

BEYOND METACULTURE

THE SAYING THAT texts are never finished, merely abandoned, is old but not toothless. It can bite, as I had cause to reflect in ‘abandoning’ *Culture/Metaculture*, some three years ago, not wholly reconciled.¹ I am particularly grateful, then, for the critical responses it has attracted, and in the first place to Stefan Collini for ‘Culture Talk’.² Collini is an intellectual historian deeply versed in the politically assorted series of thinkers often dubbed ‘the *Culture and Society* tradition’—in his own terms, the ‘public moralists’ of nineteenth-and-twentieth-century Britain.³ At the same time, he is probably still better known as a writer in that tradition, committed to the practice of ‘the higher journalism’, a non-specialist discourse engaging the general interests of a mixed readership.⁴ This is the ground from which he approaches *Metaculture*. His discussion is generous beyond ordinary expectation, and at times unnerving in its empathetic reach. But above all, it sets out some fundamental objections, to which I wish to respond now, in an attempt to clarify and develop the sense of a position beyond metaculture.

‘Metaculture’ names a modern discursive formation in which ‘culture’, however understood, speaks of its own generality and historical conditions of existence. Its inherent strategic impulse—failing which it would be no more than descriptive anthropology—is to mobilize ‘culture’ as a principle against the prevailing generality of ‘politics’ in the disputed plane of social authority. What speaks in metacultural discourse is the cultural principle itself, as it strives to dissolve the political as locus of general arbitration in social relations. Kulturkritik and Cultural Studies, typically contrasting in social attachment yet sharing this discursive template, have been strong versions of this metacultural will to authority. For the Left, such logic is either inimical or self-defeating. The alternative begins with the theoretical recognition that cultural and political

practice are structurally distinct, yielding mutually irreducible norms of judgement. Discrepancy is the necessary term of their relationship—and not a sign of blockage but a condition of practical possibility. Here, in a few sentences, are the core theses of *Metaculture*. As stated there, they have drawn criticism on both historical and theoretical grounds—and also fostered certain misunderstandings, for which I have to accept some responsibility. Collini's historical charge concerns my unorthodox deployment of the Germanic category of Kulturkritik.⁵

I. THE ACCENTS OF KULTURKRITIK

Kulturkritik as it figures in *Metaculture* is my own 'construction', Collini warns, and a tendentious one. It is chronologically more limited than the historic genre whose common name it has been, reaching back no further than 1918, and geographically far wider, extending beyond the German-language zone to assemble 'a heterogeneous crew' of intellectuals from Spain, England and France—Mann, Mannheim and the later Freud, but also Ortega, Leavis and even Benda. Thus, designedly or not, 'European inter-war cultural pessimism' becomes 'the defining moment' of an actually diverse 'tradition', and 'the appeal to "culture" has to be socially elitist, culturally alarmist and politically conservative'—intrinsically, an intellectual trope of the right.⁶ I wear my heart on my sleeve, it seems.

Of course, 'Kulturkritik' is a construction, just like 'absolutism', say, or 'modernism'. Construction and reconstruction are the process of all thought, as it labours to know reality. The pertinent critical question concerns the nature of the construction and its claim to rational plausibility. Generically viewed, *Metaculture* is an essay in the historical morphology of discourse. Its critical point of entry is *form*: the recurrence of certain relations among concepts (culture, politics, authority), a certain array

¹ London 2000.

² NLR 7, January–February 2001, pp. 43–53.

³ Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930*, Oxford 1991.

⁴ Collini, *English Past: Essays in History and Culture*, Oxford 1999. See especially pp. 1–5 and 305–25.

⁵ Deliberately rendered in this way, without italics or quotation marks.

⁶ 'Culture Talk', pp. 46–7.

of topoi (modernity as disintegration, for example), a certain ethos of address (the prophetic intellectual and kindred personae). The purpose of the analysis is to demonstrate the unity of its historical material at that specified level, to show that this 'heterogeneous crew', for all their acknowledged differences of national and disciplinary sensibility, political leaning and intellectual personality, acted within a shared discursive order and subserved its governing logic. Collini is on the whole gratifyingly clear about the 'structural or formal' priorities of the analysis, even declaring himself persuaded by the account of the relations between Kulturkritik and Cultural Studies. But here, momentarily, he responds as if to another kind of work.

A more spacious, more richly historical book would range more widely. It would register other national varieties from the same period—Huizinga's *The Shadow of the Future* and the Russian *Vekhi*, for example—and might probe the significance of a thinker such as Croce, whose thought has some formal affinity with Kulturkritik, but perhaps no more substantial association. Even if not venturing beyond the borders of Europe, it would at least acknowledge the presence of Kulturkritik, in derived or parallel forms, in other continents. A more strongly comparative study would not merely record the manifest inter-national variations in the discourse, but would attempt to make historical sense of them. Thus, Leavis differed most clearly from his European counterparts in the priority he accorded to the economic over the political dimension of modernity. Conjunctural and more enduring conditions alike contributed to this distribution. Mann wrote in the last days of Wilhelmine Germany, Mannheim in the later years of Weimar. Ortega's manifesto coincided with the birth of republican Spain. Benda's formative public engagement was as a Dreyfusard; decades later, he joined the mobilization against the Croix de Feu. In Britain, on the other hand, with a constitutional matrix long settled and largely exempt from political controversy, there was nothing to distract attention from the latest novelties in a continuing process of economic transformation: Fordism and the culture industry, not the new politics of labour, are the privileged omens in Leavis's symptomatology.

In this way, the variegated Kulturkritik of the 1920s observed the geographical pattern set by Hobsbawm's 'dual revolution', but with effects that cannot be appraised by a simple reckoning of similarities versus differences. Readers of *Scrutiny* were as much aware of Martin Turnell's

'French' critique of democracy as of Leavis's better-known extension of the 'English' critique of industrialism. Collini is a little too taken with Benda's rationalism and cosmopolitanism—which reached its limits at the Franco-German border.⁷ His glassy abstractions are perhaps not in the English manner, but his tendency, which Collini admits, to 'treat France as the national home of the universal' has a strict counterpart in Leavis's imaginary England. The favouring condition of these bewitching identifications was in both cases political. Leavis's national humanism, his fluent elision of Englishness and 'life' *tout court*, depended for its intuitive plausibility on the inherited reality of a world empire; Benda's universalism was rooted in the abstract codes of the Third Republic. For Mann, in contrast, the universal was a spurious, alien—'Roman'—value: in this sense, he had no equivalent vision of Germany. Writing as subject of a failed Empire, bracing himself for the advent of a civic equality he thought second-best, he spoke for a cherished particularism, an introverted *Sonderweg* of the spirit. Thus, his nationalism was, in context and propensity, a true negative of the others. Three images of cultural distinction, marked and contrasted, or even opposed, in national terms, all claiming moral precedence over the modern political order, each one a sublimation of given political conditions.

Varieties of political invariance

So far at least, then, consideration of the national diversity of Kulturkritik yields evidence for, not against, its discursive unity. The cases of Mannheim and Ortega, whose national identifications were complicated by the circumstances of exile and education respectively, might prove less amenable in this respect. More important, as clearly contrasted liberals of the left and right, they forestall any claim that Kulturkritik was uniformly 'conservative' or 'reactionary'. That is not the claim of *Metaculture*, nor do the arguments of the book presuppose it—fortunately, since the alternative would have been shipwreck. Kulturkritik was and remains politically changeable, in its simpler forms and still more in its alloyed varieties. Benda, when he felt himself 'permitted' to intervene, did so on the side of the left, not even straining at a manifesto with the word 'revolutionary' in its banner. Mann soon endorsed the Weimar

⁷ *La Trahison des clercs* is remembered for its chaste intellectualism, but not for its renewed insistence that the Central Powers alone bore the responsibility for the First World War.

constitution, and later put his eminence at the service of intellectual anti-fascism. Ortega responded differently, quitting Spain for Argentina at the outbreak of the Civil War. *Scrutiny's* collaborators included a socialist like L. C. Knights and a clerico-rightist like Turnell, as well as their elusively liberal chief editor—Leavis, who in the tricky currents of the nineteen-thirties held the journal to the left, only later turning visibly rightwards. Discursive hybrids call for a particular effort of discrimination. *A Room of One's Own* is rendered incoherent by the internalized pressure of Bloomsbury's presumptuous, rentier version of Kulturkritik, but to say this is not to disallow Woolf's left-wing sympathies or cancel the feminism of her book (or, as I neglected to add, of the distinct and later *Three Guineas*). Other hybrids are simpler. Richard Hoggart has substantiated the possibility of a stable, enduring Kulturkritik of the Left, social-democratic conviction adapting Leavisian diagnostics to assert the value of diffusion as progress, the quickening of popular life by culture broadly cast. Collini feels much closer to that work than I do (and has a correspondingly much lower opinion of Raymond Williams, whose cultural politics are fundamentally distinct).⁸ But the suggestion—to which the logic of his charge commits him—that my general categories cannot properly accommodate it, even as historical possibility, is unconvincing. As *Metaculture* puts it, in terms that mark a political distance but hardly suppress the historical distinction: 'In Richard Hoggart, the British labour movement found its own Matthew Arnold.'

The political habitus of Kulturkritik is of another order: conservative, liberal or socialist, this discourse thrives on *climacterics*, and its recurring tendency is *authoritarian*. The canonical texts inscribe the climacteric

⁸ See 'Critical Minds: Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart', in *English Pasts*, pp. 210–30. The difference was already formulated in the conclusion of Williams's *Culture and Society*. Collini cites this text in familiar, questionable terms, speaking of its 'equation' of the 'cultural' critique of bourgeois individualism with 'the working-class ethic of solidarity' (p. 51). In fact, as I read it, Williams posits not two but three 'ideas of the nature of social relationship', and the third is 'the reforming bourgeois modification' of individualism, or 'the idea of service'. This idea, which has predominated 'from Coleridge to Tawney', is distinct from the ethic of solidarity, and 'in practice' stands 'opposed' to it (*Culture and Society*, Harmondsworth 1961, pp. 312–3, 315). Hoggart showed, in his own career, that individual hybrids of solidarity and service were indeed possible, if only within the strategic horizons of Labourism and the BBC. The critique of that reforming paternalism was, for Williams, the prelude to an alternative, socialist and democratic, theory and politics of cultural practice and organization.

in their forms, which more or less closely resemble the manifesto—the general alert, the recall to duty, the theses nailed to the bookshop door. Kulturkritik is ‘occasionalist’ in the sense that word acquires in Carl Schmitt’s critique of political romanticism.⁹ Its relation to the pre-given terms of political engagement is subject to ‘a higher third’, which reframes politics as such as a constituent of the crisis, not the dimension in which it may be dealt with. Politics stands exposed as the modern pretender to social authority, whose legitimate form (past and, as it may be, prospective) is the cultural principle. That superordination of culture-as-principle, and of an intellectual corps privy to its meanings, can only be authoritarian, in final effect, even where the associated social aspiration is benign and progressive. There are residues of this in Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy*, and far more substantial deposits in the writings of R. H. Tawney, whom Collini cites as one index of the historical complication he misses in *Metaculture*. Christian socialist and inspiration to generations of thoughtful Labour supporters, Tawney cannot be denied his place in the intellectual history of the British Left. Yet his critique of ‘the acquisitive society’, set out in the book of that name, was driven by idealized memories of pre-industrial England and issued in a strategy appealing to the supreme moral authority of a rearmed national Church. The homology with Kulturkritik is manifest, as Collini would surely agree: the critical account I have just summarized is his own.¹⁰

II. A MARXIST KULTURKRITIK?

There remains an oddity in the expanded–restricted concept of Kulturkritik. If the chronological foreshortening of my discussion is regrettable, it is not because of any attendant foreclosure of political possibilities. It is because a longer historical retrospect would have emphasized the genealogical specificity of Kulturkritik as a descendant of German and English Romanticism. A few introductory paragraphs on Herder and Arnold were the belated, token acknowledgement of this—like most ‘introductions’, written last, without real power to modify the substantive text. Had things gone otherwise, I still might not have

⁹ *Political Romanticism* [1919], Cambridge, MA and London 1986. Written in 1917–18, this work is almost exactly contemporaneous with Mann’s *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*.

¹⁰ ‘Moral Mind: R. H. Tawney’, in *English Past*, pp. 177–94.

said much more about the nineteenth century; but the representation of mid-twentieth-century German thought would certainly have been different. Martin Ryle has expressed ‘surprise’ at the absence of ‘any systematic account of the Frankfurt School’; Peter Osborne finds the omission ‘unfortunate’.¹¹ They have reason. Marcuse and Adorno feature in *Metaculture* as mentors in my own cause, deracinated subjects of a certain theoretical position, but not more concretely, as what they historically were: critical intellectuals formed in strong German traditions. Failing to register this, the book spared itself reflection on the disconcerting possibility it appeared to exclude in advance, that of a Marxist Kulturkritik.

The ‘culture’ of which Marcuse spoke in his classic 1937 study was not Mann’s *Kultur*.¹² Universal in principle, rather than national, it was his critical reconstruction of the status and function assigned to literature and the arts in a bourgeois society. Culture in this sense is the negation of a social order for which, in the same gesture, it composes a transfiguring alibi. Committed to the possibilities of wholeness and resolution in human affairs (‘the pacification of existence’, as Marcuse would later say), yet actualizing them only in the abstracted, inward life of sensibility, culture honours the promise of happiness but only, so to speak, as a matter of form. A bad utopia, it ‘affirms’ in social practice what, as imagination, it calls to account. Sensibility, the faculty that gives access to cultural experience and grows subtle in those who exercise it, is the mode in which unfree subjects choose between inconsolable quietism and a good conscience.¹³

For Marcuse, this ‘culture’ signified the place of art and literature in capitalist social relations. Its discursive authority was an index of oppression, not a resource for an emancipated future. Dismissing Karl Kautsky’s adumbration of ‘the “coming happiness”’, he projected an alternative vision of social transformation: not the mass ‘conquest’ of culture but its ‘elimination’.¹⁴ Adorno, characteristically, was less inclined to anticipate a transformed existence or to coordinate his vision

¹¹ Ryle, ‘Tempting Relevancies’, *Radical Philosophy* 103, September–October 2000, p. 46; Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, London 2000, p. 121, n. 14.

¹² ‘The Affirmative Character of Culture’, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, London 1968, pp. 88–133.

¹³ ‘Sensibility’ seems historically more appropriate as a translation of Marcuse’s *Seele* than the literal ‘soul’ of the English edition.

¹⁴ *Negations*, pp. 132–3.

with any collective political prospectus. In a critical sequel drafted some years after Marcuse's study, he traced a different path beyond culture, involving another kind of practice. Negation, for him too, is the 'very truth' of culture. 'Just because culture affirms the validity of the principle of harmony within an antagonistic society, . . . it cannot avoid confronting society with its own notion of harmony and thereby stumbling on discord.' But the outcome of the confrontation is paralysis: culture turns on itself, and the labour of the negative is confined to the agitated stasis that is *Kulturkritik*. The critic 'is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior . . . His vanity aids that of culture: even in the accusing gesture, the critic clings to the notion of culture, isolated, unquestioned, dogmatic.'¹⁵ Yet, as the moment in which culture comes to perceive the discrepancy between its empirical generality and its 'principle', *Kulturkritik* is not worthless. It brings 'untruth to consciousness of itself', and in that lies its own 'truth'. The proper task of 'dialectical' thought that 'does not wish to succumb to "Economism"' is not to catalogue and condemn *Kulturkritik* but to 'absorb' it. Dialectical criticism differs from *Kulturkritik* in that it 'heightens' it, 'until the notion of culture is itself negated, fulfilled and surmounted in one.'

Immanent critique and regression

Not many Marxist critiques of culture have been so free of superstition, or so confident that philistines are other people. And yet dialectical reason can sometimes appear to practise its own kind of magic—*Aufhebung* as verbal legerdemain. It is worth inquiring just how much, in the Frankfurt critique and specifically in Adorno's 'immanent criticism of culture', was cancelled, and how much preserved.

The constitutive tension of immanent critique is manifest in its self-designation. As immanent, it 'bores from within', unlike 'transcendent criticism', which renounces 'a spontaneous relation to the object' in the name of an 'external', supervenient truth. Yet as critique, it must exceed the categories implied in the object; empathy, so to say, is procedural, a strong tactic, not a means to final identification. At once inside and outside, immanent critique is not so much a position as an ethic of movement, a critical practice whose artistic analogue would be music

¹⁵ 'Cultural Criticism and Society', *Prisms*, Cambridge MA 1981, pp. 28, 27, 19.

of a kind.¹⁶ Its tension is then ‘dialectical’—or could be, but only in so far as the force of negation is sufficient to sustain the movement, if the conceptual ‘outside’ is more than a figment. It is not easy to conclude that Adorno believed this—or, in impersonal terms, that his concepts can quite admit the thought. ‘Transcendental criticism’—his estranging philosophical term for the prevailing styles of Marxism—takes its stand on non-existent ground. Where ‘ideology’ has saturated the whole, as he maintains it has, there is no outside: the idea is ‘an abstract utopia’, a ‘fiction’, an Archimedean dream. Orthodoxy clings to its illusion at the cost of regression to pre-cultural ‘nature’ and scientism. But how, then, can Adorno’s ethic of critical movement continue to mark its difference from the futile agitations of *Kulturkritik*, and at what cost to itself?

The master-concept in Adornian Critical Theory is exchange: the commodity form, with its barely limitable power of reification, is the nuclear reality of capitalism as a whole. The historic momentum of society is registered in another canonical concept, that of the productive forces and their development. But where so-called orthodoxy saw the material promise—or even the guarantee—of an emancipating socialism, Adorno saw only a system of frustrations. Again and again, his essays move towards the same final cadence. A retrospective discussion of Spengler invokes ‘the powerless, . . . the negative embodiment within the negativity of this culture of everything which promises, however feebly, to break the dictatorship of culture and put an end to the horror of pre-history. In their protest lies the only hope that fate and power will not have the last word.’ Of Thorstein Veblen he concludes: ‘He represents poverty. This is his truth, because men are still constrained to be poor, and his untruth, because the absurdity of poverty has become manifest. Today, adjustment to what is possible no longer means adjustment; it means making the possible real.’¹⁷ Elsewhere, he spoke wistfully of a liberation ‘near enough to touch’. Such passages at once recall and displace the kind of closing ceremony that has been traditional in Marxist prose. ‘Valedictory flourish’ is the stock description, and it does not fit. These are visions of a promise that mocks hope. Creaturely enough for all his rigour, in such gestures Adorno delays the moment of parting, the last goodbye to the only bearable future.

¹⁶ In contrast with Lukács, whose criticism is governed by the visual image of perspective: dialectics is ‘the point of view of totality’, from which historical representations—those of the novel above all—can be surveyed, placed and assessed.

¹⁷ *Prisms*, p. 72, 94.

In theoretical logic, it could only be so. The franchise of commodities and the chained promise of social productivity are the counterpart structural effects of capitalist property—a concept certainly present to Adorno yet, crucially, inactive in his reasoning. The ‘dictatorship’ sustaining ‘pre-history’ is that of a class, whose social other, not merely (or necessarily) ‘poor’ and not merely (or necessarily) ‘powerless’, is above all propertiless, the wage-labouring collective producer of social existence. This constitutive social antagonism appears only negatively in Adorno’s work, in the forms of its putative neutralization. It was the division of mental and manual labour, rather, that furnished the terms of his engagement in the stand-off between committed and autonomous art, between all autonomous endeavour and the culture industry.¹⁸ In politics proper, an unqualifiable leftism underwrote a critical ethic of remoteness. As he wrote very late in his life, defending his practice against the reproaches of the student movement, ‘at the present moment, no higher form of society is concretely visible: for that reason anything that seems in easy reach is regressive.’ And regression, ‘objectively viewed’, is renunciation.¹⁹ His judgement on Carl Schmitt suggested an alienation still more fundamental than this self-cancelling maximalism. Again appealing to the notion of regression, he dismissed ‘the *a priori* reduction to the friend–enemy relationship’ and concluded: ‘Freedom would be not to choose between black and white but to abjure such choices.’²⁰

If there is an Adornian politics, its utopian disposition is precisely *unpolitical*, in Mann’s approving sense. And that is not the only sign of affinity with *Kulturkritik*. Marxist though he was, Adorno’s vision of modernity as a closed system of productivity and exchange might have given the anti-Marxist Leavis cause for second thoughts. In a prose that is for the greater part unbendingly objective, in the literary sense, the personae that sometimes flicker are worth noting. Adorno rejects the practice of class-ascriptive tagging in Marxist criticism, that ‘topological thinking, which knows the place of every phenomenon and the essence of none’. But there is more than one way of outing the socially unspeakable, as his own critical language suggests. ‘Most socialist contributions to cultural criticism . . . lack the experience of that with which they

¹⁸ See *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer), London 1972, and ‘Commitment’, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, New York 1992, pp. 76–94.

¹⁹ ‘Resignation’, *The Culture Industry*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein, London 1991, p. 174.

²⁰ *Minima Moralia*, London 1974, p. 132.

deal'; 'they develop an affinity to barbarism'; their theoretical tenets 'take on a backwoods ring'.²¹ Not quite 'petty bourgeois', then, but perhaps not even that. The voice that delivers these judgements comes from elsewhere. 'To anyone in the habit of thinking with his ears', Adorno begins, 'the words "cultural criticism" (*Kulturkritik*) must have an offensive ring'—and 'not merely because, like "automobile", they are pieced together from Latin and Greek'.²² Here, pitch-perfect, is an epitome of the cultural principle: music *contra* Fordism and the half-educated. That the trope of discrimination is reminiscent of Henry James, and the philology already an old school-room dogma, is essential to the ambiguous feeling of the passage. It is proof that Adorno's immanent critique, unsure of the 'outside' possibility that would fuel its dialectical movement, was not spared the general curse of regression—in his case, to the natural aristocratism of *Kulturkritik*.

Ambiguities of utopia

Marcuse, in contrast, persisted in his search for keys that might unlock 'the enchained possibilities' of the present. His estimate of historical probabilities was scarcely more optimistic than Adorno's. In the early nineteen-thirties, he would say no more than that 'the fate of the labour movement is clouded with uncertainty'.²³ By the middle sixties, the landscape was sunlit but barren:

these possibilities are gradually being realized through means and institutions which cancel their liberating potential, and this process affects not only the means but also the ends. The instruments of productivity and progress, organized into a totalitarian system, determine not only the actual but also the possible utilizations. At its most advanced stage, domination functions as administration, and in the overdeveloped areas of mass consumption, the administered life becomes the good life of the whole, in the defence of which the opposites are united.²⁴

Yet Marcuse's political conclusion was defiant, and implicitly activist: a genuinely liberating socialism would have to imagine a transformation far more comprehensive than that envisaged in the classical

²¹ *Prisms*, p. 33, 32.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 19. The English edition incorporates the German term.

²³ 'The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State' (1934), *Negations*, p. 42.

²⁴ *One Dimensional Man*, London 1964, p. 199.

programmes. 'Freedom is only possible as the realization of what today is called utopia.'²⁵

Advanced capitalism, as Marcuse theorizes it in *One Dimensional Man*, is more truly 'totalitarian' than fascism ever was. The central concept of the analysis is no longer quite Marx's 'productive forces'—important though this theoretical reference is, in his writing as in Adorno's. It is 'the technological apparatus', which subsumes property and productivity, forms of power as well as concentrations of wealth, under a single category, the self-sustaining increase in mastery over nature and society, or domination. (Here again, comparison with Leavis is apt.) In a universe so cohesive, so tightly sealed, it seems impossible that a sufficient counter-force might gather, let alone prevail as 'the new Subject' of history. Even culture has lost its negative role, operating now as an agency of 'repressive desublimation'. Yet there, precisely, is the point from which Marcuse launches his dialectics of liberation. The third and last part of *One Dimensional Man*, where a less thought-prone spirit might have positioned an exposition of the historical function of the proletariat, opens with a crucial account of 'the historical commitment of philosophy'. In a remarkable speculative sequence, Marcuse explores a process in which, by virtue of technical development, ideas once set aside as metaphysical become scientific, and science itself, with technical reason no longer alienated from art, turns finalistic, thus constituting a new theory and practice of politics. All this process lacks is an enabling social subject.

In 1937, Marcuse had seen bourgeois 'culture' as an ambiguous sign of alienation, whose vanishing point would coincide with the actuality of freedom. Now it appeared that a certain dialectic of culture and the technological apparatus would be essential to the work of transformation. Far from overcoming the ancient opposition between the liberal and useful arts—the point of departure for the critique of affirmative culture—socialism would canonize it, or so Marcuse seems to say, in the closing pages of *One Dimensional Man*:

Self-determination in the production and distribution of vital goods and services would be wasteful. The job is a technical one, and as a truly technical job, it makes for the reduction of physical and mental toil. In this realm, centralized control is rational if it establishes the preconditions for meaningful self-determination. The latter can become effective in its own

²⁵ *Negations*, p. xx.

realm—in the decisions which involve the production and distribution of the economic surplus, and in the individual existence.²⁶

If utopian theory is normally ambiguous, then here it develops by its bad side. In this culminating vision, the relation between necessary and surplus production appears as a valorized institutional differentiation in economic, cultural and political life. There is regression here. This programmatic division is no more sustainable than the orthodox prospectus of a transition from ‘the government of persons’ to the ‘administration of things and the direction of the process of production’²⁷—to which, in substance, it returns. Things, as social values, are never dissociable from persons, except in the fictions of consensus by which bureaucracies routinely validate the prerogatives of their experts; the phrase ‘vital goods and services’ is itself redolent of official communiqués, and the hard measures to be taken, as they always are, in the best interests of all. The ‘toil’ so spared us is the necessary work of a socialist democracy.

That Marcuse should have reasoned as he did is nevertheless consistent with his spontaneous cultural inclination, in which, again, utopia entailed regression. The prevalence of ‘culture’ as good tender is an index of alienated potentiality, he had maintained. However, he now appeared to say, freedom from necessity must include exemption from the care and effort of thinking about it. The putative sphere of necessity, by contrastive implication, is meaningless. The reality is otherwise. Social ‘necessity’ is excessively meaningful, inherently ambiguous and often contentiously so. Marcuse acknowledged as much in his (questionable) concept of ‘artificial needs’. The idea that the technical and moral arts of necessity are a vexation beneath the dignity of a self-determining commonwealth is a delusion, but one that runs back, as he tells us, to Aristotle. His image of liberation is a palimpsest of the ages: revolutionary seizure and remaking of the technological apparatus, the realization of affirmative culture, aristocratic privilege for all.

²⁶ *One Dimensional Man*, p. 197.

²⁷ Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, cit. V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, Peking 1965, p. 19. Compare Marx’s discriminations, in *Capital*, vol. 3, between the realms of ‘necessity’ and ‘freedom’ and the intermediate state of freedom-in-necessity (London 1981, p. 959)—a passage which, although it may well have inspired Marcuse’s thinking, does not warrant the idea of an institutionalized differentiation in social practice. Of course, the context of Marx’s discussion was not programmatic.

III. METACULTURE AND POLITICS

Marxism did not emerge unchanged from this ‘immanent’ engagement with culture, which, as Kulturkritik, reinflected the concepts that entered its gravitational field, so shaping a distinctive theoretical orbit. The Frankfurt critique of culture, for all its piercing insight, participates in metacultural discourse. This is not a statement of the obvious, in my view, nor is it easily specified without distortion. But on Stefan Collini’s reading, it would be a necessary implication of a truth that I do not acknowledge: ‘*discourse about metacultural discourse*’, he writes, in criticism of my basic thesis, ‘*is still a form of metacultural discourse*.’²⁸ Now there speaks metacultural discourse. That emphatic contention crowns a passage of argument in which Collini reaccents the core vocabulary of the book, retrieving *culture* and *politics*—and *metaculture* too—in senses more congenial to himself, and, it must be said, the broad tradition of Kulturkritik.

Of course, our disagreement is about concepts, not a word. ‘Metaculture’ is not my coinage, and the sense I give it does not drive out others. A rarefied word, by virtue of its etymology (which would make Adorno wince), in fact it is current in a half-dozen or more senses today, ranging as high and as low as its mother-term. In evolutionary psychology and anthropology, metaculture signifies ‘the bedrock of universals’ or ‘the operating system’ on which any actual culture depends; it circulates in a similar sense in discussion of Hermann Hesse’s cult novel *The Glass Bead Game*; it is the title of a series of leisure guides, and has legal standing as the proprietary name of a US postcard business, Metaculture™. In the perspective of linguistic usage, *meta* might as well mean ‘parody’. Blessedly unaware of all this, I recoined ‘metaculture’ as the summarizing term of a critical thesis, which is what matters here. If Collini’s counter-claim holds good, if the critique of metacultural discourse is, so to say, necessarily and wholly immanent, then the thesis fails.

The immediate appeal of Collini’s objection lies in its phrasing, which highlights the *reflexivity* of the critical operation. Indeed, this is not sufficient to ground a distinction between metaculture and other forms of critical discourse on culture. And even if, as he agrees, the criterion of *generality* remains central, there still seems little reason for a strong distinction between metacultural discourse and other, comparably synoptic

²⁸ ‘Culture Talk’, p. 52, italics original.

work in, say, sociology or anthropology. On the first count, ‘metaculture’ is theoretically redundant, a word in search of a concept; on the second count, its purchase is merely descriptive. However, metaculture has a third property, the crucial one, in so far as it welds and charges the other two: it asserts a *cultural principle*. Metacultural discourse is strongly reflexive in that its subject and object are one and the same culture, now split between norm and actuality. Its generality is tendentious, signifying a claim to authority over the social whole. In that subject and that generality, culture-as-principle anticipates the end of politics.

Here Collini struggles to find his ground. The critical appeal to ‘culture’ need not presuppose a ‘given or transcendent locus of value’, he maintains. But the formulations in which he sets out his position are circular. ‘Disciplined reflection partly grounded in an extensive intellectual and aesthetic inheritance can furnish a place to stand’ in ‘critical engagement’ with politics.²⁹ It cannot. In the Arnoldian problematic that governs Collini’s reasoning at this point, the first phrase is no more than an elaboration of the second. No other kind of engagement could be critical in the required sense, and the question of a place—a location in the contested order of social value—remains unanswered. Culture ‘still names an essential ethical move’, he insists, ‘an allusion to the bearing which that kind of disinterested or autotelic exploration of human possibility, characteristically (but not exclusively) pursued in artistic and intellectual activity, can have upon the processes that are governed by the need to bring about proximate instrumental ends’.³⁰ This assertion simply assumes what it needs to establish. The word ‘characteristically’ is an ideological wand. Marcuse might have seized on it to illustrate the transmutation of the historical generality of art and ideas into a transcendent value whose content is its negation of the realm of interests, or ‘affirmative culture’. Contrary to Collini’s unmistakable intentions in the matter, the place of critical engagement turns out to be another world.

Ideas of politics

The reinvention of Arnold’s cultural principle finds its necessary complement in a renewed depreciation of politics: the phrase ‘proximate instrumental ends’ is characteristic. ‘Politics’, in the language of Collini’s critique, is a negative value, normally qualified as ‘everyday’,

²⁹ ‘Culture Talk’, p. 51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

‘instrumental’, ‘present-driven’, or pejoratively associated with ‘narrow pragmatism’ and ‘partial or specialized perspectives’.³¹ It is the lesser moral reality against which culture-as-subject exercises its power of general reflection. The concept of metacultural discourse presupposes a different understanding of politics.

If the banal evidence of parliamentary affairs is desolating, the negative generalizations routinely derived from it are only a little less so. A properly critical concept of politics should trace the horizon of possibility—what is conceivable as politics—as one condition of its theoretical sufficiency. Metacultural claims then appear differently. Politics is the struggle to determine the totality of social relations in a given space (which may or may not coincide with a state territory). It presupposes at least an intuition of the whole. In this sense, the formal characteristics that Collini reserves for a certain ethic of ‘culture’ are, in truth, the ‘everyday’, because constitutive, reality of politics, which is general, qualitative labour on social relations. The basic temporalities of politics are maintenance and transformation. (Restoration is not a true third, being in effect a phantasmatic rendering of one or the other of those two.) The narrowness and pragmatism that Collini associates with politics as such will inevitably be more pronounced in conditions where the dominant temporality is maintenance, and still more where that is consensual—where the fundamental qualities of the social order have been naturalized. However, the exceptional case of transformation illuminates the general reality. Lenin assumed just this, in arguing that a revolutionary party would only be truly revolutionary if it was truly political, if it measured itself against the state, in organizational reach but also in the form of its vision, learning to see social relations as the state, in principle, ‘sees’ them, in the round. At the heart of *What Is To Be Done?*, animating its better-known organizational arguments, is an idea of politics as general labour, as a theory and practice of synopsis.

This is not to say that politics is distinctive, or distinctive only, for its exercise of the synoptic faculty—which, on the contrary, can be seen at work in every register of a cultural formation, and, conspicuously, in the leading genres of culture-as-principle. Political synopsis differentiates itself within that generality by virtue of its constitutive relation to practice, to the maintenance or transformation of actual social relations.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48–51, *passim*.

Whatever its medium or site, political discourse as such is predominantly deliberative in orientation and, explicitly or not, injunctive in its address. That is what I intended in saying that politics is ‘modally specialized’. I now regret that innocent phrase. Mentally stressing the first word, I overlooked the colloquial drift of the second—from specificity to professionalism—with unfortunate results. Collini is perhaps only teasing when he offers ‘specialism’ as an equivalent for his own phrase, ‘narrow pragmatism’. Bruce Robbins, though standing in a different relation to pragmatism, makes the same reading, and in earnest. Finding in *Metaculture* an attempt to ‘correct’ the ‘anti-democratic tendency in the social criticism of the past century’, he warns that the ‘desire to reinstate politics in the specialized sense makes this even more difficult. For specialization in the domain of politics will value certain people and skills above others, just as specialization in the domain of culture does . . . In short, there is no escape from culture to politics.’³²

Indeed there is not. Once culture is understood, as it is in *Metaculture*, as the moment of sense-making in all social relations, the very idea of escape becomes self-contradictory. The real issue is the discursive action of the cultural *principle*—which in Robbins’s case, as in that of cultural studies generally, is a popular value—in the plane of contested social authority, and specifically in that of politics as a specific form of practice. That dimension of the concept of metaculture simply disappears, in his passing summary of it, returning at length in the unappealing figure of the old-style politico, a left-culturalist bogey to match Collini’s narrow pragmatist. Politics is ordinary, Robbins might well say, echoing the high tradition of cultural studies, and so it is, but not in the same way as culture itself. Culture is everywhere; politics can be anywhere, and that is not the same thing. Any social antagonism can become political, Schmitt maintained, in the sense of intensifying to the point where it assumes the defining form of politics: a public and collective friend–enemy relationship pursued in consciousness of the ‘possibility of the extreme case’, the ‘fight to the death’.³³ If Schmitt’s philosophical embrace of mortal combat is ideological, a decadent foreclosure of the possibility of a pacified social existence, his rigorous formalism yields an insight from which there is something to learn. It is not the formalism of *Metaculture*, where the context of thought was given by Lenin

³² ‘No Escape’, *London Review of Books*, 1 November 2001, p. 35.

³³ *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago and London 1996, p. 35.

and Gramsci, but the implications run parallel. If the specific difference of politics is *formal*, not a matter of social substance, still less of rarefied professional arts, then the culture–politics relation is one internal to each of the related terms. Cultural complexes inhabit politics as the field and uncertain horizon of what is socially imaginable; and the practices of identity and representation, the patternings of affinity and aversion, that make up these complexes are always, in principle, textured by the possibility of politics, as threat or demand or opportunity.

Politics can thus be anywhere, yet not, like culture, everywhere. For if politics is indeed formally *specific*, then what is internalized is precisely a relation, which presupposes non-identity. Political practice is *trans-cultural* in its re-working of value as demand, sometimes promoting given identities and preferences, sometimes rearticulating or disturbing or backgrounding them, according to judgements based on a socially determinate programme and strategy. The commonalities and antagonisms it elaborates do not simply express or prefigure desirable ways of life. They define agencies and stakes in a struggle for collective advance on the given social terrain. Deliberately culturalized politics is only apparently different in this. So-called lifestyle politics acquires political efficacy only in so far as it assumes means and modes of contention that the lifestyle does not itself include and may not even value. The literary spectacles of the Popular Front in the 1930s and the ‘deconstructive’ street ballet of today’s *tute bianchi*, for all their contrasts of sensibility and circumstances, illustrate the same apparent paradox: ‘culture’, as it enters directly into the space of political practice, negates its ideal self-image, becoming a tactic. If Comintern instrumentalism can be cited in part-explanation of the earlier case, no equivalent suspect can be found in the later one, which continues an antithetical, expressivist tradition of militancy. The cultural *mise-en-abyme* is implicit in the logic of politics as an autonomous form of social practice.

‘Discrepancy’ is the term I have used to summarize the limits and possibilities of the relationship, and to qualify the meanings of ‘cultural politics’. Seen in this light, cultural politics is not a position, or even a demarcated set of practices; it is an inescapable field of forces whose dynamism is constantly renewed by the non-identity of its constituent terms; it is the discrepancy and its effects. Structured by discrepancy, cultural politics is a space of frustration but also, and in the same measure, of creativity. The processes by which a mythic battle of the sexes

was turned into the women's liberation movement, and then a broader, more diverse feminism, are a classic demonstration of this. The unwriting of the working class, as subject and interest, in the discourse of social-liberal modernity, is another impressive demonstration, and a reminder that creativity is not only a good thing. Such precedents are there for socialists to ponder, as they face their own unknowns, chief among them the shapes of an adequate—imaginative and capable—contemporary politics.

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