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Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture

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Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture

Ian McKay

Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (London: Cambridge University Press 1977).

Maurice Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology* (London: Cambridge University Press 1977).

Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979).

Richard P. Horwitz, *Anthropology Towards History: Culture and Work in a 19th-century Maine Town* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press 1978).

Alan Macfarlane, *Reconstructing Historical Communities* (London: Cambridge University Press 1977).

Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: New Left Books 1980).

Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana 1981).

FOR OR AGAINST anthropology? Among social historians, particularly those influenced by Marx, this question has become part of an intense (and rather fashionable) debate between "humanists" and "structuralists," Thompsonians and Althusserians. This debate has taught us many things, but perhaps what it has taught us most clearly is that emotion and demagogy are of little value in the discussion of complex theoretical questions. Participants in this great debate bask in the warm glow of their own invective, throwing onto the coals such epithets as "reductionism" or "economism" or "positivism," all the time quite oblivious to the fact that outside the charmed circle of the faithful, darkness is not receding.[1] Trying to think clearly and sensibly in

[1] For one extreme position in this debate, see E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London 1978) and Bryan Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and Theory* (Toronto 1981); the other pole is repre-

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this context about the issues raised for Marxist historians by anthropology is very difficult.

In fact, three debates, and not one, are going on: within Marxism, within social history, and within anthropology. Within history, one can develop a position on anthropology based on the assumption that the proper job of historians is writing biographies — preferably of moderate social democrats.[2] Within Marxist circles, especially in North America, it is possible to debate just about anything, including the possibility that "facts" might conceivably exist or that history might be a possible undertaking. The approach I am going to take builds on distinct assumptions. The first of these is the materialist assumption: reality is independent of thought itself, even though thought and subjectivity play an indispensable role in interpreting it; the second is the rationalist assumption: that only an approach which marries logic and history (and thereby makes abstractions "determinate") can help us understand history and society; and the third is the political assumption: we want to understand, but also transform, social structures and processes.[3] Each of these assumptions would be vigorously denied by some participants in both camps in the current debate in social history. One is left in the uncomfortable position of a committed non-combatant, among those who are slated, as E.P. Thompson has said, to be exposed and driven out.[4] Still, there may be advantages to this uneasy position, removed from the absolute certainties of the contesting parties. It may be that the issues raised by anthropology and social history, while they call for commitment and passion, are ill-served by polemical excess.

In this brief review essay I am going to look at the impact of contemporary anthropology on Marxist social history. The first step is to look at the claims of those who have urged historians to take up anthropology; the second is to examine more closely the present state of debate in anthropology, particularly at the general theories which shape and interpret empirical data. Third, I am going to look at the emergence of historical anthropology as a distinct school of social history, and fourth, at the use and abuse of the concept of culture. Finally, I will examine the new Marxist anthropology of

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sented by Richard Johnson, "Three Problematics: elements of a theory of working-class culture," in John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson, eds., *Working-Class Culture, Studies in History and Theory* (London 1979). Neither of these extreme positions has justified its claim to absolute truth. Perhaps the best commentary on the debate is provided by Gareth Stedman Jones, in *History Workshop*, 8 (1979), 202: "Let us resist this choice. Let us resist the temptation to join the Gadarene swine who are hurtling in one direction or another."

[2] Kenneth McNaught, "E.P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review*, 42 (1981), 141-68.

[3] Cf. Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel* (London 1973) and *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (London 1972).

[4] Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 381.

Pierre Bourdieu, and assess its claims to provide a consistent and systematic approach to the study of society.

I

IF ONE CAN SAY one thing with certainty about the relationship between Marxist historians and anthropology, it is that this relationship has been asymmetrical. Historians are attracted to anthropology by its ethnographic style and techniques; what they take away from their "safe adventure" is artfully concealed theory. Anyone who has read the most ambitious work of the new Canadian labour history can locate many passages in which readers are vaguely urged to read anthropology to learn about "adaptation" or absorb the cultural theories of Herskovits, Lévi-Strauss, and Mintz. It is easy to forget that anthropology is a debate. Of course there is much excellent reportage done by anthropologists which can be read without intensive theoretical preparation (one need merely think of the best studies we have of the devastating effects of mining on the East Coast or the courage and tenacity of West Coast fishermen),[5] but this reading of *ethnography* must be distinguished from *anthropological theory*. What many social historians are proposing is that anthropology and history must be merged, and that historical materialism will languish if it does not absorb an anthropological approach to culture. But if they are right, then we can no longer rest content with an empiricist absorption of anthropology. The trouble with empiricism, Maurice Bloch observes, is not that it is wrong, but that it is impossible.[6] The statement might be amended to read "pure empiricism," but the point is nonetheless well taken. Social historians committed to describing experiences as they are lived, opposed to "static" logical constructions, and drawing on the entrenched anti-theoretical bias of the entire discipline, are simply mistaken if they believe they can use anthropological theory as hastily-applied gift-wrapping for their facts. To cite just one example, there is an obvious convergence between phenomenology (which Maurice Natanson usefully defined as a generic term for "all positions which stress the primacy of consciousness and subjective meaning in the interpretation of social action"[7]) and the prevailing orthodoxy of Marxist social history. This approach emphasizes the separation of logic and history (that is, irrationalism). Were its assumptions clearly laid out by social historians,

[5] Elliott Leyton, *Dying Hard: The Ravages of Industrial Carnage* (Toronto 1975); Rolf Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life* (Vancouver 1974); Rolf Knight and Maya Koizumi, *A Man of Our Times* (Vancouver 1976); Michel Verdon, *Anthropologie de la colonisation au Québec* (Montréal 1973) — although this last work is far more than an ethnographic report.

[6] Maurice Bloch, "Introduction" to Maurice Bloch, ed., *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology* (London 1975), xiii.

[7] Maurice Natanson, *Literature, Psychology and the Social Sciences* (The Hague 1962), 157.

they would be subject to penetrating criticisms. Instead we find historians concealing the (unexamined) assumptions of their arguments and thus contributing to an implicit irrationalism: they avoid logic and explanation, not because they fall short of their own standards, but precisely in attaining them.

Consider, for example, the influential article by Keith Thomas in *Past and Present* which in 1963 proposed the then rather novel idea of a marriage between history and anthropology. He argued, "... the real case for anthropology is two-fold: first of all, that it can help widen the present subject-matter of academic history; secondly, that it can provide us with the technique to deal with, not only with this subject-matter, but with some already familiar historical problems."[8] The point about broadening the subject matter of history is conceded: the battle has been won. However, the *implicit* argument Thomas is making is open to criticism. He is equating anthropological theory with a value-free technique and history with an amorphous set of "topics," without telling us that the theory involved (functionalism) would have to displace many existing historical schools (for example, Marxist economic history). Moreover, even the infinite broadening of history into a realm at once "proliferous and deprived, nebulous and fragmented"[9] is only to be welcomed if we are given the means of bringing this vast dominion under control. However, anthropology offers no secure prospect of doing so. Anthropology and social history are not divided by a scientific breakthrough in the former field. This point has to be remembered whenever one reads statements such as those recently made by Alan Macfarlane, a leading proponent of historical anthropology. Macfarlane rightly urges that historians, like anthropologists, should take nothing for granted and "seek to explore even where the explanation seems obvious."[10] But he also claims that without "historical material, anthropological speculation is shadow-thin. The historian's task is to turn this shadow into substance. He can only do this after an infusion of wider concepts and external models."[11] This proposal of using history as a sort of pasture for the emaciated sacred cows of anthropology shows how misleading it would be to use anthropology casually. What if the speculations of anthropologists are shadow-thin because they are ahistorical, idealist, or mistaken?

There is more to this question than meets the eye — certainly more than a mere matter of "interdisciplinary encounter." Rolf Knight argues persuasively that anthropology may be attracting those who wish to escape political choices in the present by fleeing to a romanticized version of the pre-

[8] Keith Thomas, "History and Anthropology," *Past and Present*, 24 (1963), 12.
[9] Michelle Perrot, "The Strengths and Weaknesses of French Social History," *Journal of Social History*, 10 (1976), 166.
[10] Alan Macfarlane, "History, anthropology and the study of communities," *Social History*, 5 (1977), 650.
[11] Alan Macfarlane, "Historical Anthropology," *Cambridge Anthropology*, 3 (1977), 20.

industrial past.[12] There also would seem to be a clear connection between various strategies of ethnographic research — oral interviewing, for example — and radical humanism. I admire the motives and distrust the results. Russell Hann, who has written the clearest defence of oral history on the market, seems to illustrate the pitfalls of a well-intentioned approach when he writes, in his introduction to a collaborative oral history of Canadians during World War I: "Those in the ranks who became history's victims were rarely formless putty in the hands of the powerful. Even when the protests of the powerless failed most completely, they constantly forced the dominant to modify their most cherished schemes. Most of the time they led a highly autonomous existence and the best evidence as to the independent nature of their lived experience is undoubtedly their own testimony."[13] The sentiments behind the strategy are generous and humane, but it is surely unreasonable to claim that the "best evidence" of autonomous lived experience is to be found in personal testimony. Is it not likely that every individual, in his own conversation, inflates his own capacity to make decisions and cannot furnish an accurate or complete account of the historical forces which have shaped his life? Do we not, in this passage and many like it, step from a small matter of ethnographic technique, to a full-blown subjectivism in which rational explanations outside the range of our "native informant" are implicitly rejected? Is it not plain that this insistence on the autonomy of lived experience, just like the opposed claims of "overdetermination," may lead to a dogmatic denial of the facts — the fact, for instance, that World War I showed rather brutally just how limited the autonomy of countless individuals actually was?

It will not do to approach this question with off-hand dismissals (such as "bourgeois swindle"[14]) or passionate proclamations of humanistic faith. Despite the eminence of many of the names attached to the debate over anthropology, it is hard not to notice that "anthropology" is seen either as a land of promise or a barren wasteland — but not as it is, as a particular locus of debate. It is to this debate within anthropology that I will now turn my attention, by way of a review of recent work by Marvin Harris.

[12] Rolf Knight, "Grey Owl's Return: Cultural Ecology and Canadian Indigenous Peoples," *Reviews in Anthropology*, 1 (1974), 349-59.

[13] Russell Hann, "Introduction" to Daphne Read, ed., *The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History* (Toronto 1978), 10.

[14] Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History," *Journal of Social History*, 10 (1976), 215. To be fair, the authors did attempt to distinguish between various approaches to anthropology, but it seems that the phrase "bourgeois swindle" is what has lived on in academic memory. Another rather sweeping attack is made by Tony Judt, "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians," *History Workshop*, 7 (1979), 87, who assumes without question that it would be a disaster if social history became a sort of "retrospective cultural anthropology."

II

THERE IS NO "anthropological theory of culture," nor is there an "anthropological method." Anthropology is a debate in which various theories of culture and various methodologies clash. "Anthropology," writes Clifford Geertz, a noted practitioner, "or at least interpretative anthropology, is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other."[15] Keith Thomas makes the same point when he laments the passing away of older fashions in anthropology and the advent of such new schools as cognitive anthropology.[16] One vivid sign of the rapid changes that have occurred in anthropological thought is that two influential books have been titled *Rethinking Anthropology* and *Reinventing Anthropology*.[17]

Not only is the field changing rapidly, but it also shows marked peculiarities from one country to another. One clear example is the American adoption of the concept of "culture" and the British preference for "structure" and "function." Although this divergence can be partly explained by noting the strong neo-Kantian bent of Boas, the real founder of American anthropology, W.J.M. Mackenzie offers a plausible explanation of it in terms of the contrast between reconstructing destroyed native societies from the testimony of isolated survivors and working within surviving and functioning communities.[18]

Marvin Harris provides a useful guide to contemporary debates in anthropology. He is engaged in an aggressive attempt to make his own type of anthropology, "cultural materialism," the dominant school, but because of this bias he has devoted a lot of time to dissecting rival positions and analyzing the history of the discipline.

Harris believes that the history of anthropology falls into three periods. The first, from the Enlightenment to the late nineteenth century, culminated in the work of Marx, whose theory of base and superstructure is thought to be the foundation of a science of culture. The second period was one of professionalization of anthropology but also of theoretical retreat from the pursuit of the lawful principles of "sociocultural phenomena in the material conditions of life."[19] Dismayed by the political implications of Marx's materialism,

[15] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York 1973), 29.

[16] Keith Thomas, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975), 93.

[17] E.R. Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London 1961) and Dell Hymes, ed. *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York 1969).

[18] W.J.M. Mackenzie, *Politics and Social Science* (Harmondsworth 1967), 190-191.

[19] Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York 1968), 1-249. Harris' interpretation of Marx is heavily dependent on the most popular and most debated passage in the entire *oeuvre* of Marx: "In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society — the

anthropologists pursued highly particular and disjointed empirical enquiries. Even the "Culture and Personality" school in the United States and the British schools of functionalism and structural-functionalism[20] failed to live up to Marx's model, because they analyzed things in ahistorical terms and abandoned the search for causes altogether. The French, strongly influenced by Durkheim, stood apart from most other major schools, but were not any closer to Marx's original model, since they preserved a rationalist habit of mind that looked upon individual behaviour as a reflection of social entities separate from the individual and from empirical verification.

This, in brief, is the argument of *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, a stimulating book written to consolidate the materialist position in a third period of anthropological theory. Leslie White and Julian Steward are seen as the pivotal figures by Harris, because they captured most of the Marxist programme in the uncongenial climate of the 1950s. (Harris stresses the importance of White's "basic law" of energy and cultural evolution in particular.[21]) In *Cultural Materialism* Harris attempts to capture the essence of this position in the principle of "infrastructural determinism:" "The etic behavioral modes of production and reproduction probabilistically determine the etic behavioral domestic and political economy, which in turn probabilistically determine the behavioral and mental emic superstructures."[22] Against this position are ranged a large number of schools of anthropologists (as well as lovers of English): phenomenology, cognitive anthropology, and structural Marxism.

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real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness." A forceful exposition and defence of classical economic determinism has been made by G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Philosophy of History: A Defence* (Princeton 1979), not likely to be the last word on the subject.

[20] It tends to be forgotten that the two strains of British anthropological thought — structuralism and functionalism — regarded each other as rival conceptions of the social world. See the fascinating account of Adam Kuper, *Anthropologists and Anthropology: The British School, 1822-72* (Harmondsworth 1973).

[21] Harris, *Anthropological Theory*, 636. See Bruce Cox, ed., *Cultural Ecology: Readings on the Canadian Indians and Eskimos* (Toronto 1973), for the claim that Frank Speck (slighted in Harris' account) was an important contributor to the revival of materialist approaches in anthropology.

[22] Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York 1979), 55-6. Harris adopts the language of Kenneth Pike here, and defines "etic" and "emic" this way: "Emic operations have as their hallmark the elevation of the native informant to the status of ultimate judge of the adequacy of the observer's descriptions and analyses.... Etic operations have as their hallmark the elevation of observers to the status of ultimate judges of the categories and concepts used in descriptions and analyses"(32). Although he would deny it, it seems clear that the result of Harris' use of these terms (although not of the distinction in itself) is that the possibility of a science of mental life is ruled out.

There is a marked contrast between Harris' two books: *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* is by far a more persuasive, cogent, and attractive account than *Cultural Materialism*. Yet even this later book is worth examination, if only to obtain a grasp of what is at issue in many current debates. Many of Harris' attacks seem important and critical. The attack on phenomenology in anthropology, with its cogent and damaging appraisal of Carlos Castaneda — a mystic with impeccable grounding in an increasingly irrationalist academy[23] — and the critique of sociobiology are well worth reading. But these merits aside, Harris' approach is a failure — indeed, a calamity. What began with a welcome return to Marx has quickly become a defence of the most fossilized and mechanical aspects of the Marxist tradition. To establish this criticism I shall have to digress a little and present first the various kinds of Marxist debates going on in anthropology and then present Harris' critique of them.[24]

Almost all schools of contemporary social thought may claim Marx as an ancestor if they want to. Even cognitive anthropology, an idealist strategy pure and simple, might claim Marx's notion of "ideology" as an antecedent for its concepts. Among anthropologists who work explicitly within the Marxist tradition, there are very strong disagreements. Marx and Engles did not leave us with a complete science of the social world. As far as primitive societies go what they left were the *Formen*, ethnographic notebooks and a flawed reading of Morgan's evolutionary theories.[25] Actually, of course, they read far more, and with far greater discernment, than anyone could reasonably have anticipated, and their response to non-western societies was far more complex than just an acritical adoption of Morgan.[26] There is nonetheless a consensus that the relevant works of Marx and Engels are not their explicitly anthropological writings but those works in which they set out the principles of political economy. As one distinguished anthropologist has said, "There is generally a

[23] The background of Castaneda in Harold Garfinkel's school of sociology, ethnomethodology, is very clear, and historians tempted by phenomenology should consider this case rather carefully. See Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs 1967), and the critique of this school in Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York 1970), 390-5.

[24] It is out of respect, and not disregard, that I am not going to consider the "mode of production" debate in contemporary anthropology, except obliquely in my commentary on Godelier. This debate deserves far more than a compressed review could give. For this debate see Claude Meillassoux, "From Reproduction to Production," *Economy and Society*, 1 (1971), 103; A. Foster-Carter, "The Modes of Production Controversy," *New Left Review*, 107.

[25] Although see Maurice Godelier, "The Origins of Male Domination," *New Left Review*, 127 (1981), 3-17, for a favourable assessment of Engels' position on the anthropology of women.

[26] Emmanuel Terray, in *Marxism and "Primitive" Societies* (New York 1972), presents a "symptomatic reading" of Morgan which, like most such inspired interpretations, tell us more about what Terray wishes Morgan had thought than about Morgan's actual position.

convention that 'history' can be related to a body of independently verifiable evidence. By this standard while much of *Das Kapital* is historical writing those parts of the *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* which most concern anthropologists are not."[27]

A further source of complication for Marx's followers in anthropology is the influence of structuralism. Lévi-Strauss has proclaimed that his study of structures is compatible with historical materialism because he is merely completing a "superstructural" investigation. As many critics have noted, the obvious difficulty with this claim is that it leaves unclear the epistemological status of the structures which Lévi-Strauss claims to have discovered.[28] Is the "structure" discovered by the anthropologist merely a theoretical representation, to be revised and altered as empirical evidence dictates? Then all explanation would be a type of structure, at least to the extent that it imposed order on facts. What has to be distinguished are the two steps: that of discerning a systemic or structured phenomenon, and that of attempting to define and make more precise the nature of the object under study. The central problem of structuralist thought is that it continually vacillates between proclaiming the complementarity of historical and structural analysis and asserting their opposition.[29] The reason for this vacillation is that structuralism refuses to close the circle from the concrete to the abstract by returning to the concrete. (In more directly political terms, of course, this error invalidated the attempt, admirable in itself, of the Althusserians to reconcile Marxism and science.) Imposing on social analysis an essentially linguistic concept of structure leads to an imaginary anthropology, and recalls to one's mind Durkheim's critique: "It is because the imaginary offers the mind no resistance that the mind, conscious of no restraint, gives itself up to boundless ambitions and believes it is possible to construct, or rather reconstruct, the world by whim of its own strengths and at the whim of its desires."[30]

It is obviously not possible or desirable to return to the fatuous position of accepting only the immediate data of the senses. Structure may be viewed as something more than merely an arrangement of primary data, as in a statistical table showing the distribution of observed facts from a chosen aspect. What structural Marxists such as Maurice Godelier seem to urge, although in a language that invites misinterpretation, is that structures can be seen as realities which are not directly visible, and so directly observable. One is reminded of Marx's wrestling with this problem in 1857: that

[27] Raymond Firth, "The Sceptical Anthropologist? Social Anthropology and Marxist Views of Society," in Maurice Bloch, ed., *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*, 37.

[28] Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis* (London 1973), 60ff.

[29] Jairus Banaji, "The Crisis of British Anthropology," *New Left Review*, 64 (1970), 71-85.

[30] Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York 1964), 17.

capital in capitalist society appears as *both* real and abstract, a categorical and a real force. The solution of Marx, that of moving from concrete to abstract to concrete — essentially that abstraction must be historical and determinate — is opposed to the solution offered by structural anthropology, in which the movement is from the abstract to the concrete to the abstract. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss' critics have argued that the movement to the "concrete" is largely *pro forma* in his work, and that it has secured its seemingly impressive coherence at the high cost of a complete immunity to surprise.

These comments apply to some aspects of the work of structural Marxists in anthropology, but not as forcefully. Harris claims that Lévi-Strauss has dominated the field so entirely that the structural Marxists are simply confused and incoherent idealists. This charge is wide of the mark, considering (for example) Maurice Godelier's careful efforts to distance himself from the mainstream structuralist tradition. In *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, Godelier asked himself whether there was a rational reason why economic systems appeared and disappeared throughout history. He posed then the question of the definite *limits* of economic and social systems. According to Godelier, the solution was that the transformations that occur in the material conditions of their existence determine, in the last analysis, the outstanding transformations that occur in the forms and functions of the other levels of social life.[31] Godelier confronts the question of kinship directly, since it was on this issue that many critics felt they could demolish the classic Marxist insistence on the mode of production, and argues that in fact kinship in primitive society functions as part of the organization of production, and can only be understood if we consider the *several* distinct functions fulfilled by it.

Godelier resumes his analysis of these problems in *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*. Godelier wants to discover the "laws, not of 'History' in general . . . , but laws pertaining to the different economic and social formations which are analysed by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and economists alike." Although he insists that no general theory of modes of production has yet been produced, he is convinced that it should be possible to establish laws of modes of production which will "express the unintentional structural properties of social relations, the hierarchy and articulation on the basis of determined modes of production." Thus Godelier insists that Marx's materialist hypothesis does not allow anthropologists to determine (*pace* Harris) the specific laws of functioning and evolution which have or will appear. What anthropologists (and historians) ought to look for are the *limited* number of changes any particular structure could carry out and still remain itself.[32]

[31] Maurice Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics* (London 1972), xix.
[32] Maurice Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology* (Cambridge 1977), 2, 7.

This marks a distinctive break within structural Marxism and with structural anthropology: in the first instance, from the certainties of "theoreticism" with its self-confirming circles, and secondly, from the insistence that Lévi-Strauss placed on *forms* to the detriment of functions. What Godelier has in fact done is step outside the epistemological limits of his school and return to a critical *historical* logic. In his comments on the Asiatic mode of production, Mbuti religious rituals, and other questions, Godelier seems to be adopting a more concrete approach that utilizes the logical explanation implied by "structure" without succumbing to the temptation of structuralist dogmatism. And in vivid contrast to cultural materialism, Godelier respects the specificity of what is studied: religion is not *reduced* to "economics" nor is it assumed that it represents a mechanical reflection of a more solid basis.

I think that his concrete essays show Godelier's extraordinary capacity to explain macro-sociological phenomena: his writing on the concepts of the social and economic formation and on the social relations of production represent one of the best essays in Marxist historical thought. He has clearly demonstrated, by a rather tortuous and circuitous route to be sure, that his efforts to rethink anthropology via *Capital* were worthwhile. This seems a far more plausible approach than that taken by other anthropologists who assert the primacy of class struggle on the basis of a bizarre reading of the *Communist Manifesto*.[33]

Now we can return to Marvin Harris, the other claimant of Marx's mantle. Both Godelier and Harris are working the same fields: the macro-historical explanation of long-term changes. Harris sets out to demolish structural Marxism in his latest work, but revealingly has to rely on an explicitly political critique. Godelier, in his turn, has more generously noted that cultural materialism has enjoyed real accomplishments as a school — particularly in undermining the tendentious theses of the culture-and-personality tradition — but that in its central emphases, cultural materialism represents a return to the worst traditions of vulgar Marxism.[34] I think Godelier is right to stress the positive contributions made by the early cultural ecology in correcting an idealist emphasis in writings on culture. But I think he is too mild in noting that contemporary cultural materialism is vulgar Marxism revisited. In fact, Harris has gone far beyond anything that the crudest Marxists of the early twentieth century envisaged.

[33] Emmanuel Terray, "Classes and Class Consciousness in the Abron Kingdom of Gyaman," in Bloch, *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*, 85-135.

[34] Cultural materialism should perhaps be a term reserved exclusively for Harris and his followers, while the earlier, more creative phase should be called "cultural ecology." As a result of the work of the school, the ideas that primitive hunters in the Kalahari were on a level of starvation which left them unable to develop a complex culture, or that slash-and-burn agriculture was a purely irrational activity, were laid to rest.

It should be noted that Harris' relationship with Marx's work is not free of ambiguity. Although Harris bases himself on the famous 1859 statement of "base and superstructure," he observes, quite correctly, that in his economic analysis Marx mixed up "emic" data with "etic" data, with the alleged result that his scientific theories were fundamentally flawed.[35] Because Marx included in the "social relations of production" such things as ideologies and beliefs necessary for the existence and continuation of production, Marx's position as an "objective social scientist" is said to be compromised. For Harris, the long-term survival of the capitalist system depends not so much on the internal dynamics of capitalism (as Marx insisted) but more on its external relationship with nature. This "new" cultural materialism is not really familiar old-style economism, but an even cruder resource determinism: Harris verges on saying that humanity is what it eats. All the complexity of life can be boiled down to the proposition that man must eat to live and must reproduce to continue the species. Behind every set of social relations is this "secret" of materialism, which forms the basic underlying truth of all social life. The theory of base and superstructure — that difficult, problematical, provocative aspect of Marxism — has been boiled down to a technological and demographic determinism. This is a travesty of materialism. The "economic sphere" which in Marx embraced both the production of *things* and the production (objectification) of *ideas*, the relationship of man to nature which in Marx was never seen apart from the relationship of man to man: these become an isolated matrix of factors, representing an antecedent sphere, prior to human mediation. The novelty and specificity of the historico-human world — to cite the formulation of Colletti — is completely overlooked.[36]

Harris is aware of these objections and denies them. He claims, for instance, that his approach "does not deny the possibility that emic, mental, superstructural, and structural components may achieve a degree of autonomy from the etic superstructure. Rather, it merely postpones and delays that possibility in order to guarantee the fullest exploration of the determining influences exerted by the etic behavioral infrastructure."[37] In fact, of course, the possibility is usually deferred indefinitely, as a "last analysis" that is never, in fact, made. In the famous case of Aztec cannibalism, Harris postulates a causal link between the lack of available animal protein and ritual sacrifice. Human sacrifice was part of a "state-sponsored system

[35] Harris, *Cultural Materialism*, 65. Harris means by this that Marx and Engels accorded the essentially "mental categories" of capital and profits a predominant role in the further evolution of modern industrial society. From a different point of view, of course, one could say that it was precisely this aspect of Marx and Engels — their respect for the distinctiveness of the human historical realm — which separated their scientific materialism from the mechanical materialism which preceded it.

[36] Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, 65-70.

[37] Harris, *Cultural Materialism*, 56.

geared to the production and redistribution of substantial amounts of animal protein in the form of human flesh."[38] In fact, if one wanted to be exact, one could term Harris' outlook not "economic determinism" but protein determinism! In his preoccupation with *protein* as the crucial element of diet, Harris has foisted on the world a metahistorical system based on the idiosyncratic diet of suburban Americans. This would be funny, but it is in fact tragic — part of the same misconceptions which have enabled multinational corporations to sell high-protein baby formula in opposition to lower-protein mother's milk. The specific case for protein as a crucial element in diet is weak.[39] The general argument that this provides a clue to world history is farcical.

But not only does Harris take to ridiculous extremes the case for food as an element in history. He also revives all the intractable problems associated with "origins" in Marxist theory and in social science generally. Harris is always after the ultimate "origins" of things. But as Marc Bloch pointed out many years ago, origins might mean simply beginnings (the first in time) or it might mean causes. Most commonly, and confusingly, we use "origins" to mean "beginnings" that also somehow explain things.[40] This is a classic problem, to which Marx offered tentative but important solutions. Capitalism for Marx is both a logical explanation — a system which he reconstructs in terms of logical categories — and a real historical phenomenon; the question is not to lovingly track down its origins, although Marx did devote time to doing this, but to apply this logical definition to the *present*.

Again, Harris is aware of the difficulty, and tries to avoid it. What he is specifically trying to avoid is the anthropological habit of diffusionism — now prevalent in much social history and geography — whereby the spatial extension of a phenomenon out from a centre is taken to be an adequate explanation of its occurrence in any given place. However, Harris' fixation on origins leads him into strange assertions. His analysis of Christianity is carefully constructed to avoid a direct causal argument, but in general he seems to be saying that the emergence of Christianity had something to do with an abundant supply of livestock. This, in some sense, "explains" Christianity.[41] One need not be too perceptive to see that it does no such thing. The most glaring instance of this — and one which shows the depths

[38] Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures* (New York 1978), 164. See the critique by Marshall Sahlins in "Culture as Protein and Profit," *New York Review of Books*, 23 November 1978, 45-53.

[39] For a devastating critique of Harris' protein fixation, see Paul Diener, Kurt Moore and Robert Mutaw, "Meat, Markets, and Mechanical Materialism: The Great Protein Fiasco in Anthropology," *Dialectical Anthropology*, 5 (1980), 171-92.

[40] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York 1953), 30.

[41] Marvin Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (New York 1974), 155-203.

of Harris' "Marxism" — is his adoption of Karl Wittfogel's theory of "Asiatic despotism."[42]

Wittfogel argued that by means of dams, canals, and other projects, state officials in the ancient Asiatic empires diverted water from the river for the use of the peasant. Water was the most important part of food production. Hence the state bureaucracy could maintain political control by means of its exclusive access to the means of subsistence. Hence the authoritarianism of modern China and the rise of communist dictatorships.[43] Marx supposedly saw all this, but he was horrified because he realized it was a terrible foreshadowing of what his own socialism would be like. And so he committed a "crime against science" by covering over this part of his work. Harris takes all this vulgar historical pastiche over from Wittfogel, and then — forgetting that he had denounced diffusionism as the incarnation of anti-science[44] — goes on to present a classically diffusionist rendition of the Wittfogel thesis. Asiatic despotism built small states around its fringes which would benefit from trade. (This to explain the obvious difficulty of small Asiatic states.) And even more, Western civilization itself can be traced to the provision of water:

> Rainfall states during preindustrial times typically possessed loose feudal structures. In Europe, feudal kings remained weak compared with the hydraulic emperors, since they could not prevent the rain from falling on friend and foe alike. Political decentralization in turn fostered the rise of independent merchant classes and the growth of commercial interests, which further pluralized [sic] the balance of power. Given the small scale of the ancient Mediterranean city-states, their continuity with egalitarian forms of chiefdoms, and their continued pluralism, the much mystified roots of Western democracy can be brought within the compass of an intelligible process.[45]

Historians may lay down their pens, political theorists cease their anxious work, and sociologists desist from speculating on state power: Marvin Harris has shown that everything can be explained by water. Surely nobody, outside of Harris' own school, takes this nonsense seriously?

Harris is crusading in *Cultural Materialism*, evidently seeing this as part of a savage struggle with other schools for funding and prestige. Alternative positions are called "intellectual crimes against humanity," presumably perpetrated by dogged anti-scientists. This is a strange position for Harris, considering that he has explicitly rejected the standard Marxist concern for

[42] Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven 1957). An excellent critique of the concept of the Asiatic mode of production, and *en passant* of Wittfogel, may be found in Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London 1974), 462-549.

[43] Wittfogel was a willing participant in the anti-Communist purges of the 1950s. The adoption of Wittfogel as a father figure by elements of the New Left, noticeably centred on the journal *Telos*, is a clear indication that the "Marxism" of the New Left is increasingly indistinguishable from the conservatism of the New Right.

[44] Harris, *Anthropological Theory*, 378.

[45] Harris, *Cultural Materialism*, 105.

political practice.[46] But it does give him certain rhetorical advantages: opposition to Harris is not only mistaken but politically wicked. The world is running out of resources, and men must be persuaded to see why this is happening. Of course, if Harris were serious, he would soon find himself involved in those dreadful "emic" analyses he finds so distasteful. To establish a political programme based on this objective knowledge would require a mastery of symbols, political traditions, and customs: very few successful political movements have presented a purely utilitarian view of man. Harris cannot do anything about his concern for world resources, because he is entrapped within the arid determinism of his system. It is striking that he has shown how much the Socialism of the Second International — here parodied and drained of its redeeming intellectual rigour — leads to paralysis. History has, perhaps, repeated itself. The first time, this was a tragedy.

Harris and Godelier represent two poles of Marxist thought in anthropology, and there are a variety of positions in between. There surely is no further need to demonstrate that one cannot appeal to "anthropology" as some historians have done, but that one must appeal to specific anthropological theories and traditions. But there is surely a further point to be made. Much of anthropology lies outside the classic concerns of historical materialism — notably the analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the possibilities of transcending it. Both Harris, in comic form, and Godelier, in a dazzling display of erudition, are aiming at the universal history of the Enlightenment: a separate, if not opposed, project to that normally pursued by Marxists. There is no reason to suspect that historical materialism cannot absorb "universal history," but it is proper to point out that this form of work carries a high risk of slipping from concrete to generic abstractions, from the explanation of "wars in capitalist society" to "wars in general." In some cases, this emphasis is justified: one need think only of the women's question.[47] Nonetheless the risk of regression to pre-Marxist forms of abstraction is a serious one.

Let us now turn to the more limited and specific work of "historical anthropology," in which anthropological models have been brought more closely into the examination of concrete historical situations.

III

ONE WAY OF UNRAVELLING the question of anthropology a little is to look at the actual attempts anthropologists have made to intervene in contemporary

[46] Harris explicitly announces that his aim is to rescue Marx's "law of history" for non-Marxist applications, and to do this "we must break the grip which political activism holds on the scientific aspects of his contribution" (*Anthropological Theory*, 219).

[47] Obviously the oppression of women is older than the existence of classes.

social history. Certainly in recent years "historical anthropology" has emerged as a sub-discipline in its own right. Part of the explanation lies in the disappearance of "primitive" societies to study, largely because modern capitalism is rapidly destroying them. Because anthropologists are running out of primitive societies, they have generally been more receptive than in the past to studies of the city, sub-communities within capitalist society, and so on.[48] This has the rather curious result of weakening anthropology as a specific discourse at the precise moment that anthropology is spreading far beyond its pre-industrial confines. For anthropology, taken out of its classic setting in pre-history or pre-industrial society, begins to become indistinguishable from sociology or history. Just as the anthropologists within the "classic sphere" of anthropology must be seen as members of contending schools, so too must these anthropologists of complex, industrial societies — with the significant difference that in the latter case, it is often hard to determine just what is "anthropological" about the explanations being advanced.

I should like to comment on the work of five "historical anthropologists:" Alfred Kroeber, Alan Macfarlane, Richard Horwitz, A.F.C. Wallace, and Gerald Sider. So far as I can judge, each of these anthropologists works in the context of a distinctive school. Kroeber was a follower of Boas, and hence a disciple of his mentor's historical methodology; Macfarlane's position might be termed "eclectic functionalism;" Horwitz is a follower of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology; A.F.C. Wallace worked as a prominent anthropologist in the Culture and Personality school; and Gerald Sider is using a neo-Marxist approach. These anthropologists hardly constitute a school of historical writing. Nonetheless I think they have in common a tendency to pre-Marxist forms of abstraction. Even at its best, historical anthropology seems to be afflicted with an unhealthy preoccupation with cultural forms, "essences" to which the diversity of history is sacrificed. But apart from this general criticism, the main point to be made is that there is no coherent or unified anthropological approach to history which rivals the explanatory frameworks already available to us.

Alfred Kroeber was one of the major theorists of American cultural anthropology, and a key figure in the popularization and acceptance of "culture" as the central abstraction of a good deal of mainstream American social science. His major work is devoted to a history of western culture. Curiously, Kroeber's treatment of "culture" seems highly conventional:

[48] Adam Kuper, *Anthropologists and Anthropology*, 227-38, reflects on the problem of the disappearance of primitive societies to study, but concludes that anthropology is sufficiently distinctive that it will never be absorbed by sociologists — those "prissy methodologists." See also Michael Banton, ed., *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies* (London 1966), Richard Fox, *Urban Anthropology: Cities in Their Cultural Settings* (Englewood Cliffs 1977), and in general, the journal *Urban Anthropology*.

using techniques akin to natural history, he identified salient elements in western "cultures" and then classified these cultures according to a grand taxonomic design. Kroeber's approach to culture slighted its material aspects entirely.[49] His "culture" resembled something entirely above human choice. Kroeber thought of cultures as integrated, whole *things*. In his hands "cultures" became hypostatized concepts, magically endowed with powers. His masterpiece, *Configurations of Culture Growth*, is an extremely valuable and disarming encyclopaedia of world philosophy, science, philology, sculpture, painting, drama, literature, music, and "the growth of nations." It conveys the impression of a stroll through the millennia in the company of a charming and knowledgeable guide. It is also a prime example of the perils of anthropological theory.

Kroeber defines the different tasks of the anthropologist and the historian quite explicitly. As he noted, "... using culture as an instrument to infer or understand the sequence of events, or using events to understand culture, are diverse processes of intelligence. Events are specific facts; culture by comparison is a generalized abstraction. History is therefore particular, and scarcely if ever has detached itself wholly from individual persons. Anthropology often becomes technically detailed, but it can operate successfully without any knowledge of particular persons. The culture which it depicts or analyses are summaries or averages of a large number of individual acts."[50] This is an exceptionally acute observation. Kroeber clearly shows that he begins with an assumption of cultures which exist as the larger unities which precede specific "cultural" acts. We do not begin with concrete facts and move to the abstract in this style of generalization; rather the *assumption* of unity is already an abstraction to which various acts must be referred. This is the culturalist programme pure and simple: the insistence on "culture" as an essence underlying all facts and appearances. Such syncretic holism is beyond empirical test or control. For this reason, *Configurations of Culture Growth* cannot be considered as a successful example of social science. Much of the book merely represents the aesthetic judgments of a cultivated individual. Kroeber's estimation of cultural "genius," which he thought "clustered" in history, is wholly impressionistic. In hundreds and hundreds of highly detailed pages, Kroeber time and again confesses that he finds no cycles, repetitions, or necessities. "While I have followed a factual route," Kroeber candidly admits, "it ends about where deductive reasoning would have led us more quickly: from ill-defined (though perhaps important) concepts of cultural activities to ill-definable concepts of their relations."[51] This is a clear example of the perils of generic abstraction: Kroeber begins with the assumption that there were entities in

[49] Milton Singer, "Introduction" to Alfred Kroeber, *An Anthropologist Looks at History* (Berkeley 1963), v.

[50] Alfred Kroeber, *Configurations of Culture Growth* (Berkeley 1964 [1944]), 5.

[51] Kroeber, *Configurations*, 761.

history, "cultures," which existed apart from material life; he then confines himself to the internal development of these entities and finds himself unable to explain the facts of the social world. Rather than reconsider his strategy and perhaps even his central concept, Kroeber is content to confess his failure and leave us with an overweight Baedeker of human endeavour. In this he set the standard for many others.

Kroeber is admittedly an extreme case. The work of other modern anthropologists would seem to be miles away from this meta-historical approach. The current trend towards intensive, small-scale local studies makes Kroeber's *Configurations* seem all the more like a beached whale. Yet the connections between Kroeber's theoretical orientation and those we find in modern anthropological history are actually not that hard to find.

A.F.C. Wallace in *Rockdale* presents a stunningly detailed account of life in a nineteenth-century industrial community. This work has been celebrated as a classic example of sensitive and careful local research, and rightly so. What I wish to quarrel with is not the book's artistry but its theory. Wallace first achieved his reputation through his work on *Culture and Personality*. In this work, he argued forcefully against what he called the "microcosmic metaphor," by which he meant the tendency of the leading writers of anthropology in this school (such as Benedict and Mead) to use individual personalities as reflections of the culture as a whole. Wallace noted three central problems with this approach: first, the metaphor implied a false equivalence between concepts operating on different levels of abstraction; second, there is more variability in personality traits than the metaphor might lead one to believe; and third, there was no reason to believe that social organizations actually required a high degree of personal conformity to any universal norms. Only closer and more scientific attention to "biological and social variables" could preserve the valuable contribution of the Culture and Personality school.[52]

This is not the place to examine the truth of these criticisms or the High Positivism of Wallace's alternative, since this programme is not the one which Wallace is following as he writes historical anthropology.[53] Yet what is striking is that the critique of the microcosmic metaphor applied to personalities within culture, applies with equal force to Wallace's own attempt to infer the social dynamics of industrial capitalism in his particular community, from the larger international patterns of industrialization. Wallace assumes, but does not demonstrate, that the forces which were struggling throughout the world or the United States (the "radical Enlightenment," "Christian evangelicalism," etc.) were those which determined the history of his own community. The suggestion is interesting, but it is never

[52] Wallace, *Culture and Personality* (New York 1961), 125-6.

[53] A.F.C. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York 1978), 73-123.

demonstrated. These abstractions brought *to* history are never allowed to *become historical:* these demi-gods, Christian evangelicalism and the radical Enlightenment, are put through an impressive but improbably Hegelian ballet on a creaking local stage. The microcosmic metaphor has claimed its most perceptive critic, who has found heaven (inevitably) in his local grain of sand.

Kroeber and Wallace both share a tendency to generic abstraction, the one because of an inherently idealist conception of culture, and the other because of an *a priori* commitment to symbolic categories which undermines concrete historical investigation. Richard P. Horwitz, in *Anthropology Towards History: Culture and Work in a 19th-Century Maine Town,*[54] suffers from far more disabling problems. This is an attempt to apply to the history of a Maine community the methods inculcated by cognitive anthropology. The central feature of cognitive anthropology is its definition of "culture" as that which one needs to know in order to meet the standards of appropriateness set by the society one is studying. The emphasis, then, is on the formulation of rules of conduct. Horwitz's own sub-specialty is ethno-semantics. The book begins with a "Theory of Description," in which the author claims that the "emic" approach promises to give the scholar a view of social behaviour as a whole, an understanding of individual reactions to this whole, and a predictive science of behaviour. We are left in no doubt that what we are about to read is a scientific breakthrough of the first order, which will silence critics and bring Anthropology Towards History in an academic mating ritual.

After a few pages into the actual exposition, one realizes that the experiment has grievously miscarried. Few books in contemporary social history have been as strange or baffling as this one. The first disappointment comes when Horwitz announces that he is merely assembling the terminology of occupations. This might be quite interesting, if grounded within a wider theory of socioeconomic reality. But the reader puts down the book knowing little more about Winthrop, Maine, than he did when he picked it up. The author's obsession with taxonomies of various types of words — for example, those related to farming — seems to be a grave impediment to any concrete historical understanding. The second disappointment then arrives when one realizes that the terminology of occupations *did not* reflect changes in the economy or society. In other words, this method is *useless* as a way of looking at socio-economic change. The book is constructed around the disproof of its central thesis. The best one can say is that Horwitz has written a book which will hamper the growth of its idealist methodology.

Horwitz represents what must be avoided in American anthropology; abstraction from the concrete is a mild criticism to make of a work which is such a wispy web of empty categories. Alan Macfarlane is a more formida-

[54] Middleton, Conn., 1978.

ble exponent of his own particular school, that of British social anthropology. Macfarlane is well known as the author of a study of Ralph Josselin, a seventeenth-century cleric, and the editor of Josselin's diary. In contrast with the authors we have discussed, Macfarlane does not reside at a fixed theoretical address. If he may be fairly described as a descendent of empirical functionalism, he is a relatively critical one. The functionalist approach, Macfarlane argues, had an "atemporal bias" and the side effects of this were "an over-emphasis on harmony and integration and a highly conservative interpretation of society, as well as a selective over-stress on certain aspects of culture and society."[55] Notwithstanding these criticisms, Macfarlane calls for a blend of the functionalist and historical approaches, which he says will probably be more satisfactory than an "undiluted dose of either."[56] One approach Macfarlane finds appealing is that of micro-sociology, most notably the concepts of the "action-set" and the "network."[57] These strategies for studying communities stress the individual interconnections one can empirically establish as explanatory devices. As a result of his commitment to network theory, Macfarlane puts forward a cogent critique of the belief that there were in the past "communities" (stable, closely-knit aggregations of people) while in the present we merely have less personal "societies". Macfarlane notes that the search for stable and tightly-knit communities tends to be a self-confirming research programme, and he protests against the accumulation of more and more community studies, which is the "anthropological fallacy *par excellence*."[58]

Macfarlane's position as a pioneer of historical anthropology and as a theorist clearly place him in a pivotal position. Certainly his empirical work commands respect. In *Reconstructing Historical Communities*, Macfarlane outlines an ambitious programme of research, which will ultimately take in all available information about a small English community. The detail is breath-taking, and important; Macfarlane has recovered past lives with specific documentation in a way that one would have judged impossible. This transcends any quantitative project undertaken in North America in its scope and its ambition.[59] However, we do not yet have the published results of

[55] Alan Macfarlane, "Historical Anthropology," 5.

[56] *Ibid.*, 20.

[57] Macfarlane, "History, anthropology and the study of communities," *Social History*, 5 (1977), 638. I sympathize with the critique by C.J. Calhoun, who has asked what specific problems Macfarlane thinks he can solve by using these techniques. "History, anthropology and the study of communities: some problems in Macfarlane's proposal," *Social History*, 3 (1978), 363-73.

[58] Macfarlane, "History," 634.

[59] Alan Macfarlane, in collaboration with Sarah Harrison and Charles Jardine, *Reconstructing Historical Communities* (London 1977). The advice in the book for prospective researchers — which extends to the type of glue best used in preparing information cards — makes it an invaluable guide to quantitative research.

this research programme. Macfarlane has also produced a study of "English individualism," which is a critique of both Marx's and Weber's account of the "great transformation" in England from a "non-market, peasant society where economics is 'embedded' in social relations, to a modern market, capitalist system where economy and society have split apart."[60] In Macfarlane's eyes, England was as capitalist in 1250 as it was in 1550 or 1750: there was already a developed market and mobility of labour, land was treated as a commodity, and full private ownership was established; there was considerable geographic mobility, and rational accounting and the profit motive were widespread.[61] Marx and Weber were in error. Macfarlane never does tell his readers where the *Origins of English Individualism* might be found, but it seems that the Anglo-Saxons are likely to be cast in the role of the first capitalists.

There is good reason to suspect that Macfarlane's use of evidence and his selective use of theory are not going to survive close historical examination.[62] Even a layman can spot obvious flaws, as when Hajnal's famous work on the distinctiveness of the Northwest European family is taken as evidence of the distinctiveness of the English family. What I want to stress, however, is that Macfarlane in *English Individualism* merely ends up with the same individualist commitment with which he began. A doggedly individualist research strategy, in which each individual is "reconstructed," a commitment to "network theory", and the flat rejection of the notion of "community" predispose Macfarlane to select from the historical record exactly the evidence which will confirm his own approach. He is like the skeptic who "proved" that no photographs had ever been published in newspapers: under microscopic examination all that could be found was a continuum of black and grey dots. At the level of microscopic examination, it may well be that virtually all major social upheavals will seem to disappear. One could put Kroeber and Macfarlane at two ends of a spectrum: in the first case the super-organic deity of culture absorbs all the individual facts without blinking, and in the second the individuals and their histories enjoy perfect freedom from explanation, excepting the very low-level generalization of "individualism." One still has the impression, in both cases, of historical evidence not being allowed to influence the abstract categories of analysis.

The work of Gerald Sider on outport communities in Newfoundland is shaped by completely different theoretical co-ordinates; unlike any of the previous authors, Sider takes the Marxist argument seriously. He is also the only one who shows signs of having been influenced by contemporary social

[60] Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford 1978), 199.

[61] Macfarlane, *English Individualism*, 195-6.

[62] Rodney Hilton has completely demolished the main thesis of the book in a notice in *New Left Review*, 120 (1980).

history, which means that while his approach is clearly anthropological, he is less concerned to convert the whole realm of social history to his viewpoint. But despite these very real virtues, his writing typifies the problem of historical anthropology — that of abstractions imposed on, and not emerging from and tested by, historical evidence.

Sider has written two major articles which I shall review: a study of Christmas mumming in Newfoundland, and a more general study of Newfoundland social history with particular reference to property and culture. "Christmas Mumming" has attained a definite status in the eyes of the new cultural history, as evidenced by its republication as a pamphlet by New Hogtown Press. Christmas mumming has become for Newfoundland anthropologists what the potlatch was for students of the Kwakiutl: a ritual which seems to open up a whole society to analysis. Sider argues that the decline of Christmas mumming can only be understood in the context of the disappearance of the family fishery. In contrast with urban traditions of mumming, rural outport mumming meant visits to neighbours' homes. "Where the society is unequal, as in St. John's, mumming is 'about' this inequality, and where the society is fundamentally egalitarian, *mumming is 'about' this equality in the precise sense*, . . . that mumming serves significant redistributive functions."[63] These specific functions comprise the organization of the social relations of production — that is, determining who shall make up the crew and the crowd, etc. In pre-capitalist societies, the reproduction of these social relations is not as automatic as it is in capitalist society. Since in Newfoundland capital formation occurred "at a distance," people could live their lives without dealing directly with its effects. Consequently egalitarian relations characterized the outport society, "pervading the organization of work with moral values," perhaps, indeed, a "moral economy."[64] Mumming fits into this pattern because it allowed a "collective stock-taking." While kin groups organized the social relations of production, "the community organizes *the reproduction of these relations of production* over time, and it does this on the level of culture. . . ."[65] Sider suggests that mumming provided an opportunity for people to transfer (or reaffirm) relationships, to make new alliances and leave old ones, and to unite a community split by the tensions "created by the wide-spreading effects of changing relationships."[66] Sider puts his argument in three sentences: "Mumming was not so much a Christmas festival as a New Year's festival, providing a framework for the reorganization of social relationships for the coming year; a reproduction of the relations of production. Now that a new era has come to Newfoundland, the era of wage-labour, the new year no longer has the same significance. Mum-

[63] Gerald Sider, "Christmas Mumming and the New Year in Outport Newfoundland," *Past and Present*, 71 (1976), 117.
[64] Sider, "Christmas Mumming," 111.
[65] Sider, "Christmas Mumming," 120, emphasis in original.
[66] *Ibid.*

ming declined when its socially reproductive functions were transferred outside the community."[67]

This seems like an exceptionally attractive argument, and one well understands why it has been enthusiastically promoted. My difficulty is that I do not see the evidence for these assertions. There is not one ethnographic report cited by Sider that suggests that mumming in fact had this function: we have no citations of reports that places in the fishery were allocated through mumming. Why should such small communities have had to resort to such round-about rituals in order that neighbours could talk to one another? Would this one ritual have alleviated tension in the way Sider suggests? Is there in fact such a neat correspondence between the rise of wage labour and the decline of mumming — given its persistence in St. John's? Sider has written a gloss on much valuable ethnographic reporting, but he does not show why we should believe that mumming had this function. He is trapped by the *a priori* assumption that such a ritual *had* to be "about" equality or inequality. Even as an hypothesis, Sider's argument seems highly unlikely.

Sider's view of outport life in Newfoundland as fundamentally egalitarian, permeated with a "moral economy" and brought together in meaningful redistributive rituals, has come under strong attack — by Gerald Sider. In "Ties That Bind: culture and agriculture, property and propriety in the Newfoundland village fishery," Sider presents an anthropological gloss on several centuries of Newfoundland history. Sider particularly wants to look at the link between *culture* and *agriculture*, property in land and notions of propriety. He proposes that the concept of "culture," which began as a metaphor drawn from agriculture, in fact expresses a more profound link between social life and forms of property. In Sider's theory, "'Property' is one form, . . . that social relations take. 'Culture', . . . is another. The two domains, in class societies, are linked."[68] Sider believes that Newfoundland constitutes an interesting test case because the British systematically discouraged private property in land, and because "agriculture was at first suppressed and subsequently discouraged."[69] By denying settlers on the land and discouraging agriculture, the authorities made "certain forms of domination more difficult to establish and maintain — not just political and juridical domination, but cultural as well."[70] The "denial of agriculture" made resistance to domination difficult: the absence of agriculture and landed property not only created a social gulf of missing intermediary positions between capital and the fishing communities, but also "substantially affected the ties between the fishing families, and thus the social basis for a culture of resistance to domination."[71] This provides us with the major key to

[67] Sider, "Christmas Mumming," 124.

[68] Gerald Sider, "The Ties That Bind: culture and agriculture, property and propriety in the Newfoundland village fishery," *Social History*, 5 (1980), 3.

[69] *Ibid.*

[70] *Ibid.*

[71] Sider, "Ties That Bind," 9.

Newfoundland history: since land has value only in production (and has little value as an asset), smallholders could not buy neighbouring farms because clear title could not be established. This undermined "the entire basis of élite hegemony," but it also prevented the rise of a "culture of resistance." No culture could be born in Newfoundland because of the extreme fragmentation of outport life. This social fragmentation begins in the divisive social relations of the fishery, extends to the round of activities supplementary to the fishery, and is perpetuated by the lack of alternatives to the fishery.[72] Communities are ripped apart by the splitting and recombination of family fishing units; the system of payment (whether truck or *tal qual*) splits the community apart by imposing upon it an "averaging" which pits hard-working families against indolent families. Gardens are also a source of division: the absence of roads and commercial agriculture, which means that residents of the outports do not produce use-values for each other, fragments the society even further. In sum, "The fisher-families in the outport villages were thus fragmented, both socially and culturally:"

> Particularly on the south coast, where the fishery was prosecuted from smaller boats and with smaller nets, requiring even less cooperation than in the north, ethnographic references are made to the "isolation" of families within villages. On the north coast, in the early decades of the twentieth century, a poignant attempt was made to unionize the fishermen in the Fishermen's Protective Union — an attempt which, before it failed, generated an intense appeal. We may gain some idea of the cultural fragmentation created by the fishery if we compare the rallying cry of the unemployed workers in St. John's as they assaulted parliament — "one for all and all for one" — with the motto of the Fishermen's Protective Union — "Suum Cuique!" — which means, unfortunately, to each his own.[73]

Paradoxically, the same acute fragmentation that made hegemony hard to impose, also made it hard to resist. In the absence of the "ties that bind" — agriculture, landed property, the institutions of civil society — people had no way of resisting coercive "modernization." Indeed, it would be wrong to think the outports had anything that could pass for "culture:" their acute fragmentation created an "absence of the collective consciousness that one expects to see among people we could refer to as a culture."[74] These uncultured Newfoundlanders responded to modernization with pathetic incoherence. Lacking the basis of culture — and because they lack the ties that bind — the outports enter history as victims.

I have summarized Sider's argument at length because it seems, to me, to represent the best and the worst of the new anthropological history. There is no denying that both articles show a stimulating and imaginative mind at work: like many anthropologists, Sider makes us look at the commonplace once again, makes us appreciate the strangeness of the ordinary. His larger

[72] Sider, "Ties That Bind," 18.
[73] Sider, "Ties That Bind," 20.
[74] Sider, "Ties That Bind," 38.

theoretical purpose of grounding Marxist categories in reality is laudable. But I nonetheless think that this anthropological version of the history of Newfoundland exemplifies all the difficulties of anthropological reason. First, there is simply no way of reconciling the two versions of Newfoundland history in Sider's articles. In "Christmas Mumming" Sider presents us with a picture of outport life in which something as basic as the reproduction of the social relations of production was the province of a collective and egalitarian value-system. Families and kin might organize the details, but *the reproduction of this system lay in the field of culture*. This is what outport mumming, according to Sider, is all about. Sider even suggests that "moral economy" of egalitarianism was present in the outports. Moreover, Sider notes, even the fishermen of the south coast — the *locus classicus*, to him, of individualism — mounted a collective resistance against the use of larger boats and longer voyages.[75] In his first approach to Newfoundland society, then, Sider argues that the ties that bind were binding so tightly that mumming served as a way of handling the problems of organizing crews without undermining the tight egalitarian fabric of community life. His central argument was that the reproduction of the social relations of production occurs largely at a *cultural level* in outport society. Now, in his second article, again largely focussed on the traditional outports, the vision is completely altered. Not only are these communities fragmented, they lack anything that we might dignify with the term "culture" — so that while Sider had once argued that within culture we find the sector in which the social relations of production are produced, he now says that this sector does not exist. In his first version, outport residents were seen to possess something like a "moral economy" — presumably, a rooted, collective, and traditional set of values concerning the economy. The second article makes this claim hard to believe, since it is hard to believe that such a collective outlook on the economy can function in places which lack the bare essentials of cultural cohesion. Collective resistance in the outport could hardly take the form of a moral economy: all that could be achieved would be the odd "poignant" outburst.

But of even greater difficulty is the way Sider shapes his argument and deploys its central terms. Consider his claim that agriculture and culture are intimately linked. Why should we accept this argument? What evidence for it is there? Why should so much emphasis be placed on property in land? Given that outport families attach a modicum of importance to the inheritance of fishing equipment, why should not this be considered a suitable incitement to culture? There is something distinctly liturgical about Sider's repetition of this argument, which nonetheless never develops beyond *abstraction*, never returns to the concrete world in which its central propositions could be refined and tested. How could we set about to disprove a

[75] Sider, "Christmas Mumming," 111.

theory that has been stated in this way? Or consider Sider's analysis of hegemony. Sider rightly criticizes the notion of culture as "totalizing," but his "hegemony" is nothing if not totalizing and non-falsifiable. How could hegemony have been simultaneously difficult to impose and difficult to resist?

Third, Sider seems to homogenize and simplify the actual history of Newfoundland. Sider is, of course, right to note that there was something odd about private property in Newfoundland — although his work would have been strengthened had he noted revisionist work on this subject.[76] But what must be questioned is Sider's assumption that throughout history the élite has in fact been engaged in an attempt to discourage agriculture. This is simply factually incorrect. Yet the argument that the state has systematically discouraged agriculture throughout Newfoundland's history is essential to Sider's position. Another instance of this same problem is the way Sider avoids evidence which falsifies his argument. Consider his argument about the Fishermen's Protective Union, that "poignant" eruption. When he talks about the real protests of fishermen, Sider makes one throw up one's hands in despair. The FPU may have been "poignant" — whatever that means — but it was also one of the most vigorous and disciplined protest movements in Canadian history. Strange that the divided and helpless Newfoundlanders created a movement that was so coherent, so methodical, so collective! Sider attributes a heavy symbolic significance to the slogans carried by the St. John's rioters (whom he has put in the wrong year, incidentally) as compared with the slogan of the FPU. The real workers carried a collective message, but the fishermen produced the slogan, To Each His Own. Sider seems to be unaware that the burden of the FPU's slogan was that the grasping merchants of Water Street had better stop exploiting them. In fact the FPU clearly invalidates Sider's exaggerated view of fragmentation.[77] Of course it is easy to look at the FPU and denounce it as a populist failure, but with which social movement in the West is it being compared? Does Sider seriously contend that the crowd in St. John's represents collective discipline and the FPU the unrestrained individualism of the fishery?

Finally, Sider is wrong to think that modernization is something recent. In fact Newfoundland has known monopoly capitalism in its most exploitative form since the turn of the century. The interviews which Sider cites at great length to show the incoherent response to modernization show very little at all. Most ordinary working people, who lack the time and (sadly) the inclination to develop a theoretical knowledge of the system within which they live, would respond in the "instance-by-instance" fashion of the

[76] For example, G. Cell, *English Enterprise in Newfoundland, 1577-1660* (Toronto 1969).

[77] See S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto 1971), 77-115, for an account which emphasizes the modification of the individualist fishing economy through participation in the seasonal seal hunt.

woman Sider thinks is a special example of "fragmentation." Would thoroughly industrial workers in Passaic or Dallas respond to questions about the economy with hard-hitting Marxist analysis? Would that it were so. By using such generic abstractions as "fragmentation" and "modernization," Sider seems to have homogenized the past: one removes the FPU as a "poignant" eruption and forgets, seemingly, that a good part of the "modernization" programme had substantial outport support.

Sider's articles cannot be considered worthless; they remain in one's mind as provocations long after the resolutely empiricist prose of many historians has faded. Perhaps this is the enduring value of a great deal of the work being produced by anthropological history: that it will goad historians into developing new critical positions and enter the realm of theory as creators. But the homogenizing and generic quality of anthropological history seems to be unable, by itself, to generate new historical understanding. The historical anthropologists seem trapped in the *a priori;* history becomes, not the place of decisive theoretical engagement, but raw material for abstraction. But as we move from the concrete to the abstract and back to the concrete, we should notice a change in our perspective; if, time and time again, our initial theories emerge triumphant, this may be because they will absorb every contrary instance. Far from being a sign of strength, this is a sign of weakness. There is no "anthropological approach to history" because there will be as many types of this approach as there are schools of anthropology. But if there is one common (and damaging) denominator, it is that anthropologists tend to work with abstractions which homogenize and neutralize history. These abstractions must be analyzed with great care before they are generally adopted, because there may well be something wrong with their conceptual foundations.

The leading instance of such an abstraction is the concept of "culture."

IV

IN 1871, Edward B. Tylor defined "culture" as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[78] There was a long lag between this date and the general acceptance of the term in social analysis; quite prominent exponents of the British school resisted the concept as long as they could.[79] In the 1940s Stuart Chase, a devoted if unoriginal follower of trends in anthropology, proclaimed the culture concept as the

[78] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (Gloucester, Mass., 1924 [1871]), 1.

[79] Most notably Radcliffe-Brown. The influence of Boas in the United States was quite decisive in gaining American acceptance of the new concept.

foundation stone of social sciences.[80] Any lingering doubts about the acceptance of the term in sociology were relieved by a crucial 1958 article in the *American Sociological Review* by A.L. Kroeber and Talcott Parsons. The authors began by noting a persistent confusion among anthropologists and sociologists: "Sociologists tend to see all cultural systems as a sort of outgrowth or spontaneous development, derivative from social systems. Anthropologists are more given to being holistic and therefore often begin with total systems of culture and then proceed to subsume social structure as merely a part of culture." Hoping to resolve this dilemma, Kroeber and Parsons suggested "that it is useful to define the concept *culture* for most usages more narrowly than has been the case in the American anthropological tradition, restricting its reference to transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior and the artifacts produced through behavior." The term "society" was then to be used to designate the specifically relational system of interaction among individuals and collectivities. Kroeber and Parsons effected a truce on the question of whether culture was best understood from the perspective of society or society from that of culture: "... it is no longer a question of how important each is, but of how each *works* and how they are interwoven with each other."[81] "Culture" could therefore be allowed to flourish alongside structural functionalism, and indeed be partially integrated into the Parsonian schema.

As it has crossed the frontiers of anthropology and entered the world of social discourse, the concept of culture has undergone subtle but substantial alterations. Here, more than anywhere else, non-anthropologists have forgotten that they cannot use "a" concept of culture from anthropology: the best that they can import is a debate, waged vigorously for more than a century, about what culture is. In its modern Parsonian form, for example, culture implies a theory — not unlike others proposed by Parsons — in which ideas and values are seen as determinants of social being.[82] The acceptance of this proposition is a step of immense consequence. On the other hand, in the school of cultural materialism, culture would appear to be a relatively anodyne synonym for "society" and can be explicated by reductionist methods.

In *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*,[83] A.L.

[80] See A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York 1952), 3.

[81] A.L. Kroeber and Talcott Parsons, "The Concepts of Culture and of Social System," *American Sociological Review*, 23 (1958), 582-583, emphasis in original.

[82] A cogent critique of Parsons and his school may be found in V.L. Allen, *Social Analysis: The Marxist Critique and Alternative* (London 1975).

[83] Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture, passim*. A more rigorous analysis of definitions of culture may be found in Albert Carl Cafagna, "A Formal Analysis of Definitions of 'Culture' ", in Gertrude E. Dole and Robert L. Carneiro, eds., *Essays in the Science of Culture: In Honor of Leslie A. White* (New York 1960), 111-32.

Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn assembled nearly 300 definitions of "culture" and showed how broadly the term had been accepted. But this is not all that can be learned from their collection. This maze of definitions provides us with a major clue about the concept of culture. It is true that the concept of culture has won acceptance in virtually all corners of intellectual life. The sheer energy which has been poured into the task of defining "culture" by intellectuals through the years testifies to the extraordinary success of Tyler's concept. But one also has to note that the attempt to find a unifying definition has *failed*, utterly and completely. Kroeber and Kluckhohn did not succeed in reducing the definitions of the ages to one universal definition, despite truly heroic (and wearying) efforts. Even in its most modern form, the concept of culture is deployed to designate four kinds of phenomena: values, norms, beliefs, and expressive symbols. There is no agreement as to the weighting to be attached to each of these factors.[84] It is the vagueness of the term that allows such confusion. Many scholars sympathetic to the concept of culture suggest that this vagueness or flexibility constitutes one of its chief attractions: culture is a term "rich in history" which can accommodate a nearly inexhaustible number of meanings. Rather than protest, we should merely accept this unyielding ambiguity: as in modern post-structuralist criticism, there is no one correct reading.[85] This argument runs counter to any rational or empirical process of verification, and ultimately leads to a nihilistic abandonment of the criteria of truth. Many historians may be driven to put forward such positions out of weariness with theoretical debate: why all this argument, one hears, over one little word! But if "culture" is a word which has become the cornerstone of social science and which is held to have explanatory value, it must be able to stand up to scrutiny. And it must be able to sustain itself without imposing upon its critics the threat of a subtle orthodoxy, that is, the threat of either accepting the term or being denounced as a sympathizer with repressive political regimes. The intrusion of a stridently political language would seem to raise the risk of walling up, totally, the logical and empirical categories of radical humanism.[86] Thus the concept of culture must either be capable of logical

[84] Richard A. Peterson, "Revitalizing the Culture Concept," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 5 (1979), 137-66. Peterson defines values as "choice statements that rank behavior or goals", norms as "specifications of values relating to behavior in interaction", beliefs as "existential statements about how the world operates that often serve to justify values and norms . . .," and expressive symbols as "any and all aspects of material culture." Two points might be made quickly about his definition and his additional comments: the definition constitutes a sharp swing away from Tylor's admixture of material and mental elements, and the term "material culture" in his list of elements is transparently tautological when it is found in a definition of culture itself.

[85] A criticism which might be made of the way Raymond Williams has written on the subject, as for example in *Keywords* (New York 1976), 76-82.

[86] To paraphrase E.P. Thompson, "Interview," *Radical History Review*, 3 (Fall 1976), 20.

and empirical test, or the social historians who have urged its centrality to the materialist project are in fact constructing a "theology," incapable of dialogue with evidence and open rational criticism.[87]

It is quite true that both sides in the humanist/structuralist debate, which has partly involved culture, have accepted the term.[88] This ironic convergence of opinion is at least partly caused by the rejection of logico-historical categories on both sides. But in fact all possible schools of social thought may find safe shelter within the harbour of "culture." It is not for nothing that "culture" became the term *par excellence* of consensus ideology.[89] It is only the revival of Marxist strategies in anthropology that has created a movement *against* the inflation of the term. Historians who adopt the term "culture" as the central element of their analyses are unconsciously mimicking the anthropological fashion of twenty years ago — even though the importation of this concept is still being greeted with loud declarations of theoretical novelty.

Why has the concept of culture been so difficult to define, even by men who have devoted their lives to this work? Zygmunt Bauman has proposed a useful answer in his *Culture as Praxis*, an unjustly overlooked work of social theory.[90] He suggests that the term "culture" will never be clarified because it is the junction of three incompatible lines of thought. I shall adapt his argument for the discussion of contemporary history, for it would appear that in the discipline "culture" merges five distinct and incompatible approaches. On the basis of this argument I am going to suggest that many of the contemporary usages of the term "culture" should be abandoned.

The first of these five concepts of culture is that which defines what is human as opposed to what is a part of the rest of the animal kingdom. This idea Bauman calls the generic concept of culture. This concept is evoked by Clifford Geertz when he writes,

> Man is the toolmaking, the talking, the symbolizing animal. Only he laughs; only he knows that he will die; only he disdains to mate with his mother and sister; only he contrives those visions of other worlds to live in which Santayana called religions, or bakes those mudpies of the mind which Cyril Connolly called art. He has . . . not just mentality but consciousness, not just needs but values, not just fears but conscience, not just a past but a history. Only he has culture.[91]

E.P. Thompson suggests the same emphasis when he urges that "the very

[87] *Ibid.*

[88] A point emphasized in his defence of the term by G.S. Kealey, "Labour and Working-Class History in Canada: Prospects in the 1980s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981), 88.

[89] Robert F. Berkhofer, "Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of a Changing Relationship in American Historiography," in Louis Schneider and Charles Bonjean, eds., *The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences* (New York 1973), 78.

[90] Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, 22-35.

[91] Cited, *Ibid.*, 41-2.

notion of man (as opposed to his anthropoid ancestor) is coincident with culture.... Thus to propose the investigation of 'man' apart from his culture (or his lived history) is to propose an unreal abstraction."[92] Many of the definitions gathered by Kroeber and Kluckhohn fall into this category. Tyler in 1871 speaks of man in general and Malinowski followed in his path.[93] Kroeber presented one of the most comprehensive assessments when he wrote of culture as

> ... the mass of learned and transmitted motor reactions, habits, techniques, ideas, and values — and the behavior they induce — is what constitutes *culture*. Culture is the special and exclusive product of men, and is their distinctive quality in the cosmos.... Culture... is at one and the same time the totality of products of social men, and a tremendous force affecting all human beings, socially and individually.[94]

This search for the specifically human character of mankind is to be found in *Capital* itself, where Marx writes that "... [W]hat distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality."[95]

This generic concept of culture is an indispensable part of social theory, although a number of schools of Western Marxism have crusaded against it.[96] There is always the danger of hypostatizing the concept of "human nature" in a way which denies historical change, and conservatives have always sought to show that inequalities between the sexes and between classes stem from the basic facts of "human nature," which guarantee that sexism and capitalism will always be. But no Marxist strategy committed to human emancipation can avoid a commitment to some concept of the human. However, the difficulty with the cultural definitions I have noted is that they tend to produce a number of peculiarities of the human race without presenting any analysis of their inter-relationships. Geertz's powerful prose makes one forget, but only for a moment, that he has merely listed discrete qualities of human beings without establishing any ordered priorities or any explanation. Yet the point stands that, with the dangerous exception of sociobiology,[97] all major schools of anthropology take their stand on the doctrine of the psychic unity of mankind, and this postulate is essential for any Marxist politics.

The second concept of culture is quite radically different. The generic

[92] E.P. Thompson, "Caudwell," *Socialist Register* (1977), 254.
[93] Cited, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture*, 83.
[94] *Ibid.*, 84.
[95] Marx, *Capital*, I (Modern Library Edn., n.d.), 198.
[96] Balibar's comments on the elimination of "man" from his social theory is the object of an emotional attack in *The Poverty of Theory*, 336-7. Those who wish to be impartial might also want to investigate the views of the Frankfurt Marxists towards philosophical anthropology.
[97] See the excellent critique by Marshall Sahlins, *The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology* (Ann Arbor 1977).

concept of culture sought to define man's nature; the hierarchical concept views "culture" as an essentially detachable part of the human repertoire. This approach to culture is necessarily and always value-saturated. Most frequently in our society this term is applied to the arts — music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film. More problematically it is also applied to the social sciences, the natural sciences, and philosophy. What unites these various activities is the quest for human perfection. It is only in this sense that we can speak with confidence of a conscious *use* of culture: the notion of conscious use presupposes that it is possible to stand *outside* culture and deploy it for other purposes.

The difference between the two approaches is clear. In the first, we *think of culture as an inalienable human trait, something possessed by every* reasoning human being. The hierarchical concept, on the other hand, implies differential access to culture: it is in this sense that we speak of one person being more *cultured* than another. It was against the implied élitism of this approach that many Marxist cultural critics wrote their works: Raymond Williams, for example, reacted strongly against the notion of a "Great Tradition" in literature by insisting on a broader and more comprehensive approach to culture.[98] In general, Marxists, in attempting to turn the hierarchical concept upside down, merely substitute other hierarchies: the insistence on the value and dignity of "popular culture" is an implicit acceptance of the hierarchical definition, although one which tries to modify it.[99] In this line of thought, it is not really possible to think of plural cultures; even attempts to include working-class works of art proceed on the basis of a unified set of values which one seeks to modify but not destroy. This type of culture is the province of Ministries of Culture and Secretaries of State, and corresponds to the most common view of culture understood by the general public. It is also quite clearly a descendant of the older notion of "civilization," which generally suggests refinement, learning, and the pursuit of excellence.[100] The German word *Kultur* was identified with civilization in the time of Kant, but Herder effected a decisive change in his attack on the "assumption of universal histories that 'civilization' or 'culture' — the historical self-development of humanity — was what we would now call a unilinear process, leading to the high and dominant point of eighteenth-century European culture."[101] Nonetheless the older notion of culture lives on. Since we do not have the power to change such things,

[98] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth 1975 [1958]).

[99] See, for example, Tim Patterson, "Notes on the Historical Application of Marxist Cultural Theory," *Science and Society*, 39 (1975), 257-91, an investigation of white country music.

[100] Freud's comment "I scorn to distinguish between culture and civilization" in *The Future of an Illusion* (London 1973 [1928]), 2, succinctly captures the radical nature of his programme and the relative state of these concepts in the 1920s.

[101] Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 78-9.

English-speaking people will no doubt continue to describe the arts and the world of learning as "culture," and taking a position one way or the other is simply redundant.

In both these two senses "culture" is not that difficult to understand. However, what is being debated in social history and anthropology is not encompassed in these first two definitions. It is in the next three differential concepts of culture that the confusions and difficulties begin.[102] Each of the next three approaches attempts to use the concept of culture to explain the *differences* between peoples, strata, or individuals. I term these three approaches to culture "national," "partitive," and "essentialist."

The most common usage, the national concept of culture, merely attempts to explain or denominate differences between tribes, nations, countries, or peoples. Since Herder's day, we have learned that Western Civilization is not the heavenly city, not even in itself a unified structure. In the homeland of multiculturalism and the Quebec question, one does not have to belabour the point that Herder's theoretical distinction has registered the tragic inescapable fact of modern nationalism. Whether history imitated theory is a difficult question to answer. Maurice Godelier hazards a guess that there are approximately 10,000 "groups" which recognize their own identity, history, and culture distinct from, and even opposed to, those of their neighbours.[103] In general "cultures" are thought to conform to major linguistic demarcations, so that in New Guinea, with a population of three million, there would be 600 "cultures" corresponding to the 600 languages or dialects spoken by a minimum of two groups.[104] E.J. Hobsbawm has noted that the best way to establish a claim to "culture" worthy of national independence is to be a dependency of a colonizing power, that is, already marked on the map as a separate territory.[105]

Now the simple fact is that neither Marxism nor any other social theory has proved capable of explaining why national cultures exist or why they differ one from the other or what these differences might be. So great an anthropologist as Lévi-Strauss was reduced, when asked about the ultimate origins of separate cultures in Europe, to saying, "We call ourselves French because we are not Italians, Germans, Spaniards."[106] David Kaplan has quite simply defined culture in this sense as something which does not appear "to be explainable by an appeal to either genetic or panhuman psy-

[102] Bauman's category of the "differential concept" seems to me to be too broad to be useful in a discussion of contemporary social history; I have divided it into three.
[103] Godelier, "Male Domination," 5.
[104] *Ibid.*
[105] E.J. Hobsbawm, "Some reflections on 'The Break-up of Britain' ", *New Left Review*, 105 (1977), 6, n.4.
[106] Cited in Pierre Vilar, "On Nations and Nationalism," *Marxist Perspectives* 2 (1979), 28, n.1. The argument in this article is the direct opposite of the one I am making.

chic traits."[107] We speak routinely of French culture and German culture (and even of Canadian culture) without pretending to be doing anything more than describing "complex wholes" whose appearance and disappearance in history is a mystery to us. Moreover, as anyone knows who has argued about the existence or non-existence of a national culture, the abstraction is almost wholly self-confirming. As Bauman explains,

> If any culture constitutes by definition a unique, cohesive and self-contained entity, then any situation of ambiguity, equivocality, lack of visible unilateral commitments, even of apparent lack of cohesion, tends to be viewed as "encounter" or "clash" between otherwise separate and cohesive cultural wholes. This impact of the differential concept of culture is already so deeply ingrained in popular thinking, that we employ and perceive the notion of "cultural clash" as self-evident, commonsensical truth. . . . Viewing the world through the spectacles of the differential concept, students of culture are forced to trace the roots of any change to some kind of a contact between the culture under study and another culture. Trying to arrange all the data related to the studied community around an internal axis of cohesion, they destroy by the same token potential analytical tools to locate the "inside" causes of change.[108]

And so the dogma of culture may be perpetuated, giving an appearance of explanation to woolly mystification.

The means of distinguishing one culture from another are vague, to put it mildly. In practice we tend to accept the self-definition of collectivities: if enough people say they constitute a separate and distinctive culture we accept the fact. This acceptance, let us note, was a necessary change from the narrow Eurocentric world of the *philosophes*. This acceptance of an obvious fact does not mean that we think we have explained it. The amorphous generality of the concept of culture makes it impossible to envisage our ever doing so. What are we to do with an abstraction which designates the difference existing between an Australian aborigine and a modern citizen of New York, and between the citizens of Britain and Scotland, by the same notation? In practice, "culture" has merely replaced "race" as a *deus ex machina* of social theory. One can pick up any number of books from the early twentieth century — and not obvious precursors of Fascism — in which the terms "race," "civilization" and "culture" are used interchangeably.[109] We now know enough to eliminate crude biological explanations

[107] Cited, Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, 22.

[108] *Ibid.*, 35.

[109] Even in so distinguished a book as Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism* (London 1961 [1914]), where one reads: "It is probably true that a 'Renaissance' of architecture in Italy was, on racial grounds, inevitable. Already in the twelfth century there had been a false dawn of classic style. Indeed, it seems evident that medieval art could exercise but a temporary dominion among peoples who, however little of the authentic Roman strain they might legitimately boast, yet by the origin of their culture stood planted in Roman civilisation" (19-20). A small classic of a transitional period in social terminology!

(although we should never be complacent about the permanence of this change), but we know very little more than that about our "cultures."

Through the abstraction of national culture, Marxism was exposed and in many cases succumbed to irrationalism. All nationalisms are varieties of irrationalism because they explicitly eschew rational theory. It is important to emphasize the ambiguous legacy of the "culture" concept within Marxism, because the Thompsonians, in order to provide their school with an immaculate conception, have implied that the hallmark of authoritarian Marxism is its insistence on the crudest forms of base and superstructure theory, which an emphasis on "culture" will correct.[110] It seems to have escaped their attention that the principal Marxist architect of a theory of culture was Joseph Stalin.[111] One can measure the decline of Leninism almost in these terms: Lenin, dying, uses "culture" in its full Enlightenment sense and denounces the workers for failing to live up to his expectations; Stalin, in wartime, evokes the culture of Old Russia and the "folkways" of her people, explicitly undermining the rationalist tradition.[112] It was under Stalin that the modern Soviet academy took up the concept of culture we now associate with anthropology.[113]

Clearly there can only be one attitude to be taken to the attempts to make "national culture" a major analytical term: unremitting hostility.

Now the difficulties of the other two differential approaches to culture are even more severe. They are also more difficult to discuss. The partitive concept of culture is in many ways a metaphorical adaptation of the anthropological term. It is an attempt to differentiate various value systems *within* a larger "culture" on the basis of the existence of class, strata, or region. This form of the differential concept is predicated on the existence of wider national cultures. It involves the extension by analogy to major divisions within the culture. Although there are clear similarities between this concept and the national approach, there is also a clear difference: cultures such as these are most often the creation of the scholar, who uses these "cultures" as abstractions. While many people might acknowledge the existence of an "American culture," few would pronounce themselves members of a "working-class culture" or a "Southern culture," unless prodded

[110] Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 355-7.

[111] Vilar has shown ("On Nations and Nationalism," 24-8), that the gist of Stalin's argument was present in 1904. Stalin defined the nation as "a stable, historically constituted human community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological formation, that translates itself into a community of culture." Such a concept is not only ultra-empiricist but almost completely circular.

[112] See Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (London 1975 [1968]), 113-4, for evidence that Lenin did not think in terms of cultural "folkways".

[113] Alfred G. Meyer, "The Use of the Term Culture in the Soviet Union," in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture*, 414-23.

by the academics who have deployed these terms. These are distinctly *artificial* categories.

The most important single use of this approach to culture has come in the field of working-class studies. "Working-class culture" is an abstraction which has succeeded more than any other in labour history. No one who has read the field for the last ten years can avoid seeing a great many articles on culture.[114] There are many reasons, good ones, for this development. Yet surely nothing could offer more dramatic, and saddening, evidence of the decline of practical intellectual engagement in a broader working-class movement. Deprived of concrete involvement in the workers' struggles, intellectuals learned to see workers as exotic tribes, as people whose ordinary judgements and opinions required the most elaborate exercises in "decoding." For reasons which the intellectuals could not control — for they worked in a period of working-class defeat, in a time when an active and creative working-class politics was not on the agenda — the workers appeared as though they were part of a distant culture, to be marvelled at, decoded, converted into symbols, and carefully footnoted. There is an unspoken assumption in this reconstruction of the workers as an alien culture: that only the intellectual, with his cultural abstractions, can unravel the mysteries of working-class life. And it was inevitable, given the bleak horizons of socialist politics, that this turn to the notion of working-class culture should take the form of a nostalgic celebration of past cultures, with the implicit assumption that the working class of today is a pale imitation of the "real workers" of the past. Most historical work in this *genre* portrays past workers with enormous capacity to *create* their own moral economies and cultures of resistance; but there is always a tragic fall into the stasis of the (early/mid) twentieth century, a time of bleak collapse of "heroic culture" before the onslaught of "mass culture" or "hegemony" or "incorporation." One could dwell on the inherent implausibility of this view of history: we are being asked to revere a working-class movement which had at best a limited political autonomy, a relatively narrow conception of the scope and ambitions of trade unionism, and an uncritical attitude towards sexism and racism, to the detriment of a working-class movement which has a far fuller sense of political autonomy, a much wider social view of trade unions, and is partially overcoming sexual and racial discrimination. But I will instead underline the *implicit anthropology* of this approach. For none of the workers in the past *knew what they were doing*: it is up to us to reveal — and not to workers but to fellow professionals — the inner truth or essence of their words and actions. "Culture" becomes just as arid an abstraction as all the others: workers may have thought they were making history, although

[114] One famous example: Alan Dawley and Paul Faler, "Working Class Culture and Politics in the Industrial Revolution, 1820-1890," *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1976), 466-80.

not in conditions of their own choosing, but "we" know that they were actually instruments of deeper cultural forces.[115]

But we should not forget that the historians who think in terms of culture do so from honourable motives, most notably the wish to restore to historical materialism and to the working class itself a respect for working-class self-activity. Even here our admiration for the motive must be mixed with skepticism towards the procedure. By a deceptive anthropological relativism, historians have argued themselves into an untenable *ouvrierist* voluntarism. Pierre Bourdieu has noted that beneath the notion of popular culture lie assumptions which undermine its democratic intention:

> Le culte de la "culture populaire" pourrait n'être en plus d'un cas qu'une forme irréprochable du racisme de classe qui conduit à ratifier la dépossession culturelle (justifiant par là la démission du système scolaire). Le style de vie des classes populaires doit ses caractéristiques fondamentales, y compris celles qui peuvent apparaître comme les plus positives, au fait qu'il représente une forme d'adaptation à la position occupée dans la structure sociale: il enferme toujours, de ce fait, ne serait-ce que sous la forme du sentiment de l'incapacité, de l'incompétence, de l'échec, ou, ici, de l'indignité culturelle, une forme de reconnaissance des valeurs dominantes.[116]

A populist *ouvrierism* cannot by its very nature grasp "working-class culture" as *both* resistance and alienation, affirmation and dispossession. It necessarily refuses to confront the wider structures which confine "working-class culture" and to which this "culture" must respond. This is surely self-evident in the case of language, for when a worker acquires a language — something beyond the limits of "self-making" — he acquires a relationship to that language.[117] Just as inevitably, when academic labour historians use language, they tend to cloak their celebrations of spontaneity in thousands of footnotes and their attacks on professionalism (made for the benefit of professional audiences) in the latest, post-structuralist styles. The anti-intellectualism of the intellectuals, the consequence of their "culture shock" when writing of workers, leads to a form of *ouvrierism* that is often condescending and naive.[118]

The historians who are drawn to "culture" because they wish to stress the dignity and autonomy of workers in history should study carefully the

[115] This point had already been made in 1939: ". . . a very peculiar conception of the human animal emerges from the cultural way of viewing behavior. He appears as a bearer of culture, much as factory workers look like 'hands' to their employer. What one sees from the cultural angle is a drama of life much like a puppet show in which 'culture' is pulling the strings from behind the scenes." J. Dollard, "Culture, Society, Impulse, and Socialization," *American Journal of Sociology*, 45 (1939), 52.

[116] Pierre Bourdieu with Monique de Saint-Martin, "Anatomie du Goût," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 2 (1976), 30.

[117] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction In Education, Society and Culture* (Chicago 1979), 116-7.

[118] It goes without saying that while I think this criticism applies to some recent Canadian

record of Oscar Lewis. All of the early statements of the proponents of "working-class culture" as a valid historical abstraction contain ritual denunciations of Lewis. The reason for the easy dismissal of Lewis is not hard to find. Lewis's "culture of poverty" thesis argued that poverty breeds a particular variety of "personality configurations" regardless of the society in which it occurs.[119] Lewis approached the poor families he studied as a skilled ethnographer, and his books contain some of the finest and most engaging attempts to capture lived experience.[120] There is an obvious similarity between Lewis and E.P. Thompson: both men argued passionately in favour of the importance of immediate experience, of the crucially limited value of abstractions, and for a democratic attack on privilege. (It is not often remembered that Lewis, who warmly sympathized with the Cuban Revolution, naively urged upon his fellow anthropologists and sociologists the view that "revolution" might be a suitable cure for the culture of poverty.)[121] But now, we know, Lewis is the favourite author of the New Right. To unravel this intellectual tragedy, we surely have to go beyond the pat answers offered by cultural historians and go to the heart of the matter: this concept of culture itself. Because he used the ambiguous concept of culture, Lewis' poor immigrants could be seen as being the creators of their own "cultures," transmitted through the generations. This concept could encourage some readers to think that the reactionary view that "the poor are always with us" was authorized by the latest word in social science. Lewis reminds us that a well-intentioned declaration of freedom for workers in history may have strange results. "Culture" in this partitive sense does not in fact give us any causal explanation of the phenomena it covers. In the absence of any such explanation, readers may fill in whatever they wish. Lewis also reminds us that words are not innocent and ideas are not inconsequential. We do not yet have a similar right-wing interpretation of

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work — such as Bryan Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal 1979) — such work constitutes an important and decisive first step in the writing of Canadian labour history. The problem of *ouvrierism* will only disappear when a mass base for progressive historical work has been consolidated.

[119] Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty — San Juan and New York* (New York 1965), xlii-liii.

[120] For the debate over Lewis' theories, see C.I. Waxman, *The Stigma of Poverty: A Critique of Poverty Theories and Policies* (New York 1977) and E.B. Leacock, ed., *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (New York 1971).

[121] Lewis and his wife wanted to produce an "oral history of contemporary Cuba" but their project was terminated by the Cuban authorities. See Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis and Susan Rigdon, *Four Men: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana 1977), *Four Women: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana 1977) and *Neighbours: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana 1978).

"working-class culture." But it is not hard to imagine the tack it might take. If, after all, as historians have argued, nineteenth-century workers enjoyed such autonomy in their cultural lives, why not simply return to those conditions of *laisser-faire* and small-scale industry in which such autonomous cultures flourished? Why not restrict university education to the élite, since workers have their own perfectly valid cultures with which to interpret experience? I hope proponents of "working-class culture" will not provide unintentional support, as Oscar Lewis did, for the exclusivist arguments of the right, but if they do, they have only themselves to blame.

The final objection to the notion of working-class culture is its weak explanatory value. No good argument has been presented in the Canadian context for the ability of this abstraction to anticipate hitherto unknown facts or explain the phenomena it names. One might illustrate this problem by attempting to think of a good factual argument against the view that (say) urban workers in Canada had their own distinctive culture. Were they divided on ethnic lines, separated by thousands of miles of barren geography, bitterly opposed to each other on religious grounds? But such mere facts are easily brushed aside: nobody ever claimed that working-class culture was "perfectly homogeneous." Were they divided in their basic social outlook: did some of them see themselves as warm friends of the boss, and others as his bitter enemy? The solution is child's play: every working-class culture has residual and emergent elements, and we should think of culture as a complex tapestry of attitudes and dispositions.[122] Well, then, perhaps these workers had ideas about society which were indistinguishable from those of, say, the middle class? No problem: hegemonic ideas[123] were

[122] The categories of dominant, residual and emergent cultures are developed by Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," an essay now reprinted in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London 1980), 31-49. Without denying the interest and value of this essay, it seems that so "unitarian" a Marxism defines the "mode of production" out of existence and treats all forms of human experience more or less indiscriminately. (See the stimulating critique of Ellen Meiksins Wood, "The Separation of the Economic and Political in Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 127[1981], 66-95.) In practice Williams' categories of "residual and emergent" cultures merely have allowed social historians to indulge in retrospective cheerleading for progressive ideas, and enabled them (at a high theoretical cost) to forget that "emergent" socialist values did not, in fact, "emerge" and win the acceptance of the majority.

[123] "Hegemony" merely restates, within the Marxist tradition, the problems unresolved by "culture." Carl Boggs, for instance, defines hegemony as "the permeation throughout civil society — including the whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches, and the family — of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc. that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it." Carl Boggs, *Gramsci's Marxism* (London 1976), 39. Perry Anderson notes that the complexities of this term are rooted in serious ambiguities in Gramsci's own thought, which oscillated between an emphasis on coercion to an emphasis on the securing of consent. See Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review*, 100 (1977), 49.

indeed present in "the culture" but they were always placed in the context of working-class life. Each and every objection to the theory has its calm, unruffled reply. But this is not a sign of strength, but of confusion. One would place a great deal more confidence in the approach if its proponents would tell us what evidence they would accept *against* their proposition. Were there ever significant populations of Canadian workers who did not have a culture? And if the answer comes back that there is no evidence which could conceivably dislodge the notion of working-class culture, and that it was present whenever and wherever workers gathered together, I would suggest that we have here a fully-fledged theology, with its own purely internal criteria of proof and a consequent inability to explain the history of men and women.

Now the partitive concept of culture is a metaphorical extension of an anthropological idea, but it is at least a plausible metaphor. At least in theory, the "cultures" we think we discern are based in widely-recognized facts of social life: classes, regions, cities. The essentialist concept of culture is similar in that it relies on metaphor, but it cuts itself free from the objective constraints of class or locality and flies away into the sky. The most common indication that this concept of culture is being evoked is the phrase, "a culture of..." or "the culture of." The creation of a "culture" of this type is easy. First select a number of things that you think are interesting or important. You may think that the most interesting thing is the automobile. Now you assume that this thing has a double existence. On the one hand, there is the simple fact: people are driving automobiles. But on the other hand, this phenomenon is the receptacle of subjectivity, alive with inner meanings projected from ourselves; if we read it correctly, the automobile leads us to the expression of a collective consciousness and thence to the "prevailing value system." The phenomena that one sees become the essence, the hidden secret, of a culture. From the automobile, then, one steps with assurance to the "automobile culture" or the "freeway culture." One of the most convenient aspects of this terminology is that it operates away from any empirical or logical controls. One need merely go from the phenomena to the platonic essence, and thence to the "culture" of these essences.

It is here that one sees the opening of the flood-gates of irrationalism. We are now deluged with "cultures", since scholars have managed to invent a "culture" for virtually every type of individual they stumble across. Some of this work is of value. By taking up certain problems and associating them with others, some instructive linkages have been made and (most importantly) some serious politico-ethical criticism has been made.[124] But for the most part this metaphor has been badly damaged through over-use.

[124] See, for example, Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York 1963), a searing indictment of contemporary capitalism.

Consider, for example, the work of one historian somewhat influenced by E.P. Thompson, Christopher Lasch. In *The Culture of Narcissism* Lasch notes a whole variety of things: the decline of the work ethic, the erosion of authority, the corruption of standards in the schools, the spread of permissiveness, the rise of delusive therapies for "personal fulfillment," oral sex, the fear of growing old, the degradation of sport, the cynical view that politics is a spectacle, the cult of sensuality, homosexuality, etc. To a vulgar mind, each of these things might be best examined as a separate problem; but for an essentialist approach to culture, they all disclose, on investigation, a "secret essence." This essence is indeed the "culture of narcissism," which underlies each one of these social facts and gives them coherence. We might well want to wonder, with many others, how Marxists are supposed to absorb this anti-feminist, rather authoritarian Freudianism and whether some of Lasch's ethical critique might not have been better expressed outside the "scientific" language of psychotherapy.[125] (No doubt Lasch could then diagnose "resistance.") But instead we should focus in on the method itself. This method of cultural analysis sees essences in everything, all things may be made to conform to the original model. Contrary evidence cannot be assembled against such a theory.

This creation of "cultures" — cultures of control, cultures of consolation, cultures of free enterprise — has become the major intellectual pastime of our day. E.P. Thompson, by far the most formidable and critical of the historical proponents of culture,[126] reels out culture after culture in the *Poverty of Theory:* the "earlier campus culture" which allegedly explains Talcott Parsons, part of the more general "American college culture," which is no doubt connected with "Californian culture" (all this on one page!), the "atheist culture" which helps explain Edward Thompson, and so on and so forth.[127] This profusion of "cultures" defeats explanation. One might take from Thompson's protest against structuralism a parable which makes the point. Try to imagine a woman factory worker with two children who lives in the Maritimes, is active in the NDP, takes in the occasional lecture at the university, and has trouble disciplining her family. Now we can describe her average day as a trip in and out of hundreds of "cultures." She wakes up and gets breakfast for her husband (part of "women's culture"), quarrels

[125] Stephen Black, in a quiet and restrained review in *Queen's Quarterly*, 87 (1980), 532-534, suggests that Lasch has abused psychiatric categories in the course of his polemic. Lasch, he correctly observes, has done something for which he himself has pilloried Erich Fromm and other popularizers of Freud: removed a psychoanalytic idea from its clinical context and made it into an analogy, rather than using the idea to generate new perceptions and interpretations.

[126] Thompson's critical approach to anthropology, in "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History," *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 247-66, stands in vivid contrast to the writings of many of his North American followers.

[127] Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 100, 108.

with her children (tell-tale signs of the "culture of narcissism") and opens the mail, which consists largely of bills (the penalty of living in a "consumer culture"). Finally she goes to work ("women's work culture," of course[128]) and kicks the time-clock as she enters the premises (a "culture of resistance"). Some of her fellow workers think she's crazy (they are prisoners of a "culture of deference," like many Canadians) but others think what she has done is wonderful (because they are the *träger* of a "culture of resistance"). After an otherwise uneventful day at the factory (part, no doubt, of a "technological machine culture") she goes home. In the evening she first goes to an NDP meeting (which we might *very* generously describe as a modest part of a "Maritime socialist culture") and thence to a lecture at the university (where a professor is discoursing on the "culture of the working class"). She throws a book at the professor — right in the middle of his lecture — and stalks out. The learned gentleman looks startled, but soon returns to his address: he is too far gone in the "culture of confusion" to be roused from his reveries.

And so the grand concept of culture is reduced to this: a buzz-word for any general phenomena or situation which happens to engage our interest. Under the new, libertarian edict, we may fashion however many cultures as we want; indeed, every oppressed group must have one. What constitutes the "proper" use of so imprecise and vague a differentiating term?

It is clear that of these five concepts of culture, only two can (with reservations) be accepted as major theoretical terms by historical materialism. National approaches to culture can be accepted as descriptive tools, but must be resolutely rejected as analytical terms. Although much creative and impressive work has been done by those using the last two concepts of culture, it is clear that they raise as many questions as they answer. In fact, there is a clear case for the abandonment of the term "culture" simply on the grounds of intelligibility. So malleable a word occupies a central place in social history and theory at the high price of incomprehensibility.

The distinction between the kinds of concepts of culture is somewhat artificial in that the emotional power of the word is greatest when writers draw on all its meanings simultaneously. The most holistic approaches to culture invest it with the same qualities that Spinoza attached to God as a *causa immanens:*

> Culture, however we define it, is central to everything we do and think. It is what we do and the reason why we do it, what we wish and why we imagine it, what we perceive and how we express it, how we live and in what manner we approach

[128] The concept of "women's work culture" has been popularized by a number of historians in the journal *Radical America*. Compound modifiers of "culture" always imply a latent typology of cultures: thus "women's work culture" implies at least three further formulations: "men's work culture", "women's general culture", and "men's general culture". The "cultures" are fruitful and multiply, free from all empirical constraint.

death. It is our environment and the patterns of our adaptation to it. It is the world we have created and are still creating; it is the way we know ourselves and each other; it is our web of personal relationships, it is the images and abstractions that allow us to live together in communities and nations. It is the element in which we live.[129]

Enter the temple of culture, and be, as Ida put it in *Brighton Rock*, at one with the One.

Many writers reject this totalization of their concept. Sider notes that the "anthropological concept of culture" is "ahistorical, non-processual and totalizing:" first because everything becomes, or is considered, "culture," and second because everyone in the society is supposed to have the same culture.[130] Raymond Williams provides us with a more muted protest against the all-absorbing qualities of the concept. Certainly in his best-known work on the subject, "culture" was seen in a very comprehensive way as "relationships between elements in a whole way of life," which was slightly modified later to a "constitutive social process, creating specific and different 'ways of life'."[131] In his most recent study, *Culture*, Williams acknowledges the force of many of the criticisms levelled against his earlier approach. He notes that the modern history of the concept of culture is a search for a general concept which might indicate the "complex interrelations" of various types of cultural analysis, but that the insistence on a definition of culture as "a whole way of life" left analysts with a "crucial absence of significant relational terms beyond it."[132] Williams is now urging the adoption of a notion of culture as a realized signifying system, made up of one very wide signifying system (language, codes, rules) and many very obvious sub-systems (such as art, literature, and drama). While Wil-

[129] Bernard Ostry, *The Cultural Connection: An Essay on Culture and Government Policy in Canada* (Toronto 1978), 1. The theological approach to culture was typified by Brian Stock, an important figure in the revival of the "cultural" approach in the 1970s. As he argued in 1964 ("Why Young Men Leave," *The Atlantic Monthly* [November 1964], 113-4): "Canada is a land which possesses only raw earth, and therefore she can only nourish the body; she has no Zeitgeist, and therefore she cannot nourish the soul. . . . At times when I was at home I felt a vague 'Canadianness.' It was thin and wispy, but it said quite clearly to me, Canada. . . . Yet the voice was too weak. It never clutched my inmost nature." But Stock solved his problem by using the anthropological concept of culture; an "invisible" popular culture was there all along, providing the *Zeitgeist* we all long for. See Brian Stock, "English Canada: the visible and the invisible cultures," *Canadian Forum* (March 1973), 29-33.

[130] Sider, "Ties That Bind," 2.

[131] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London 1977), 19.

[132] Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London 1981), 210. Williams presents an almost classically ethnocentric argument that while "primitive" societies are well-served by a simple "culture/nature" approach, "complex" societies need something more substantial. Few anthropologists would accept his assumption.

liams' new position preserves the holism of his earlier approach, there is at least in this third revision of his argument a greater attention paid to preserving and clarifying distinctions. Yet the programme cannot be judged because Williams has confined his actual analysis to art and has not justified his theory with an empirical demonstration of its worth. He does not ponder the utility of retaining the same term to cover the three different approaches he has used.

It will not be easy to give up the differential concepts of culture. They appeal to our emotions in ways which ordinary abstractions cannot. "Culture" in the hands of a master becomes an almost magical word. There is a rich legacy of humanism on which to draw, and the concept allows us to invest the description of ordinary life with a sense of nobility and purpose. At times the rhetoric is transparent. If I write, for example, of the heroic culture of Canadians, the ethical and nationalist values which I stand for are close to the surface. Although I am mixing two types of discourse — the moral and the analytical — most readers are sufficiently alert to chauvinism that they will not be swept along. For E.P. Thompson, the concept of culture is of such importance that it is to be defended, if necessary, against Marx and those readers of Marx who think (correctly) that he cannot be pressed into a "cultural" mould. Certainly the approach to culture championed by Thompson is becoming the dominant approach in Canadian social history. But it does so at a high analytical cost. For Thompson — and herein lies his artistry — plays the concept of culture like a virtuoso, appealing now to the social sciences and now to ethics in his elaboration of this idea. But if the problems of "heroic culture" in a national context are evident, is it not right to note that "heroic culture" is not only the dominating *motif* of Thompson's work, but constitute the last words of his masterpiece?[133]

The term should be reserved for philosophers who wish to explore the essence of humanity and the realm of aesthetics. Working theorists and historians can have little use for so indeterminate an abstraction. "Culture" in its most common applications merely designates a central but empty place where the theories of historical materialism should be.

V

BUT IT WOULD BE dangerously misleading to leave the matter there, because one would run the risk of creating a false alignment in the debate over "culture." While there might be certain superficial similarities between a conventional mainstream critique of the new cultural history and the critique based on historical materialism, in fact these two critiques are diametrically

[133] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1970 [London 1963]), 915. Editions after the first included a lengthy postscript.

opposed to each other and proceed in opposite directions. For mainstream historians, the failings of the concept of "culture" provide an opportunity to retreat to the numbing banalities of biographical history and the concealed irrationalism of historicist explanation. Spokesmen for this retreat see it as an emergence from a looking-glass world back to the world of good, plain facts.[134] But this step backwards is profoundly inimical to the position I am proposing. The apt comparison is not with Alice and the Looking Glass, but Theseus and the Labyrinth. The historians of the working class who have been stressing the importance of "culture" have transformed the field; they have provided us with the first, preliminary sketches of the social world which must now be perfected. This transformation must be consolidated and not repealed. But the lines of explanation offered us by "culture" do not extend very far into the Labyrinth of the social world, and they lead back to the same starting place. The Labyrinth remains unsolved, and the only choice is to try and develop more rigorous concepts which will take us further, until at some distant date we have mastered the Labyrinth and can change it. "Culture" must be rejected not because it deals with an imaginary world, but because it offers insufficient explanations of a real one.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu and his school in France offers the most promising new approaches to the problem. Bourdieu blends the approaches of history, anthropology, and sociology; he is both an empirical and theoretical writer. His style tends to be rather abstract and difficult, and he shares with other Parisian intellectuals the annoying habit of assuming that the rest of the world desperately needs to know just where he differs with his confrères. But I would like to argue that historians should read Bourdieu, because he offers tentative and partial solutions to some of the debates which have been going on in social history.[135]

Bourdieu is trying to create a materialist science of symbols. His work is aimed *against* a subjectivist (or phenomenological) approach. It is also an explicit polemic *against* structuralist writers such as Lévi-Strauss and Louis

[134] David Jay Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981), 95-112.

[135] Major works by Bourdieu include *The Algerians* (Boston 1962); *Algeria 1960* (London 1979); "Symbolic Power," in Dennis Gleason, ed., *Identity and Structure: Issues in the Sociology of Education* (Dunmifield 1977), 112-19; Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London 1977); Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture* (Chicago 1979). A more complete listing of the works of this school may be found in *Reproduction*. Critical analyses of Bourdieu include David Swartz, "Pierre Bourdieu: The Cultural Transmission of Social Inequality," *Harvard Educational Review*, 47 (1977), 545-55; Paul DiMaggio, "On Pierre Bourdieu," *American Journal of Sociology*, 84 (1979), 1460-74; and the particularly useful article by Louis Pinto, "La Théorie de la Pratique," *La Pensée*, 178 (1974), 54-76.

Althusser. Bourdieu is interesting to read in light of the present debate in social history, because he is arguing against *both sides*.

For the phenomenological schools (defined by Bourdieu broadly enough to take in contemporary British "culturalism") the aim of inquiry is to make explicit the truth of the primary experience of the social world. Against the "static" (i.e. logical) constructions of theory, these schools prefer the reconstruction of inner apprehensions of reality. Culture, in all such interpretations, is the realm of freedom. What is rejected by the phenomenological schools is the possibility of an objective science. Class, for example, cannot be construed as a "thing;" to do so reduces living men to inert objects. A distinctive preoccupation of all such approaches is "interactions," interpreted in the terms of the agents to the interaction themselves. Bourdieu notes that subjectivism uses a defence of "primary experience" as a way of attacking science and logic. Now Bourdieu does not reject the importance or value of all such approaches. What such approaches forget is that interactions between individuals owe their form to the "objective structures which have produced the dispositions of the interacting agents and which allot them their relative positions in the interaction and elsewhere."[136] Bourdieu stresses that while phenomenological approaches seem to offer explanations, what they often provide are "complicitous descriptions," which in taking at face value the common sense of the participants, merely perpetuate self-serving notions of the ordinary. Since Bourdieu thinks the fundamental problem of sociology and anthropology is to explain why systems of domination persist and reproduce themselves without conscious recognition by society's members, it follows that he must reject any social science based on the subjective perceptions of participants, or on commonsense classifications of social groups or social problems, because these can only reinforce and confirm the very domination he regards as problematic.[137] In Marxist social history we are presently living through a period of intense subjectivism — consider the cult of "lived experience" and the elevation of oral history to a privileged position among research strategies — and Bourdieu's warning is direct and timely.

Do we then move over into the camp of the hardline structuralists, whose very terms force us to break with primary experience? No: Bourdieu's harshest critique is reserved for them. Objectivism (and Bourdieu sees "structuralist hermeneutics" as a particular case of this more general type of knowledge) constructs the objective relations, and questions the lived experience, of the social world. Characteristically objectivism creates *models* and suggests the *rules* underlying experience. Bourdieu believes that the objectivist approach has, in fact, objective limitations. It is by definition, the approach of those who are *excluded from the activities*. Bourdieu

[136] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 81.
[137] DiMaggio, "Pierre Bourdieu," 1461-2.

uses the analogy of learning a musical instrument or a game:

> Just as the teaching of tennis, the violin, chess, dancing, or boxing breaks down into individual positions, steps or moves, practices which integrate all these artificially isolated elementary units of behaviour into the unity of an organized activity, so the informant's discourse, in which he strives to give himself the appearance of symbolic mastery of his practice, tends to draw attention to the most remarkable "moves," i.e. those most esteemed or reprehended, in the different social games, . . . rather than to the principle from which these moves and all equally possible moves can be generated and which, belonging to the universe of the undisputed, most often remain in their implicit state.[138]

In this way, objectivism, which is conditioned by the separateness of its practitioners from the social realities they study, is condemned either to ignore the question of why regularities in fact occur, or else hypostatize abstractions by endowing them with social efficacy.[139]

No doubt many North American readers will stir uneasily in their seats as Bourdieu delivers this lesson in epistemology, but what he is saying is absolutely central. In essence he is repeating (without perhaps being conscious of this lineage) Marx's critique of Hegel.[140] Bourdieu is charging that the structuralists have hypostatized their concepts. In an argument of breath-taking originality, he goes over a classic area of anthropology — the study of gift-giving — and shows that his critique is not aimed at a naive restitution of "native experience" but a more comprehensive scientific knowledge. Mauss presented an analysis of gift-giving in various societies in terms of what the gifts meant to participants: he separated the various aspects of gift-exchange as the obligations to give, to receive, and to repay. Lévi-Strauss effected a break with Mauss by looking at the gift in terms of an "objective" model of reciprocity, arguing that the "mechanical laws" of the cycle or reciprocity are the unconscious principle of the obligation to give, give in return, and receive. But while his model represents an advance in knowledge, it is by definition that of an observer, for whom the structure is fundamentally defined by its reversability. This model, created from the outside, cannot include *strategy* or *time:* in actual practice, the gift cannot be repaid by an identical object, nor repaid immediately. Therefore Lévi-Strauss has objectified the gift, and thereby missed its full truth.

"The observer's totalizing apprehension substitutes an objective structure fundamentally defined by its *reversibility* for an equally objectively *irreversible* succession of gifts which are not mechanically linked to the gifts they respond to or insistently call for. . . ."[141] Note carefully that Bourdieu's critique is not one of subjectivism. He does not protest against Lévi-Strauss on the grounds that he has displaced the subjective truth of gift

[138] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 18-9.
[139] *Ibid.*, 27.
[140] Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel*, ch. 6.
[141] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 5.

exchange by imposing a logical model. It is, rather, that in presenting a mechanical model of reciprocity Lévi-Strauss has forgotten that the ritual depends on individual and collective misrecognition *(méconnaissance)* of the objective reality of the exchange. To return the gift immediately is to refuse it; everything depends on timing and choice of occasion. Gift exchange occurs in such a way that one might suppose the participants' manipulation of style and time are designed to conceal from themselves and others the objective truth of their practice, "which the anthropologist and his models bring to light simply by substituting the timeless model for a scheme which works itself out only in and through time."[142]

The demonstration is repeated again and again; the citadels of structuralist anthropology (such as kinship and the analysis of myths) fall one by one. This assault is completely convincing. What Bourdieu is in fact showing is that the debate betweeen the "humanist" and the "structuralist" readers of Marx is in fact being waged between two partial appropriations or steps in the production of objective knowledge. It is hardly enough for structural Marxists to declare war on subjectivism because this alone does not really break with it; it merely allows one to fall in to the "fetishism of social laws to which objectivism consigns itself when in establishing between structure and practice the relation of the virtual to the actual, of the score to the performance, of essence to existence," and to substitute "for the creative man of subjectivism a man subjugated to the dead laws of natural history."[143] Bourdieu hopes to transcend this fruitless debate by putting forward a materialist theory of practice, one which takes the "next step" beyond objective models.

Bourdieu has redefined the study of "culture" and has proposed a whole set of new terms with which to analyze society. But what is even more — and what is more apt to win readers among historians — Bourdieu has grounded all these new concepts in a massive empirical enterprise: his concepts have tackled such subjects as education, art, science, language, power, and stratification in Algeria and France. In contrast to virtually all other aspects of French intellectual life, the new encyclopedists surrounding Bourdieu have shown tremendous respect for empirical research, including work on English working-class "culture."

Bourdieu's special interest is the delineation of the mechanisms of symbolic domination and control. He has shared the general disillusionment with simple base-and-superstructure explanations of social change; the particular motivation behind Bourdieu's rethinking of the older model was the Algerian revolution. For in a period of rapid transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist economy, the older model was so inadequate that one had to be "blind to reality to reduce the economic agents to mere reflections of the

[142] *Ibid.*, 6.
[143] *Ibid.*, 84.

economic structures and to fail to pose the problem of the genesis of economic dispositions and the economic and social conditions of their genesis."[144] This rejection of a simple model of base and superstructure does not mean that Bourdieu has rejected historical materialism; his work on symbolic power accepts a Marxist definition of classes: while Bourdieu is interested in symbolic power, the material sphere is the vital nucleus of change, classes are seen as the decisive forces in the social world. This is clear in a short *précis* of his position Bourdieu wrote in 1977:

> Different classes and class fractions are engaged in a specifically symbolic struggle to impose the definition of the social world most in conformity with their interests. The field of ideological positions reproduces in transfigured form the field of social positions. They may carry on this struggle either directly in the symbolic conflicts of everyday life or indirectly through the struggle waged by the specialists in symbolic production (full time producers), in which the object at stake is the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence — that is to say, the power to impose (and even indeed to inculcate) instruments of knowledge and expression of social reality (taxonomies), which are arbitrary (but unrecognized as such). The field of symbolic production is a microcosm of the struggle between the classes. It is by serving their own interests in the struggle internal to the field of production (and to this extent alone) that these producers serve the interests of groups external to their field of production.[145]

Bourdieu's special interest is what others would call the "class cultures:" the unspoken assumptions, "commonsense," and apperceptions characteristic of a given class. The imposition of such arbitrary categories is essential to a system of class domination. Bourdieu has introduced several new concepts — habitus, symbolic violence, symbolic capital, field of force — which cover the same ground as "culture" and "hegemony." It can easily be shown that merely this more specific demarcation is a major accomplishment, but it is also possible that Bourdieu has in fact made a permanent theoretical breakthrough with this work.

The *habitus* is the central theoretical term. This is the link between structure and individual practice; it might be translated as "ethos," but not precisely.[146] The *habitus* is created in early childhood through family socialization; it is carried through life, although modified by encounters with the world. The *habitus* is neither purely subjective nor purely objective. As Bourdieu explains, the *habitus* is a durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations.

> The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to functions as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without

[144] *Algeria 1960*, vii.

[145] Bourdieu, "Symbolic Power," 115.

[146] Bourdieu uses "ethos" to cover roughly similar terrain in *Algeria 1960*, but *habitus* would imply a more precise theorization of how an ethos is made.

in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.[147]

No doubt somewhere halfway through this definition — perhaps at that phrase "structuring structures" — readers impatient with Parisian discourse gave up. But it is not really that obscure a notion. An analogy, and one in fact close to the origins of the concept, can be had in language and speech: the next words you speak are neither completely predictable nor entirely unregulated: you will select, in a regulated and regular way, a sentence from the infinite number you might make, without in any way having this choice *determined* for you. The *habitus* works in much the same way, except that because of early childhood socialization, the agent's actual freedom is more restricted. If we wish to think in the older terms of "culture," then in this version culture is not the heroic realm of self-making but a historically constituted and materially determined set of conceptions, categories, beliefs and "commonsense," which through regulated improvisation provides a means of grasping potentialities in the future. Through *habitus* agents select appropriate strategies and learn what is "right for the likes of them;" the *habitus*, as an unwritten and unexamined set of cognitive and motivating structures, produces practical strategies. For Bourdieu insists upon this point: it is folly to write as though classes may be *reduced* to their past or to their present, when in fact they are as much defined by the objective chances of success or failure.

The *habitus* is subjective, but not individual, internalization of structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class.[148] Through the *habitus* the individual integrates relatively independent causal series, yet since there is a vital similarity between individuals of given social classes (who are statistically more likely to have had the same experiences), this means that we can speak of a class *habitus*, a class-based tendency to respond to similar situations (the "emergency situations of everyday life") in similar ways. Bourdieu thus eliminates the problem of explaining social reality either by postulating hundreds of separate "cultures" each corresponding to some set of phenomena, and the problem of specifying relatively autonomous "levels" each reflecting a structural division. In reality individuals integrate the various "cultures" and "levels:" nobody truly sees his own world in terms of moving from one culture to another at random. Bourdieu insists that the principle of this integration can be understood and laid bare. Because it represents an endless capacity to engender products — thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions — whose limits are established by the conditions of childhood, "the con-

[147] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 72.
[148] *Ibid.*, 86.

ditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings."[149]

This notion of *habitus* stakes out a far more precise theory of society (and of social history) than does the concept of culture. We should note that there are important lingering ambiguities. Bourdieu's love of paradox (regulated improvisation, durably installed structuring structures) makes the concept more obscure than in fact it need be. The objection that "We are told that the initial *habitus* is durable but, since it is also transformable, we are never sure just what difference this durability makes, or under what circumstances it makes a difference for what phenomena,"[150] is true as far as it goes. But Bourdieu's insistence on the crucial importance of early childhood makes it clear that he does not believe that large modifications are in fact made in the *habitus* during the rest of life. The *habitus* is, after all, the principle on which transformations are made, not itself the sum total of all the individual changes. It is also true that Bourdieu has not given us the empirical proof that the structures laid down in childhood are as crucial as he says, or conform to class positions. There is, however, nothing in the concept which would preclude the scientific testing of this hypothesis.

Bourdieu has applied the concept concretely in a number of empirical studies. Using a questionnaire and open-ended interviews, Bourdieu and his associates studied the popular and bourgeois responses to art and literature in France. They found that tastes in music and in culture generally followed very regular class patterns. Perhaps the most impressive — almost astonishing — illustration of the concept is Bourdieu's work on the Kabyle house and body language, surely two of the most rigorous efforts to analyze material life and make sense of its involuntary symbolism.[151]

Bourdieu uses the concept of the "field of force" as a metaphor for the totality, although it also comes into play in more restrictive senses (intellectual field). The field resembles a magnetic field; it is made up of a series of power lines. The "constituting agents or system of agents may be described as so many forces which, by their existence, opposition or combination, determine its specific structure at a given moment in time. In return, each of these is defined by its particular position within this field from which it derives *positional properties* which cannot be assimilated to intrinsic properties."[152] This metaphor captures the essence of Althusser's structure-in-dominance without the metaphysical assumption of a structural causality.

[149] *Ibid.*, 95.

[150] DiMaggio, "Pierre Bourdieu," 1467. DiMaggio's related charge that Bourdieu is interested primarily in class struggles within the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie misses the import of the early work on Algeria, which provided the impetus behind the entire project.

[151] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 92; *Algeria 1960*, 133-53.

[152] Cited, Dimaggio, "Pierre Bourdieu," 161.

E.P. Thompson has used this concept with effect in his recent essay on eighteenth-century English society.[153] In his enquiry into contemporary French popular and élite culture, Bourdieu and his associates actually prepare a model of the "field of force" in music, literature, and painting, which represents graphically the social space within which we can locate, for example, the "Art of the Fugue." The empirical procedures are at times puzzling, but the concept seems a stimulating and pathbreaking one, which suggests parallels between seemingly disparate phenomena. The impact of such an idea on the traditional notion of culture is to recapture some of its evocation of "totality" without a corresponding slide into mysticism. The totality evoked by the metaphor is seen as a complex field in which agents, products, and preferences are given their co-ordinates according to the fundamental axes of the social relations of production.[154]

Bourdieu captures the hierarchical notion of culture with his phrase "cultural capital," which denotes those symbolic elements valued by the bourgeoisie, from proper speech and good manners to esoteric knowledge and an appreciation of art. Bourdieu's idea is that individuals and classes spend money to get cultural capital, which in turn is reinvested to gain further money and power. As we would expect, Bourdieu is trying to transcend a false dichotomy: the opposition between the narrow definition given "economic interest" by reductionist materialism and the "enchanted" and "mystified" view of culture given by idealism. Bourdieu rejects the idealized view of primitive societies which places no emphasis on self-interested behaviour and focusses instead on allegedly irrational or passionate acts. In fact, Bourdieu argues, there is an element of calculation in most practices. The trouble with both the economist and romantic views of primitive society is that they do not "extend economic calculation to *all* the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation — which may be 'fair words' or smiles, handshakes or shrugs, compliments or attention, challenges or insults, honour or honours, powers or pleasures, gossip or scientific information, distinction or distinctions, etc."[155] Bourdieu gives a concrete instance of this complex mixture of motives. A reductive materialism can only dismiss as absurd the behaviour of a family which has purchased a second pair of oxen after the harvest, on the grounds that they are needed for treading out the grain, only to sell them again for lack of fodder. But a more complex materialism would note that the oxen were added for symbolic purposes, since the family purchased them in the late-summer period when marriages are negotiated.[156]

[153] E.P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?", *Social History*, 3 (1978), 157.
[154] Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, "Anatomie du Goût," *passim*.
[155] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 178, emphasis in original.
[156] *Ibid.*, 179.

The academic degree in western society is to cultural capital what money is to economic capital. By creating a system of equivalent qualifications, the educational system encourages the free flow of cultural capital and establishes a market mechanism for its convertibility into money. Although academic qualifications are held by particular persons, their very logic allows all holders of the same certificate to enter the market with roughly the same value. The cultural capital represented by the degree does not have to be constantly proved once the degree is granted.[157] At the same time, a serious "inflation of honours" may make many who have invested in degrees regret the economic sacrifices imposed by the pursuit of learning, since this is no longer rewarded by guaranteed success on the job market. Classes are demarcated by their symbolic or cultural capital; the imposition of these arbitrary systems forces different strategies on different strata. For example, the middle class views education as a far more crucial area of social mobility than does the haute bourgeoisie; the working class, arbitrarily excluded, realistically views education as a dead end. The alleged democratic and humane values of the university in fact serve to intensify and legitimate élitism.

Finally, Bourdieu's rendering of "hegemony" as "symbolic violence" brings materialism face to face with the Weberian definition of the state as that which holds a monopoly of the legitimate means of physical violence. Bourdieu greatly extends this concept to include all impositions by arbitrary authorities of arbitrary "cultural" systems.[158] The ritual of the seminar, for instance, is produced by the collusion of students and professors, both sides having a stake in preserving the illusion of co-operative intellectual effort. Working-class students who attend university are in fact punished for lacking the spontaneous, "cultured" stance of the privileged students; rather than training or teaching, university education merely confirms class differentials and in fact make these arbitrary standards appear to be natural ones. The physical lay-out of universities stress lecturing; and the formal lecture elevates the role of the professor as the legitimate transmitter of cultural goods. Classroom knowledge is not a negotiated outcome between professor and student but the imposition, through symbolic violence, of arbitrary meanings by the professor, and through him the social structure. Bourdieu, like Gramsci, is interested in why classes support a system which oppresses them, and he answers with a reformulation of the classic Marxist position: not only are the ruling ideas, in every age, those of the ruling class, but these ideas themselves reinforce the rule of that class by concealing their basis in the realities of economic and political power.[159]

It is hard to summarize this vast and compelling array of theories, prop-

[157] *Ibid.*, 187.
[158] Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction*, xi-xii.
[159] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 190-7.

ositions, hypotheses, and observations, and equally difficult to be sure that one has accurately captured the argument. Bourdieu draws on a perplexingly broad set of philosophers and theorists; from Hegel to Wittgenstein, from Marx to Weber. There is room for a variety of positions. Not all of Bourdieu's approach is clear or successful. The notion of *habitus* is not free from ambiguity, the use of such terms as "capital" very free and easy, the links between various elements of the synthesis weakly drawn. Bourdieu rests on the concept of "relative autonomy" without always spelling out how relative and autonomous the phenomenon actually is. Bourdieu's emphasis on expectation ("the causality of the probable") can be read as an improbable assertion that individual expectations are synchronized perfectly with objective possibilities. The abundant metaphors and paradoxes seem at times a weak substitute for a more detailed, testable set of propositions.

And doubts can be raised about the long-term convergence of classic mainstream sociology and historical materialism Bourdieu seems to be proposing. Bourdieu has in fact become less interested in working-class studies as he has progressed: his brilliant *Algeria 1960* was very much a study of working-class and sub-proletarian Algerians, while his latter cultural investigations seem preoccupied with fractions of the bourgeoisie. The absorption of the class categories of structural Marxism (of which "fraction" is the most obvious) has not been accompanied by a rigorous examination of their plausibility. Throughout one has the sense that while Bourdieu in his earlier Algerian work was influenced by a society in ferment and upheaval, his mature theory has been formed in the context of a stable capitalist society. Bourdieu seems therefore to present to us a highly theorized portrait of a society at rest, capable of endlessly reproducing itself. In fact, things may not always work so clearly. There can be enormous miscalculations on a collective level; expectations may be held by large classes which do not in fact conform to objective possibilities. Bourdieu notes, with evident sorrow, that workers are made incapable by the deep conditioning of their childhoods to seize historical opportunities, but he might also consider those historical instances of working classes who have been seized with a sense of possibility which was not objectively justified. Millennarian moments have not been unknown in the working-class movement. Bourdieu also seems, most particularly in his work on French education, to be focussing on status groups as opposed to social classes in his analysis, so that the implicit materialism of his work is qualified and diminished by too great a concession to Weber.

These are not minor caveats, but they do not detract from the extraordinary interest of this vast enterprise. Bourdieu raises the possibility of creating a science of the reproduction of structures, a study of the "laws that determine the tendency of structures to reproduce themselves by producing agents endowed with the system of predispositions which is capable of engendering practices adapted to the stuctures and thereby contributing to

the reproduction of the structures."[160] It is too early, perhaps, to say if he has succeeded, and whether such concepts as *habitus* and symbolic violence will become the accepted terms of such a discipline. Certainly the prime obstacle is the absence of a more rigorously materialist concern for the social relations of production, which require far more detailed and systematic treatment. But Bourdieu is proposing amendments to the concept of culture which rescue it from many of its intractable difficulties. He is reinstating a materialist logic within anthropology and sociology, and an actively historical sense to the study of structures. His work must be watched carefully, and should not be lightly dismissed. It represents an extraordinary synthesis of approaches and disciplines, and a genuine commitment to a materialist social science.

FOR OR AGAINST anthropology? We have given a long, complex answer to a simple question. But the question, as it is being posed in the field of social history and in debates among Marxists, is in fact far too simple. The answer in large part invalidates the question: we can not be for or against anthropology, but only for or against propositions advanced by various schools of anthropology at various times. It is nonetheless possible to draw up a kind of balance sheet: anthropology has helped widen the field of social history and make us look again at the commonplace, without providing us with abstractions which could bring this vast new territory within the realm of materialist explanation.

If we ask the question merely as a matter of interdisciplinary exchange, it is hard to understand why any undue importance should be attached to it. The whole concept of the discipline has assumed its present importance during the temporary reign of the university as the principle intellectual centre. It is hard to imagine that this reign will continue indefinitely, or that future forms of intellectual life will find much to admire in the organization of disciplines within the university. If, however, we ask the question as a way of resolving issues within historical materialism, the matter is rather more serious. Two things can be said. The first is that the principles of abstraction employed in contemporary anthropology tend to differ significantly from the central methods of the Marxist tradition. Anthropologists could be said to be using two different sets of lenses, both significantly different than "determinant abstraction." The first is the lens of universal history, which we see at its best in Godelier, in which the history of the entire world is the subject of analysis; the second is the lens of micro-anthropology, used so skillfully by Bourdieu to explain individual tastes and the preferences of social classes. The point is not to insist that the traditional concepts and subjects of historical materialism should be sacrosanct nor to claim that they are sufficient: the women's question is a sufficient indication that on many vital

[160] Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," in Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey, eds., *Power and Ideology in Education* (New York 1977, 487.

issues historical materialism is more or less silent. But it is proper to point out that it will produce only intellectual chaos if we simply run together concepts which have been produced within different approaches without careful attention to the underlying coherence of the pre-existent historical models. There is no reason to doubt that historical materialism is now firmly enough established that it may look forward with confidence to the absorption of both macro- and micro-anthropology, but only on terms which are consistent and logical.

The second thing which must be said is that where anthropological models are being drawn in to *replace* the established concepts of historical materialism with concepts drawn from anthropology (to replace the social relations of production with "culture" and effectively to break with political economy) there is no clear indication of their superiority. *The Poverty of Theory* can be read two ways: as a rejection outright of the possibility of a science of history and of the findings of political economy, or as a qualified acceptance of central terms of political economy (for example, capital) but a rejection of over-simplified models which reduce the totality of history to its economic "secret." The difference is not resolved in the text of Thompson's essay. The most one can say is that if "culture" is being offered as a *replacement* of the central terms of *Capital*, it manifestly represents no forward step. It is better to consider the move to "culture" as supplementing, and not replacing: correcting absences, not overthrowing the whole conceptual framework. If we see it this way, then we can accept the new approaches as ways of mapping out a huge and unexplored terrain, which we do not have the ability, as yet, to explain. Rather than making this inability to explain a merit in itself, we should envisage the creation of logico-historical models by which this realm of consciousness may be made the object of a scientific discourse.

Colletti observes that classes are made but also make themselves. As long as the working class remains without political consciousness, it remains a cog in the mechanism of capital. But in order that it should become something more than this, it must understand its objective position: "the working class cannot constitute itself as a *class* without taking possession of the scientific analysis of *Capital*."[161] We may read Bourdieu politically, and to much the same effect. As long as workers remain unaware of the objective realities of symbolic capital, they cannot constitute themselves as a class independent of the values and traditions of the bourgeoisie. This political reading of Bourdieu is not inherent in the text, but it seems a legitimate inference from its argument. We can go even further and read Bourdieu's insistence on a third step beyond subjectivism and objectivism as a strategic as well as a logical proposal. The debate between humanists and structuralists in theory and historiography, which Bourdieu helps resolve, is in

[161] Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, 236.

some ways a displaced political debate. Just as in theory this debate has been inconclusive because it sets up a false opposition between two necessary steps in the mind, so too is the political debate doomed to futility because it insists upon a conflict between two necessary steps in political knowledge. We close the logical and political circles only by a return to the concrete: to the determinate abstractions of *Capital* and to a logical political practice.