is affirmed by groups assumed (because of objective class position, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.) to be "marginalized" or "resistant." The process of labeling is circular, since it has been predetermined whether a particular group is, in fact, hegemonic or resistant.

The populism of cultural studies is fundamental to its allure. To say that popular culture is worth scholarly attention is to say that the people who render it popular are not misguided when they do so: not fooled, not dominated, not distracted, not passive. If anything, the reverse: the premise is that popular culture is popular because and only because the people find in it channels of desire, pleasure, empowerment. The people in their wisdom have erected a *worthy* partition, separating culture (good) from conventional politics (bad), and then, magically, culture has turned out to be politics—real politics, unofficial politics, deep politics—after all. This premise is what gives cultural studies its aura of political engagement—or, if nothing else, political consolation. To unearth reason and value, brilliance and energy in popular culture is to affirm that the people, however embattled, however divided, however battered, however fearful, however unemployed, however drugged, have not been defeated. The cultural student, singing their songs, analyzing their lyrics, at the same time sings their praises. However unfavorable the balance of political forces, people succeed in living lives of vigorous resistance. Are communities of African Americans suffering? Well, they have hip-hop—leave aside the question of whether all of them want hip-hop in equal measure or what values it mobilizes besides aggression and self-assertion.

The thirst for consolation explains the rise of academic cultural studies during precisely the years when the right held more political power for a longer stretch than at any other time in gen-

erations. Consolation and embattlement led to the wishful notion that cultural studies, for all its frailty, amounted to a force combating right-wing power. To believe this one had to vulgarize the feminist notion that "the personal is political." In effect, one had to believe that "the cultural is political." In popular culture the opposition could find footing and breathing space, rally the powerless, defy the grip of the dominant ideas, isolate the powers that be, and prepare for a "war of position" against its dwindling ramparts. To dwell on the centrality of popular culture was good for morale. It certified the people and their projects. The assumption was that what held the ruling groups in power was their capacity to muffle, deform, paralyze, or destroy contrary tendencies. If a significant opposition were to exist, it first had to find a base in popular culture—and first also turned out to be second, third, and home plate as well, since popular culture was so much more accessible, porous, and changeable than the economic and political order.

With time, what began as compensation hardened into a tradition. Younger scholars gravitated to cultural studies because it was to them incontestable that culture *was* politics. To do cultural studies, especially in connection with identity politics, was the only politics they knew or respected. The contrast with the rest of the West is illuminating. In varying degrees left-wing intellectuals in France, Italy, Scandinavia, Germany, Spain, and elsewhere retain energizing attachments to Social Democratic, Green, and other left-wing parties. There, the association of culture with excellence and traditional elites remains strong. But in the Anglo-American world these conditions scarcely obtain. Here, in a discouraging time, popular culture emerges as a consolation prize. Throughout the English-speaking world of Europe, North America, and Australia, class inequality may have soared, ruthless individualism may have intensified, racial misery may have mounted, unions and social democratic parties may have reached an impasse, the organized left may have fragmented and its ideas blurred, but never mind. Attend to popular culture, study it with sympathy for the rewards that minorities find there, and one need not be unduly vexed by electoral defeat. One need not be rigorous about what one opposes and what one proposes in its

place. Is capitalism the trouble? Is it the particular form of capitalism practiced by multinational corporations in a deregulatory era? Is it patriarchy (and is that the proper term for a society that has seen many improvements in the status of women)? Racism? Practitioners of cultural studies permit themselves their evasions. Speaking cavalierly of "opposition" and "resistance" permits—rather, cultivates—a certain sloppiness of thinking. You can identify with the left without having to face hard questions of political self-definition.

So the situation of cultural studies conforms to the contours of the past political generation. For economic and political ideas it substitutes a cheerleading approach to popular culture, with its cascading choices and technological marvels. Its cultivation of sensibility ratifies the wisdom of the prevailing withdrawal from practical politics. Seeking political energies in audiences who function qua audiences, rather than in citizens who function qua citizens, cultural studies stamps its seal of approval upon what is already a powerful tendency within industrial societies: popular culture as a surrogate for politics.

Indeed, cultural studies worships at the shrine of the marketplace. Its idea of the intellect's democratic commitment is to flatter the audience. Disdaining elitism, cultural studies helps erode the legitimacy of an intellectual life that cultivates assessments of value independent of popular taste. Trashing the canon, it deprives students of the chance—for once in their lives—to encounter culture that lives by values apart from the market. Whatever its radical gloss, cultural studies integrates itself nicely into a society that converts the need for distraction into one of its central industries and labels as "critics" those arbiters of taste whose business is to issue shopping advice to restless consumers.

Is there a chance of a modest redemption? Perhaps, if we imagine harder-headed, less wishful studies of culture that do not claim to be politics. A chastened realistic cultural studies would divest itself of pretensions. It would be less wishful about the world—and also about itself. Rigorous practitioners of cultural studies would rethink their premises. They would learn more about politics and history. They would deepen their knowledge of culture beyond the contemporary. When they study the con-

temporary, they would investigate cultural strands of which they do not necessarily approve. In the process they would appreciate better what culture, and cultural studies, do *not* accomplish. If we wish to do politics, let us organize groups, coalitions, demonstrations, lobbies, whatever: let us do politics. Let us not think that our academic pursuits are already that.

Notes

1. Present when Aronowitz made this announcement—at a conference organized by the history of consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz—was Adam Michnik, a major intellectual figure in the Polish movement against communism, who naturally held a rather different idea of social movement and found the proceedings something between incomprehensible and laughable. His astonishment at what passed for political debate among American academics was more than idiosyncratic. It reflected an Eastern European's understanding of where the fundamental dividing line falls in politics: between civil society and the state.
2. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950).
3. Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan/Holt, 2002).
4. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1963).
5. On youth see Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1976); on television personalities see especially Stuart Hall, Ian Connell, and Lidia Curti, "The 'Unity' of Public Affairs Television," in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies,* vol. 9 (Birmingham, U.K.: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1976), pp. 51–93; on television viewers see Dave Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).
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10. See Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge. 1992).
11. The following revelation recorded by a leading British film theorist speaks volumes: "My own road to Damascus came over a decade ago when an entire fifteen-strong graduate class subscribed to the opinion that they would not outlaw clitoridectomy in other societies on the grounds that this would be the imposition of western norms." Colin MacCabe, "Mumbo-Jumbo's Survival instinct," www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-1-66-2324.jsp (February 1, 2005).
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6

The Values of Media, the Values of Citizenship, and the Values of Higher Education

What Media Cultivate

Talk about values is in the American grain, and so it has gone since 1776, when the United States was deliberately imagined as a nation distinguished by its ideals rather than by the nationality of its inhabitants. In principle, Americanness is a matter of principle. There is, of course, a recurrent nativist streak, which looks to ethnic or racial origin as a stand-in for qualification, but nevertheless, no other nation speaks so incessantly about values as the foundation of its existence.

Might it be that the rhetoric of values, repeated with a recurrent pounding of rostrums, conceals as much as it reveals? Realism requires that to know seriously the values of a society or a civilization, we should look beyond what people profess about what they value. To grasp the values of a society, or a civilization, we should look beyond what people say about what they believe, to what they do—and not only what they do when they are gathered up at ritual moments but, day after day, how they spend their time. The truth of a civilization is less what it professes than how it busies itself.

To an extraordinary degree the way this civilization spends its time is as spectators, listeners, recipients, and donors of communication. We spend our time in the presence of media.[1]

The nonstop arrival and flow of story and sound and image is a huge unacknowledged fact of our collective life. We prefer to

think of ourselves as an information society, but this label simplifies the experience that takes place as the stories, songs, and images never cease to arrive. Sometimes we pay more attention and sometimes less, but all in all, we live among media to such a degree that time with media is the bulk of the time that people have at their disposal when they're not asleep or at work—and in fact they spend much of their time at work or on their way to or from work with media, underscoring the point.

In the course of about twenty-five years of writing about media, among other things, it often felt to me that the deepest truth about media was slipping through my fingers, something for which I didn't have an analytical category. While working on other projects, I sometimes collected note cards under the gaudy rubric "ontology," notes to myself about people's immersion in media. The note cards gathered dust.

What crystallized the conclusion that I defend here was a parable about a customs official. He goes to work on the border, and just after he arrives on the job he observes a truck rolling up to his customs booth. He asks the driver some questions, the man answers them, and the guard waves him through. The next day, somewhat to his surprise, the same truck driver pulls up, and this time the guard asks him the same questions, and the driver gives acceptable answers, and he waves him through. The next day the same driver is back. The guard's suspicion is growing. He tells the driver to get out of the cab. He pats him down. He can't find any contraband and waves him through. The next day the driver is back. This time the guard brings out some equipment. The day after that he brings in a colleague to help him search. This goes on for days, it goes on for weeks, it goes on for months, it goes on for years. Eventually, the guard is using the most sophisticated X-ray machines, sonar, technical measures hitherto unimagined. Never can he find any contraband. Finally, the guard reaches retirement age. Fast-forward to his last day on the job. Up rolls the truck driver. The official says, "Look, all these years I know you've been smuggling something. For my own satisfaction, please tell me what it is. I can never do you any harm now. I won't say a word. Just tell me, what have you been smuggling?" To which the answer is, of course, trucks.

The media have been in the habit of smuggling the habit of living with media.

In the media-saturated way of life, people derive multiple satisfactions from various kinds of experience that they have with media. Surely, one reason why people are reliant on media is that powerful and wealthy organizations accrue benefits through the process of marketing it. The attention of customers is the commodity that they sell to advertisers. One reason why people find the media omnipresent is that a grand effort is made to make them omnipresent. Many are the rewards that accrue to the attention-getting industries that deliver the most attractive goods. The effort of the attention getters amounts to the supply side of the story of media saturation.

But the supply side doesn't suffice for a comprehensive understanding of what media immersion accomplishes for us, as individuals, as a culture, and even as a civilization. While people are surely coaxed, and their preferences molded, in part, by their cultural environment, I cannot accept the notion that people are force-fed with what, after all, gives them pleasure. Americans are by no means exceptional in their reliance on popular culture. It's of some interest that in 1992, when Euro Disneyland opened outside Paris, and French intellectuals were signing petitions denouncing it as (in the words of one famous director) "a cultural Chernobyl," *Terminator II* sold five million tickets in France, a nation of fifty million. This didn't happen because Arnold Schwarzenegger stood outside the theater with an AK-47 herding everyone inside. Something is in it for the customers in media saturation: call it the demand side.

Consonant with our flattering image of ourselves is that we claim that we go to media in pursuit of information. The technically proficient like to herald themselves as the advance guard of the information society. But what is more important in driving people into the arms of media is that we look to have certain emotions and sensations. We're looking to feel. It seems so self-evident that only decades of scholarship could have missed it. I don't want to say that media experience is uniform, that reading the *Wall Street Journal* is the same as watching *Sesame Street,* or reading *Time* magazine, or viewing *The Simpsons,* or the latest

reality show, or the CNN version of the war in Iraq, or listening to a top-ten single on the radio, or sending an instant message, or playing a video game. There are varieties of emotion and sensation attached to all these experiences. But what they have in common, it seems to me, is that they generate emotion or sensation of a type for which we hunger in the modern world: disposable emotion, emotion lite. Deep emotion would incapacitate you for feeling the next frisson. When you're deeply in love, or deeply in grief, you don't resort to a remote control device of the emotions in search of the next stimulus. You have the feeling, or you are the feeling, and the feeling has you. The kinds of feelings and sensations that we have from television, popular music, video games, the Internet, from most of the media that are common to us, these feelings are transitory and they are in a sense each a preparation for the next. If we were deeply satisfied, we wouldn't need the next. But we do need the next—or we feel we do.

Let me just throw out a few numbers to suggest the dimensions of the sort of relationship that I'm talking about. The figures that follow are for the United States, but Americans are not that far ahead of the rest of the developed world in our attachments to media. The average American television set is on for more than seven hours a day. The average individual is in the presence of a television set for about four and a half hours a day. We have a good study of the media habits of children aged two to eighteen, thanks to a solid survey underwritten by the Kaiser Family Fund in 1999. If we look at children aged two to eighteen, we will see that they spend, during an average day, six and three-quarter hours in contact with media, not counting homework. Of those six and three-quarter hours, they spend three-quarters of an hour reading (not counting homework). They spend the remaining six with television, recorded music, video games, and so on. More than two-thirds of American children have in their bedrooms a television set, a tape player, and a radio. Whether you live in a poor or a rich neighborhood, those figures for bedroom goods hold fairly constant. Black kids tend to watch more television, and boys are more likely than girls to have the equipment in their bedrooms, but the differences are less striking than the similarities. And all this is to speak strictly of in-house media: not

the mall screens, billboards, Walkman and iPod modules, car radios, elevator music, and assorted other displays that accompany them as they move around their world.

Periodically, far-sighted observers anticipated that a society of this sort was coming. In the seventeenth century, for example, Pascal worried that kings would distract themselves from the proper pursuit of God with women, wine, and gambling. By today's lights virtually everyone in the rich societies can live like Pascal's distracted kings. The hunger for a way of spending time that makes limited demands and relieves a person from the burdens of normal existence—specifically, from the utilitarian calculation of everyday life—has become normal.

So much so that to challenge it is considered freakish. A while ago I was struck by the appearance on the front page of the *New York Times* of an article reporting that a man had been charged with credit card fraud in New Jersey and sentenced to ten months under house arrest without a television set. (At the time he owned seven.) What was this doing on the front page of the *New York Times*? His lawyers had gone to federal court, arguing that such a punishment constituted "cruel and unusual punishment." The editors of the *New York Times* thought this claim not only original but revelatory.[2]

Indeed. The media add up to a machinery of distraction, sensation, and stimulus, and yet institutionally the protections that the media enjoy, their legal and political position in our society, are predicated on a very different model of the purposes and significance of media—namely, one in which the media are carriers of debate for the self-government of a democratic citizenry. The First Amendment, which sanctions the freedoms that have become routine in the domain of the media, is predicated on an eighteenth-century model of political debate in which the media are intended not for steady and unbroken stimulus but for enlightenment. They are for the clarification of the public good.

This is surely one of the purposes of higher education: not only to train a skilled elite but to bolster the ability of the populace at large to conduct its collective affairs. Yet all educational institutions from the lowest to the highest discover that the official curriculum approved and passed down by school authorities, in-

scribed in textbooks, tested, graded, and succeeded by other curricula, contends with an informal and largely unacknowledged curriculum, the one that the students bring with them to school—a huge and interwoven set of songs, stories, gestures, terms, tones, slogans, icons, cartoon and celebrity names, figures, and gossip that they have derived from a virtually lifelong immersion in television, recorded music, radio, billboards, video games, and the other media that penetrate their everyday lives.[3] I am not saying that this unacknowledged curriculum is all that our students experience or know. A great deal of thought and imagination is bound up in their lives elsewhere—in the play that they undertake beyond media, their sports, reading, informal home lessons, family contact, religious activity, and so on. But to a large and growing degree their sense of the world is bound up with media and the emotions and sensations that they find in their contacts with media. They draw much of their shared vocabulary from media. The heroes that bind them are likely to be media celebrities, drawn mainly from the worlds of entertainment and sports.

It is beyond dispute that the informal curriculum of popular culture absorbs much of our students' mental attention. They bring televisions as well as computers and elaborate musical equipment to their dorm rooms. They carry digital phones, with instant messaging and (increasingly) camera adjuncts. They are everywhere in the presence of advertising. This ensemble contributes mightily to the web of social associations that binds them to one another. A welter of items, associations, and fascinations circulates through all the media of our time and then through peer groups, making jingles, themes, names, styles, logos, and so on familiar to them—and not only familiar but *interesting*.

The sum of nonstop image machinery, the whole nonstop sound track—these have been with the young from their earliest ages. As a result boredom is anathema, whence the media of preference must be speedy and sensational, full of surprises and rapid shifts. Trivia are tailored for weightlessness. "Dead air" is deadly. Movement is all. Sense gratification must be within reach, always. In the visual media edits come quickly—in music videos and commercials, frequently several per second. Sports are sped up by simultaneous stats, animations, and instant replays stream-

ing across and punctuating the screen, so that even such a viscous spectacle as baseball becomes an explosion of dazzling segments. While human bodies run up against limits in their capacity to race, bend, and otherwise delight, animation does not. Music will be percussive, dominated by rhythmic pulsation. Electronic rumbles and drums drive emotional effects, bass notes producing an aura of menace, strings a whiff of cheer. Stories are conflictful, images kinetic. Many media tales have morals and may kindle a certain order of moral reflection, but usually the morals of the tale emerge quickly and demand rapid resolution.

Much of what streams through the media is funny—often self-consciously so. Jokes come thick and fast, or are supposed to, pitched at the average level of early teens. Physical humor, pratfalls, and goofiness are plenteous. Popular culture serves as the repertory on which popular culture itself draws, so that there is little or no recognition that any more demanding, worthier culture might exist. In the last generation a recognition of the omnipresence of popular culture, as well as its foolishness, is built into popular culture in the form of sarcasm and tongue-in-cheek attitudes. Cartoons that mock the rest of popular culture (most brilliantly in *The Simpsons,* the exception that proves the rule), ads that smirk at other ads, soap opera characters who selectively disparage popular culture, magazines and websites that mercilessly unmask others—these are the common currency. Stupidity is subject to mockery, too, but in a way that suggests that what is wrong with stupidity is that it isn't hip and that those who rise above stupidity are, more than likely, snobs.

This is the condition of the bulk of popular culture and remains so even if the observer does not sink into a chiding voice. There are of course exceptions where intelligence is not mocked. The best to be said for this culture is that it brings a certain diversity into parochial households, cultivates curiosity, and recommends tolerance. But to expect that expectations of popular culture are tidily put away the moment the student walks into the classroom or opens a textbook is naive—insupportably so.

Casual violence, however misunderstood, is a common value in popular culture. On this score video games considerably compound the effects of network television, and video games are

compounded by videocassettes, heavy metal, and rap music. The deeper significance of all the casual violence is not self-evident; of causal links to violence in the real world there is little serious evidence and much counterevidence. My own view is that the importance of media violence lies largely in the sensory experience that it generates, not in the dire behavioral effects popularly attributed to it. The evidence from laboratory studies, limited as it is as a predictor of effects in the outside world, suggests that violent images cultivate both anger and indifference, neither of which is conducive to the intellectual receptivity, disciplined competence, and methodical deliberation that study—or, for that matter, citizenship—requires.

In other words, violence in the media is best addressed as a commonplace feature of the lives that young people actually live, not a trigger for violence in the actual world beyond media. The replicas of violence constitute themselves a sort of real experience, a part of the life that young people live, a part that registers as cognitive and emotional. It is not an intimation of violence to be performed at some other time or place, it is *already here* in one's daily world. While violence in the media pours forth without a corresponding uptick in the violence of the actual world, it does make the world—*at least the world of human connection with the media themselves,* a world that young people live in during many hours a day—appear casually cruel. In these everyday adventures aggressiveness is the common currency of life. One had better get used to it.

Violence is only one of the regular crudities. Everyday media are soaked in coarseness of many sorts. Primitive jeers, double entendres, easy jokes about body functions feature regularly in many programs radiated to young people through network sitcoms, MTV, the Comedy Channel, and other commercial sources, as well as video games (which now outgross movies, in both senses of *outgross*) and Internet entertainments. The sexual innuendo of music videos is hard to miss, whence its huge adolescent appeal. Overall, though, probably more prevalent than sexual suggestiveness is the crude style evident in vocabulary, look, gestures—the whole expressive repertory of popular culture. The full range of human emotions is collapsed into the rudimentary

alternatives of "love" and "hate," "cool" and "gross." The media take the side of the simple over the complex, the id over the superego, the pleasure principle over the reality principle, the popular over the unpopular.

All in all, then, the media promote emotional payoffs—and expectations of payoffs. The rewards are immediate: fun and excitement. Images and sounds register in the here and now. They are supposed to feel good—this is the expectation. They make a cardinal promise: you have a right not to be bored. Yet the media must not feel *too* good for *too* long, because part of their goodness is that they change, yield to the next, and we know it. Accordingly, our students have become accustomed to feel feelings with a particular quality: feelings that are relatively disposable, fast-rising and fast-fading, excitements and expectations that readily yield (and are expected to yield) to other fast-rising and fast-fading feelings, excitements, and expectations. Young people expect their images and sound tracks not only to cause enjoyment but to change. They expect jolts of sensation, surges of unexpected (yet, paradoxically, predictably unexpected) feelings. They expect to change the channel—or fast-forward the tape, or search out a different song on the CD or the iPod—if it does not please them.

Thus the unacknowledged curriculum readies them not only for sensation but for interruption. Interruption is a premise of contemporary perception. It is no small part of the experience of media. Interruption—and the expectation of it—is built into the media's own texture. Programs interrupt themselves. In commercials, trailers, and other filler, one story interrupts another—expedited by channel switching and the variety of distractions (talking, eating, chatting on the phone, exchanging "buddy messages" on line, and so on) that children build into their media experience.

Interruption is even built into content. In the spelling lessons of *Sesame Street,* as in the commercials after which it was patterned, in action movies as in video games, in music videos as in disk jockey chit-chat, in sportscasting as in news, the young expect split screens, moving logos, and quick cuts, even if some continuity may be supplied by the sound track. The acceleration of editing during the past generation is striking, with images jump-cutting to other images in a split second. The contrast with the

past is plain whenever one sees a movie more than twenty years old—how static it looks! Finally, within the unedited frame is the now-normal glide or zoom or, in any case, movement of the image itself, the product of a handheld camera, or one on a dolly or Steadicam. In media the "story line" turns out to be jagged. The expectation of immediate but disposable rewards has become normal.

Interruption becomes routine. Interference leads to multitasking as the young become accustomed to dividing their attention. Media frequently come to them simultaneously or near-simultaneously—and they expect them to come that way. The habit of switching is partly a function of the convenience of switching. Thanks to the remote control device, one of the most underestimated of contemporary technologies, they may conveniently graze among two or three television channels in rapid alternation. They may switch between a video game and a soap opera or sports event, and so on.

For this reason, among others, I do not want to argue that when the young attend to the media of popular culture, they are necessarily deeply attentive. To the contrary: they tune out much of the time. They select what they attend to. They retain unevenly. Sometimes they focus and sometimes not. Those who approve of the habit of simultaneous media viewing and listening refer to the cognition that this practice demands as "parallel processing." Those who disapprove consider it distraction. But however one evaluates this common condition of half-attention, it is not the focus that is required for intellectual mastery—learning a language, performing a complex computation, grasping the contours of history, assessing rival explanations of a given phenomenon, assessing the moral implications of complex realities. It is not a mood conducive to education—or citizenship. Are we not too distracted, or even addled, for such concentration?

Education and the Values of Citizenship

Against this background—the texture of everyday life in a media-saturated society—the values of education for citizenship become

indispensable, all the more so in an era when higher education is the almost automatic vehicle for advancement.

For students, as for others, popular culture has recreational uses. Escape from rigors and burdens is, after all, its point. But the sheer profusion of popular culture in the lives of the young has a larger implication: the informal curriculum of immediate gratification obstructs education for citizenship—just as it obstructs the analytical work of education across the board.

Education's prime obligation to the public weal in a democratic society is to improve the capacity of citizens to govern themselves. For now I leave in suspension the question of the degree to which the good citizen is a direct participant in the decisions that affect his or her life—the ideal enshrined as participatory democracy in the 1960s—or, on the other hand, one who (in Michael Schudson's term) "monitors" the decisions of public bodies and intervenes in public affairs only occasionally, in particular when they make decisions that offend ideals or interests.[4] I take it as axiomatic, in either event, that higher education has a distinct and significant part to play in forming and bolstering the capacity for citizenship. The growth of higher education makes colleges and universities steadily more promising—or disappointing, as the case may be—in their potential for public improvement. But colleges and universities can discharge this duty only when they combat the distraction induced by media saturation.

Some, mainly on the left, would argue that an obligation of higher education is to mobilize activists. Now, there is much to be said for the proposition that activism is the lifeblood of democracy. Toward that end, as part of their democratic mission, universities are obliged to mobilize students to register to vote and, subsequently, actually to vote. (The youth vote has declined precipitously since the mid-1970s, as has the percentage of students who read newspapers regularly.) Universities as institutions must shield the rights of dissenters, students, and faculty alike.[5]

But beyond such fundamental service to democracy, universities ought not to be entrusted with any political mobilization in particular. Institutions of learning are forums, not parties. If they were to endorse a position, which would it be, and who would decide? If public opinion shifted, or were heavily polarized,

wouldn't the university need to adjust its position or risk being torn apart? Universities' primary mission would be in danger of succumbing to ephemera.

So universities ought to embrace citizenship, not particular uses of citizenship. They short-circuit the educational process and damage their commitment to reason if they officially advocate beyond a bare minimum, for advocacy cuts short the deliberative process that is their proper charge. Position taking would compel ideological minorities to concede that their participation in reflection and deliberation is fruitless because the issue has already been decided. Moreover, activists ought to realize that endorsements are useless on practical grounds. What reason is there to believe that universities can actually shift public opinion outside their walls?

Mainly, universities serve bedrock purposes of higher education in a democracy when they spur reasoned participation in politics and the accumulation of knowledge to suit. For the work of arousing and channeling passions there are political organizations, parties, and movements. Education has a more precise responsibility: to cultivate reason and to deepen understanding of the world. No other institution is dedicated to these functions. In fact, the political sphere is in many ways dedicated to undermining them, as, in their own ways, are media. Yet reason and understanding, the university's own specialized charge, are imperative. There is no time when this is not so. But a time like the present, with unreason on the march, especially needs an infusion of knowledge into the political domain. To judge foreign policy, energy programs, terrorist threats, ecological problems, questions of economics, and so forth requires not just committed but knowledgeable citizens. Truly, the United States has suffered in recent years from failures of intelligence in more than one sense. Universities, no less than other institutions, have cultivated complacency.

For citizenly as well as strictly educational purposes, then, higher education ought to cultivate a disciplined curiosity about the world and an enthusiasm for careful disputation. Toward these ends, schooling needs to counter the impulsive, hyperkinetic, associational, trivia-centered relation to images and sounds

that the bulk of the media offer. Colleges and universities ought to be arenas for robust speech, where students are encouraged not only to reinforce views they already hold but—knowledgeably and logically—to challenge and modify them. An atmosphere conducive to reflection is a prerequisite for education in civic preparedness, as also for learning in its own right. Where else in modern life is such an atmosphere to be found, or created, responsive to social needs that are not the needs of the market? If not in colleges and universities, hardly anywhere.

Beyond training in specialized crafts, institutions of higher learning exist in significant part to deepen understanding of intellectual traditions—of science, the humanities, and social sciences alike. Toward this end, the spirit of higher learning benefits when students are, for some of their college careers, immersed in a common curriculum. The decisive reason is not that the standard lists of canonical texts deserve to be engraved in granite strictly by virtue of their longevity (a circular argument) or their Westernness (not an argument in behalf of their logic-inducing potential). It is that the student body's shared exposure to central literary and philosophical texts and methods of argument enlarges the community of reason. It widens the circle of shared conversation. It challenges parochialisms of all sorts—including the demographic and subcultural niches preferred by the market as well as the specializations preferred by the professions. Not only does a common curriculum help overcome the intellectual narrowness that accompanies specialization. The core experience also helps cultivate citizens who might be capable of rising above private and group interest to work toward a common good. A core curriculum aerates elites and tends, over time, to substitute meritocratic principle for inherited cultural capital.

So a common curriculum, including political philosophy (and thus defenses as well as criticisms of democratic theory), has citizenly as well as intellectual uses. These uses extend beyond the makeup of the curriculum's subjects to the cultivation of reason itself. In particular, the atmosphere of higher education should cultivate an awareness—controversial in today's climate—that an argument is different from an assertion or an opinion. An argument is obliged to confront its contraries: to engage them, not

to ignore them. An argument ought to confront its contraries at their strong points, not their weak points. An argument is not the simple pressing of a point, as in the shoutfests that characterize radio, television, and movie punditry. We cannot speak of argument without evidence and logic. Yet for years, while teaching at Berkeley, New York University, and Columbia, I have noticed how frequently students have difficulty understanding what an argument is. Many, asked to make an argument on a particular subject, express an opinion—or even an emotion ("I feel that"). Many high school graduates arrive at the university without learning what an argument is. Plainly, the whole educational system is in default.

Citizenship requires more than reason, but the public sphere cannot dispense with reason without making a mockery of the democratic idea. Yet, just as the torrent of media washes away the careful sifting and winnowing that reason requires, the conduct of politics today is inimical to the reasoning arts. A reputation for excessive knowledge is "wonkish." A reputation for verbal stumbling establishes the common touch and certifies "likeability." The anti-intellectualism of American life, of which Richard Hofstadter wrote tellingly forty years ago, has not diminished even as the proportion of the adult population attending colleges and universities and acquiring degrees, even advanced degrees, has grown.[6]

In principle, Americans ought to be more thoughtful and knowledgeable than ever before. If years spent in school are the right measure, we have surely become better educated. Between 1960 and 2003 the percentage of the adult population that graduated from high school more than doubled, from 41 to 85 percent of those aged twenty-five and older. During the same period the percentage of college graduates in the adult population almost quadrupled, to 27.2 percent of those aged twenty-five or older.[7]

How knowledgeable are Americans, then? Comparative data on political knowledge are scarce, but to take one salient subdivision of knowledge, Americans' knowledge of foreign affairs ranks low in multinational assessments—sometimes startlingly so. In a 1994 Times Mirror survey in which the same five questions about international facts were asked of people in seven countries—the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom—Americans ranked sixth, surpassing

only the Spaniards. Thirty-seven percent of Americans could not answer any of the questions correctly, and only 15 percent could answer at least four of the five (as opposed to 58 percent in Germany and 34 percent in Italy).[8] American knowledge of world geography ranked near the bottom in a *National Geographic* survey of ten countries.[9]

A compendious survey by Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter comes to this general conclusion: "In spite of significant increases in educational attainment, aggregate levels of political knowledge are about the same today as they were forty to fifty years ago, raising the possibility that the schools today are less effective at transmitting political information or stimulating political engagement."[10] Or at the least: whatever knowledge benefits schools succeed in imparting are outweighed by forces that undermine knowledge.

The public sphere is less a theater of debate than a theater of repetition, professionalized into the imperative of staying "on message." Politics has taken more than a leaf from the advertising manual of driving the point home by pounding in a Unique Selling Proposition[11]—it has taken the whole book. Talk radio and punditry excel in podium pounding, not argument. Much of our politics follows suit and not only in election campaigns: the Supreme Court's nonsensical decision in 2000's *Bush v. Gore* is a case in point. Presidential speech can skirt logic and evidence without evident penalty. Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser to Jimmy Carter, pointed out in April 2003 that in the eighteen months since September 11, 2001, President Bush spoke the words "either you're with us or with the terrorists" ninety-nine times. To state what ought to be obvious: the repetition of such remarks is not an argument. It is a declaration meant to stop an argument. Declamation by fiat presumes that an argument has already been made and won.

Declamation by fiat is Bush's presidential manner, though it is scarcely unique to him. On more than one occasion he could proudly declare, "I don't do nuance" without chastisement from most of his supporters, who seemed proud that his ostensibly from-the-gut straight-shooter performance brooked no complications. On June 17, 2004, Bush said: "The reason I keep insist-

ing that there was a relationship between Iraq and Saddam and al Qaeda: because there was a relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda."[12] (He went on to cite the charge that Iraqi intelligence officers met with Osama bin Laden in Sudan in the 1990s, as if such contacts were ipso facto proof of collusion.) Bush's repeated yoking of September 11 terrorists and Saddam Hussein into the same sentence, without ever exactly making an argument about the nature of their connection, was a surrogate for logic. In this, as in many other of his pronouncements, Bush was resorting to the associative clamor of television commercials, as in: sexy woman fondling car = if you drive this car, she'll fondle you. A public official who asserts and reasserts in this manner without engaging contrary evidence is a bully, though many bullies are more glib than Bush. Perhaps because at some deep level he knows his weakness, Bush aims to win by overpowering dissent rather than engaging it. Whether such rhetorical performances reflect Bush's own thought process or his tactics for driving a point home, the result is not debate. It is propaganda.

To judge from published accounts Bush's intellectual process in private seems to match his propagandistic manner in public. According to former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, as quoted in Ron Suskind's *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill,* the president did not read reports. Unlike Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, under whom O'Neill had also served, Bush did not solicit rival opinions from his advisers. At meetings, O'Neill said, "the President is like a blind man in a roomful of deaf people. There is no discernible connection."[13] Christine Todd Whitman, formerly in charge of Bush's Environmental Protection Administration, "never heard the President analyze a complex issue, parse opposing positions, and settle on a judicious path. In fact, no one—inside or outside the government, here or across the globe—had heard him do that to any significant degree."[14] "With his level of experience," O'Neill told Suskind, "I would not be able to support his level of conviction."[15]

My point is not simply that a graduate of Yale University and Harvard Business School can conduct the public business in this manner—though slapdash governance is appalling enough. It is that in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century the

refusal, or inability, to reason is no disqualification for the presidency. In 2000 almost half the American electorate were willing to vote for an unreflective propagandist, although he had already demonstrated his illogic and evasiveness during the campaign. (In 2004 a bit more than half were willing to confirm his fitness for leadership, many of them on the strength of indefensible opinions on the facts of the Iraq war.[16]) Of course, if mainstream campaign journalists had not favored the story line that *Al Gore* was the prevaricator while George Bush was the amiable yahoo, they might have helped voters spot Bush's deceptions and evasions and so made it harder for him to sell his plain-folks brand.[17]

Disrespect for serious standards of political argument prevails throughout public life. In our debased state of political discourse, one of the most damning insults is the charge of two-sidedness: "flip-flopping," "waffling." What is being implicitly valued is consistency of opinion, which has come to stand for steadiness of nerve and reliability of character. In many situations steadiness is a virtue, indeed. But there is the further implication that changing one's mind is a mark of untrustworthiness.

Two things are wrong with this claim—two things that ought to be elementary. First, circumstances do not, as a rule, repeat. If it makes sense to fight a war under conditions A, B, and C, does it make sense to fight a war under conditions A, B, and D, or A, D, and E, or D, E, and F? As soon as the circumstances differ, the war differs, and therefore so does the justification for war. So to have favored the first war and not the second, or the second and not the first, may not be a sign of flip-flopping or inconsistency at all but of pragmatic ability to read situations as they deserve to be read: with care.

Then, too, during the course of public life in a democracy one encounters many contrary views. How is one to manage differences? Who is entitled to disregard views that are apparently delivered with logic and evidence? Only a tyrant is impervious to the dispositions of others. Any legislator must negotiate. So must most executives. In the process they discover in experience what they may already have half-realized in principle: that public positions often rest on different sets of evidence or different standards of evaluation. It makes sense to look at evidence that one

might have disregarded. It makes sense to consider the values implicit in others' positions as well as one's own. The refusal to reconsider one's views is blindness—and to put it this way is to be uncharitable to blindness.

If one goal of public life is to improve the capacity of citizens and their representatives to govern their affairs, then whether one's side has won is but one measure of the success of a debate. The question is also whether the protagonists have learned anything in the process. What they learn in the current situation, both in substance and in method, can only help improve their capacity to address the next situation, for politics, like education and indeed the rest of life, is sequential. Education is of the essence. Learning from the defeated can take place under judicious rules in a properly run classroom, where those who hold unpopular views are encouraged to defend them, those who are uncertain are encouraged to understand better the grounds of their uncertainty, and students may experiment with unfamiliar or seemingly outré views.

Finally, higher education is obliged not only to cultivate habits of mind conducive to democratic debate but other habits as well—habits of emotion, sensibility, and (as principled conservatives would insist) character. In an era of high-speed media and trivial experience, what institution if not the university will acquaint students with the pleasures of argumentative care, the duties of open reflection, and the complex uses of what the critic Robert Hughes has called "slow art"?[18] On the subject of art much deserves to be said, but it ought to be self-evident that the greatest work is more likely to elicit depths of pity and terror than lightweight work. The complexity of motives and the torments of unintended consequences hold powerful lessons for public conduct. It is better to study *The Brothers Karamazov* than to study *General Hospital*. There is more to be derived from a production of *Hamlet* than a production of *Desperate Housewives*. Call it the intellectual sublime—and if that strikes you as an embarrassment, the embarrassment is a tribute to the power of the market. A curriculum that credits the sublime cannot be left to the vagaries of popular taste, for popular taste answers to other criteria, including the sheer inertia of the available. In composing a curriculum, the

authority of teachers should not be surrendered to the commercial judgments that mold popular taste.

For again: the media's business is to stimulate emotion and sensation that generate instant payoffs measurable in the marketplace. Because their sole criterion of success is market preference, the prime question for them is always—*always*—whether they can get customers to pay attention. This commitment leaves the realm of emotion impoverished. I can get you to pay attention: I simply have to make a loud noise. But the sensibility of a self-governing society needs more from its collective emotional life than temptation or titillation. It needs patience. It needs to appreciate the sublime. It needs to savor (and sometimes solve) the complex. It needs to instruct in the overcoming of impulse. It needs to teach how to evaluate desire and know the difference between desirability and morality. It needs to teach how to make sense of duties when duties conflict. To glib answers it brings complication and further questions. To the shallowness of the moment it brings the subsoil of history. To the casualness of everyday talk it brings the discipline of seasoned judgment.

In sum, higher education has the burden of advancing the intellectual and moral side of citizenship. This obligation pits education against the noise of the media and against the pettiness, parochialism, and corruption of propaganda and politics. It deepens the educational mission. It enrolls higher education in the defense of the society's highest values. It is not a mission that can be offloaded onto any other institution. It is partisan only in the sense of a commitment to improve the common life. But this is a partisanship of which we have precious little today. If higher education abdicates its authority in order to float on popular tides, it defaults, and the common life weakens, whether the public knows it or not.

Notes

1. The following discussion recapitulates some passages from my *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan/Holt, 2002).

2. Benjamin Weiser, "A Sentence of No TV? Unusual, Yes, but Cruel?" *New York Times,* March 7, 2002, p. A1. In the event, a federal appeals court found in favor of the criminal in question (Benjamin Weiser, "House Arrest Doesn't Bar Watching TV, Court Rules," *New York Times,* October 24, 2002, p. B5.)
3. The following discussion of the unacknowledged curriculum draws on my essay "Teaching in the Torrent of Popular Culture," in Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti, eds., *Kid Stuff: Marketing Sex and Violence to America's Children* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 19–38.
4. Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), pp. 294–314, esp. p. 311.
5. For a strong defense of this mission by a former president of Kent State University, see Michael Schwartz, "The Place of Dissent in Inquiry, Learning, and Reflection," *Peace and Change* 21, no. 2 (April 1996): 169–81.
6. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).
7. U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003* (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004), no. 212.
8. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 90, table 2.8. The questions were: "Who is the president of Russia?" "Which country is threatening to withdraw from the nonproliferation treaty?" "Who is Boutros Boutros Ghali?" "Which ethnic group has conquered much of Bosnia?" "With which group have the Israelis recently reached a peace accord?"
9. Cited in Henry Milner, *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work* (Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2002), p. 58.
10. Delli Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know,* p. 199.
11. Rosser Reeves, *Reality in Advertising* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).
12. Dana Milbank, "Bush Defends Assertions of Iraq–Al Qaeda Relationship," *Washington Post,* June 18, 2004, p. A9.
13. Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 148–49.
14. Ibid., p. 114.
15. Ibid., p. 325.

16. Steven Kull et al., "The Separate Realities of Bush and Kerry Supporters," October 21, 2004, Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Pres_Election_04/Report10_21_04.pdf (March 14, 2005).
17. To take one of a myriad examples, in the presidential debate of October 17, 2000, Bush said: "If I'm the president . . . people will be able to take their HMO insurance company to court. That's what I've done in Texas and that's the kind of leadership style I'll bring to Washington." In fact, as governor Bush vetoed the patients'-bill-of-rights measure passed by the Texas legislature in 1995. Passed again by a veto-proof majority, it become law without his signature in 1997. See Jake Tapper, "Spin Room: Spinning the Third Presidential Debate," CNN, October 18, 2000, and Charles Lane, "A 'Flip-Flop' on Patients' Right to Sue?" *Washington Post,* April 5, 2004, p. A15. At the time the *New York Times* corrected Bush's lie on p. A29 (Jim Yardley, "Taking Credit for Patients' Rights Where It's Not Necessarily Due," *New York Times,* October 18, 2000, p. A29). None of the three major television networks corrected Bush's lying braggadocio at all. As president Bush did nothing to pass a patients' bill of rights.
18. Robert Hughes, "A Bastion Against Cultural Obscenity," *Guardian,* June 3, 2004, www.guardian.co.uk/arts/features/story/0,11710,1230169,00.html (March 14, 2005).