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## DEFENDING CULTURAL CRITICISM

**I**N THE ACTIVITY described by the rather tired phrase ‘an intellectual exchange’, it is all too often the case that all the protagonists manage to give each other is a piece of their minds. They exchange shots but don’t, in any genuine sense, ‘exchange’ ideas, the participants generally resembling incorrigible Bourbons. Recognizing this risk, I nonetheless want to try to respond to Francis Mulhern’s reply to my reading of his book *Culture/Metaculture*, encouraged by the belief that our earlier contributions have already gone some way towards escaping this dispiriting pattern. Certainly, Mulhern’s reply is acute, constructive and, to pinch one of his own kind phrases, ‘generous beyond ordinary expectation’.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in clarifying and extending his position, he throws down a fundamental challenge to anyone who, like me, thinks they believe there is a legitimate role for something called ‘cultural criticism’, as opposed to Mulhern’s ‘cultural politics’; so trying to go a little further in identifying where we agree and where we differ may at least provide some grist to others’ mills.

The central argument of Mulhern’s book, in his own careful summary, is as follows:

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.<sup>2</sup>

In my earlier essay I, while emphasizing the merits of the book as a whole, raised both a historical and a theoretical objection to these claims. In 'Beyond Metaculture' Mulhern now responds strongly to these objections, and then elaborates and extends his original argument; but he does so in ways that, for me at least, make it seem less rather than more persuasive. I shall try to address the issues, broadly in the order in which Mulhern raises them, but I shall then go on to touch on what seem to me the even larger underlying questions, ultimately questions about the role, and the limits, of intellectual work in relation to public debate.

In what follows, I do not take myself to be saying anything particularly novel or to be staking out a distinctively personal position. My concern, rather, is that the tightly interlaced grid of concepts through which Mulhern makes his criticisms of what he calls 'metacultural discourse' involves a baby-with-the-bathwater outcome: in other words, it appears to eliminate the possibility, or at least deny the legitimacy, of what has conventionally been called 'cultural criticism'. I am well aware that this term is now used in many senses, especially within American academia, but I believe the traditional sense is also still usable and useful—the sense associated, in Britain, with aspects of the work of figures such as Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, Richard Hoggart, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary versions of cultural criticism, in this sense, still seem to me to have a valuable part to play in public debate, and the effect of Mulhern's argument—especially in its re-stated form—appears to be to deny any standing to this activity.

Necessarily, this exchange must deploy a number of large and contested abstract categories, and there is always a danger that too much may appear to turn on stipulative definition. When one of us proposes a category of 'cultural politics', to which the other responds by insisting on the desirability

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, London 2000; Stefan Collini, 'Culture Talk', NLR 7, January–February 2001; Mulhern, 'Beyond Metaculture', NLR 16, July–August 2002.

<sup>2</sup> 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> For American usage see, for example, Gerald Graff and Bruce Robbins, 'Cultural Criticism', in Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, eds, *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, New York 1992.

of continuing to speak of 'cultural criticism', it may seem a case of the narcissism of small differences. But within the broad area of our common concerns there is, I believe, a genuine and relatively fundamental disagreement at stake, and such disagreement is bound to be expressed partly through matters of intellectual allegiance and preferred vocabulary.

The term 'culture' itself is the most worrying but also the most intractable of these categories, and I have perhaps even more worries than Mulhern about whether it is practicable to treat the various senses as belonging to a single semantic field. In what follows, I shall try to restrict my own invocations of 'culture' to what Raymond Williams, in the book both Mulhern and I would recognize as having set the terms for so much modern discussion (for better or, as I would hold about some aspects of it, for worse), called 'the primary' meaning, namely, 'artistic and intellectual activities'.<sup>4</sup> I am obviously not denying that there are all sorts of purposes for which it is entirely legitimate to take 'culture' in one of its other senses, as Mulhern does in much of his discussion and as I myself do on other occasions. But where the enterprise of 'cultural criticism' and its relation to 'politics' (another of these deceptively familiar abstractions) is in question, there is at least a certain utility to beginning with this narrower sense of 'culture'. I shall hereafter do so without using the quotation-marks that signal my recognition that this is only one of the term's several meanings.

## I. THE CATEGORY OF KULTURKRITIK

The term 'Kulturkritik' is used by Mulhern in a specific and somewhat idiosyncratic sense. I suggested, in slightly minatory tones, that it is important to recognize that the term, when so used, 'designates a position or tradition that has been constructed by Mulhern himself'. He returns by contending that all such general concepts are 'constructions': the real issue, he argues, concerns its nature and 'its claim to rational plausibility'.<sup>5</sup>

General concepts may indeed be 'constructions' in some sense, but where they are being used to characterize a slice of the past, 'rational plausibility' may not be enough. First of all, there is a special reason for drawing

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*, London 1958, p. xvii.

<sup>5</sup> 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 87.

attention to the constructed nature of Mulhern's category because the term with which he labels it has *already* had a long and well-established history in an overlapping, but not identical, sense that refers to a distinctively Germanic tradition of social thinking. He is attempting to appropriate the term and to re-define its meaning and its historical range. This courts confusion: he *may* persuade some others to use the term in his special, theoretically defined, sense, though the room for slippage seems invitingly wide. Of course, the label '*Kulturkritik*', as applied to certain contemporary, non-German, examples of cultural commentary, does already make occasional appearances in English-language writing, and it would seem to me an unnecessarily purist restriction on our vocabulary to object to this allusive usage. But allusion is not concept-formation. When the term is used in this relatively relaxed way (as applied to, say, the work of Allan Bloom or George Steiner), it functions rather as a citation, often ironic. In such cases, part of the appeal of the usage is precisely the self-conscious borrowing of a term acknowledged to have a culturally and historically located referent. Mulhern, by contrast, wants both to naturalize the term and to give it a more determinate conceptual structure.

But, beyond this, all kinds of categories may possess 'rational plausibility' yet be historically distorting. Mulhern specifies his category 'morphologically': it is constituted by a recurring structural relation among concepts such as culture, politics, authority. But for it to function effectively as a way of organizing our *historical* understanding and to pick out a 'tradition', as he more than once refers to it, we would need to know much more about the place of this set of conceptual relations in the work of the different figures who are said to make up 'the tradition of *Kulturkritik*'. Does it play some central or energizing part in their work, or is it peripheral—or barely discernible? Is it consistent with the general thrust of the writings in which it is discerned, or at odds with it? Are the concepts among which the allegedly recurrent relation obtains actually constant across significant chronological and cultural variations? Is the alleged common pattern recognized as such by the supposed members of this tradition—and if not, why not? Does its use illuminate more than it distorts? And so on. Mulhern's category of *Kulturkritik* is a polemical weapon, one that is central to the scheme of his book. But to emphasize that it is indeed his own construction, and one formulated at quite a high level of abstraction, is neither an expression of obtuse nominalism nor a resistance to conceptual innovation. It is to register that such constructions have to pass demanding tests before they can expect to be

naturalized in the historian's vocabulary, and 'rational plausibility' is only one of those tests.

Following the emphasis of *Culture/Metaculture*, which starts its historical survey in 1918, I initially took Mulhern's focus to be on the European interwar cultural pessimists, and I queried his building their particular form of cultural alarmism and social conservatism into the category itself.<sup>6</sup> His subsequent clarification of the scope of the category of Kulturkritik, and his insistence that it has no particular political or social affiliations, conservative or otherwise, is helpful in one way, but a bit unnerving in another. In the Introduction to his book, Mulhern had already mentioned in passing that Kulturkritik, as he uses it, is to be traced back to the late eighteenth century, and that its English 'tradition' is that discussed in Williams's *Culture and Society*. But he has now extended it in other directions, most notably by his elaboration of a form of the tradition absent from the original book, namely 'the disconcerting possibility [*Culture/Metaculture*] appeared to exclude in advance, that of a Marxist Kulturkritik'.<sup>7</sup>

I shall return in a moment to the question of why Mulhern might regard this as a 'disconcerting' possibility, but what I believe would disconcert most intellectual historians is the sheer range of types of writing this category is now being asked to cover. After all, Williams's own (very questionable) elaboration of 'the culture-and-society tradition' ranged from Burke and Cobbett, through Mill and Newman, to Eliot and Orwell. Mulhern's category now extends this, not only to embrace figures running from Herder to Mann, but, in other directions, to include the likes of Benda and Ortega; and, now, Adorno and Marcuse. To ask for detailed discussion of all these figures and their cultural milieux would, I agree, be to ask for 'another kind of work' than that which Mulhern has undertaken; but it still seems to me a legitimate reservation to say that the extent to which these very diverse figures 'acted within a shared discursive order and subserved its governing logic'—and, above all, what the interpretive status of this 'governing logic' is, when its exemplars are so diverse—remains open to question.<sup>8</sup> Of course we need organizing concepts to be

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<sup>6</sup> I am slightly comforted by the fact that so sympathetic a critic as Bruce Robbins also construed the book's historical argument as an attempt to 'correct' the 'anti-democratic tendency in the social criticism of the past century': Bruce Robbins, 'No Escape', *London Review of Books*, 1 Nov 2001, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Culture/Metaculture*, p. xvi; 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 88.

able to write history at all; but the potential weakness of this notion of a 'discursive formation' is that it grants the later interpreter an authority to discern examples of its 'logic' in a way that over-rides *all* discriminations made in the vocabulary of the periods in question. It can then become difficult to see what kinds of textual evidence could be acknowledged as challenging the appropriateness of the initial category.

There also remains some unclarity, it seems to me, about both the relation of Kulturkritik to its parent category of 'metacultural discourse' and the defining marks of Kulturkritik itself. To begin with, there is the question of whether Kulturkritik and Cultural Studies are merely two among several illustrations of the larger category—and, if so, what other examples there might be—or whether, taken together, they exhaustively constitute it. (In 'Beyond Metaculture' Mulhern, understandably, focuses on his claims about Kulturkritik rather than upon his provocative identification of a comparable conceptual structure at work in Cultural Studies. I shall follow this emphasis here, although in a larger discussion one might need to reconsider this linkage in the light of what Mulhern acknowledges as the 'authoritarian bearing' of Kulturkritik.) Then there is the question of whether metacultural discourse/Kulturkritik is defined purely structurally, or whether it has any determinate content. In summarizing the argument of his book, Mulhern again emphasizes the priority of form in terms of:

the recurrence of certain relations among concepts (culture, politics, authority), a certain array of topoi (modernity as disintegration, for example), a certain ethos of address (the prophetic intellectual and kindred personae).<sup>9</sup>

But it is not obvious that these *are* all 'formal' characteristics. The topos of 'modernity as disintegration', for example, specifies a particular type of content, one which, when joined to his suggestion that Kulturkritik is marked by its taste for 'climacterics' and the ensuing 'general alert', still seems to justify my suggestion, repudiated by Mulhern, that the tradition as he describes it is represented as 'culturally alarmist'. (It is also, incidentally, an ingredient that seems more plausibly characteristic of Kulturkritik alone than of 'metacultural discourse' more generally). Indeed, at several points Mulhern seems to give Kulturkritik a set of historically located characteristics that are all more than formal. For example, he suggests that, for the proponents of Kulturkritik, the culminating feature of modernity was 'the rise of the masses', and

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<sup>9</sup> 'Beyond Metaculture', pp. 87–8.

elsewhere he claims that ‘Intuitions of loss define the temporal imagination of Kulturkritik’. This then raises questions about the minimal criteria for membership of the tradition. He later wishes that, in a more extended account, one might ‘probe the significance of a thinker such as Croce, whose thought has some formal affinity with Kulturkritik, but perhaps no more substantial association’. This again seems to indicate that the category is to be specified in more than purely formal terms. And, finally, this surely explains why it is the ‘classic critics of “mass” modernity’ that provide the ‘canonical texts’ of this tradition.<sup>10</sup> Mulhern’s category has been extended outwards from a core that did, indeed, have a historical existence, not just a ‘rational plausibility’, but some of the features specific to this historical instance seem to have been retained within the larger re-definition.

### *A metacultural Marxism?*

Obviously, the most notable extension of the category suggested in Mulhern’s recent article is that of a Marxist Kulturkritik. I am not confident that I altogether follow his discussion here, but he seems to be suggesting that Adorno and Marcuse shared a common failing, one that is homologous with that identified in his earlier examples of Kulturkritik. The fundamental limitation of Adorno’s work, he argues, was an inability to find anything in present society upon which to ground his dialectical criticism, and hence no basis for a progressive view of the future. As a result, his critique of contemporary society becomes regressive, re-enacting the ‘natural aristocratism of Kulturkritik’. Marcuse’s disdain of the ‘realm of necessity’, his locating of the realization of human potential above or outside any mechanisms actually present in the dynamics of social life, seems to condemn him to a similar cul-de-sac. The ultimate unrealism of his hope for the future is characterized as ‘aristocratic privilege for all’.<sup>11</sup>

The recurrence of ‘aristocratic’ in these charges illuminates something further about Mulhern’s category of Kulturkritik. Although he insists that Kulturkritik is ‘politically changeable’—able to appear in ‘conservative, liberal, or socialist’ varieties, and not ‘uniformly “conservative” or “reactionary”’—his extension of the category here does suggest it always exhibits a ‘regressive’ quality that helps to foster attitudes that

<sup>10</sup> See *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. 4, 161, xx; ‘Beyond Metaculture’, pp. 88, 90.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Beyond Metaculture’, pp. 96, 98.

most readers would recognize as broadly conservative in character. The relation between the critic and the forms of life being criticized, between the writer and the public, is at the heart of this; and it is, as we shall see, a relation that Mulhern regards as inherently 'elitist'. So although he insists that the 'logic' of Kulturkritik may, as a matter of (so to say) contingent historical fact, have been accompanied by more or less any political allegiance in any given writer, a particular—and, to Mulhern, particularly offensive—political bearing does appear to be built into the category itself.

This is borne out, it seems to me, by Mulhern's acknowledgement that the possibility of a Marxist Kulturkritik is to be regarded as 'disconcerting'. Why, after all, should it be so, if the category has no necessary political affiliation? It is surely because, in Mulhern's re-definition, there is a more fundamental tension between its alleged properties and those of Marxism than there is with any other position. Adorno and Marcuse, it seems, are being indicted for failing to relate their analyses to an actual politics which was attempting to organize those elements within the 'realm of necessity' that pointed towards a transformation of its present exploitative character. The identification of those elements and that character constitutes the core of Marxist theory. Any criticism of contemporary society from the standpoint of culture that is not grounded in a progressive analysis of class conflict is, it seems, inherently 'regressive'. The engagement with the organized expression of that conflict appears to be what 'politics' means here. What seems to be disconcerting about the cases of Adorno and Marcuse is that, although they were working within an intellectual framework premised upon the possibility of transforming existing social relations by means of such a politics, other elements in their thought, especially a certain cultural hauteur, prevent them from giving any coherent expression to that possibility.

All this suggests to me that the adoption of Mulhern's special, extended sense of Kulturkritik as an organizing historical category would bring with it more drawbacks than benefits. Successfully to embrace such a diverse range of figures, historical categories other than those current at the time—including categories that adopt a label from the period but re-define its scope—have to be fairly hospitable and easy-going, otherwise the re-description involved will appear strained and unpersuasive. Kulturkritik, as Mulhern uses it, is a category that has a strong thesis built into its very constitution; namely, that the defining move of those

allegedly writing within this tradition is the attempt to ‘displace’ or ‘sub-limate’ politics, indeed to ‘dissolve political reason itself’. To bring home the problems that use of this category would entail, we need to move from my historical reservation to my theoretical objection.

## 2. DISSOLUTION OF POLITICS

In ‘Culture Talk’, I challenged the description Mulhern gives of his own argument in *Culture/Metaculture*. I suggested that his discussion itself has to be seen as a further instalment of ‘metacultural discourse’—not just because it is a form of intellectual labour, but also because it is itself a reflective analysis of the place of culture in public debate. In other words, I argued, it is not a supersession of ‘culture talk’ by politics but rather a ‘modern meditation upon . . . “the function of criticism”’. ‘*Discourse about metacultural discourse*’, I insisted, in thumping italics, ‘*is still a form of metacultural discourse*’.<sup>12</sup> I continue to think there is a truth underlying this general characterization, but I would now have to acknowledge that Mulhern is justified in saying of this section of my discussion that ‘Collini reaccents the core vocabulary of the book, retrieving *culture* and *politics*—and *metaculture* too—in senses more congenial to himself’.<sup>13</sup> In particular, I think I underestimated the extent to which Mulhern’s category of ‘metaculture’ does not just lend itself to, but is actually constituted by, a very strong thesis about the way in which the forms of cultural criticism he is analysing entail ‘the dissolution of political reason itself’ (whatever our other disagreements, Mulhern and I seem willing to agree that any blame for such misunderstandings, if blame there be, should be shared between us). As a result, my earlier italicized sentence now looks insensitive to the distinctive, and distinctively critical, character of the category; though this acknowledgement does not altogether settle the question of how far Mulhern’s account is a further instalment of, rather than complete break with, the discourse he criticizes.

However, the further effect of this clarification is to make me feel that I was initially too indulgent to Mulhern’s use of the category. Roughly speaking (I shall try to make it a little less rough as I go on), the more tightly the conceptual circle is drawn, the less room there seems to be inside it for the forms of cultural criticism I would want to defend. For,

<sup>12</sup> ‘Culture Talk’, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Beyond Metaculture’, p. 99.

in addition to the properties of generality and reflexivity that ‘metaculture’ shares with what Mulhern calls ‘other forms of critical discourse on culture’, he now emphasizes even more strongly that it is defined by a third quality: metaculture ‘asserts a *cultural principle*’, and ‘culture-as-principle anticipates the end of politics’.<sup>14</sup> It now seems even more important than it did in my earlier reading of his book to bring out just how central to Mulhern’s whole position this claim is—and to make clearer just where I disagree with it.

The repeated theme of Mulhern’s writing—from the concluding chapter of *The Moment of ‘Scrutiny’*, published in 1979, through some of the essays collected in *The Present Lasts a Long Time*, to *Culture/Metaculture* and his most recent NLR essay, re-stating its argument—has been to reproach one or other historical example of cultural criticism for its failure to acknowledge or express a ‘real’ politics, and hence, given his governing conceptual economy, for its attempt to ‘displace’ politics as such. This failure is represented as constitutive of what he calls ‘the perceptual scheme of liberal cultural criticism’, in opposition to which he constantly seeks to redeem or re-instate the dignity of ‘politics’.<sup>15</sup>

This was the central, animating argument in his treatment of Leavis and his circle in *The Moment of ‘Scrutiny’*. There Mulhern insisted that the reason why socialists should not regard *Scrutiny* as a natural ally, despite certain superficial points of contact,

is essentially that the basic and constant discursive organization of the journal, the matrix of its literary and cultural criticism and of its educational policies, of its radical and conservative manifestations alike, was one defined by a dialectic of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ whose *main* and *logically necessary effect* was a *depreciation*, a *repression*, and, at the limit, a *categorical dissolution of politics as such*. Nothing could be more disorienting for socialist cultural theory than the ingestion of a discourse whose main effect is to undo the intelligibility of its ultimate concern: political mobilization against the existing structures of society and state.<sup>16</sup>

It is noticeable how the claim is already cast in apodictic terms: the ‘constant’ discursive organization of the journal was ‘defined’ by a dialectic

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Beyond Metaculture’, p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> See ‘A Welfare Culture?’, one of Mulhern’s pivotal essays, which first appeared in *Radical Philosophy* in 1996, was reprinted in *The Present Lasts a Long Time: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Cork 1998, and extensively re-used in *Culture/Metaculture*.

<sup>16</sup> *The Moment of ‘Scrutiny’*, London 1979, p. 330 (emphases in the original).

whose 'logically necessary' effect entailed 'a categorial dissolution of politics as such'. And this first formulation also makes clear that the category of 'politics as such' carries a special valence or charge, as a placeholder for the revolutionary transformation of society.

In his subsequent work Mulhern has broadened and refined this argument but retained its essential structure. Thus, in the Introduction to *Culture/Metaculture* he claims: 'The unifying theme of Parts I and II is the relationship between culture, in its conflicting senses, and the idea of politics . . . [The logic of metaculture attempts to] resolve the tension of the relationship between culture and politics by dissolving political reason itself.' The specific, and frequently re-iterated, charge against the Kulturkritik tradition concerns its alleged contention that 'politics is inherently deficient as a mode of general authority, which can emerge only from the elusive life of the whole, or culture'. And again, as we have already seen, he insists in his most recent re-statement that 'culture-as-principle anticipates the end of politics'.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, it is *Mulhern* who, from the outset of his writing career, has insisted that 'culture' and 'politics' have hitherto been locked into this contrastive and mutually excluding relationship, a kind of zero-sum game of public debate. And in so doing, he has always appeared to suggest that politics is, in some sense, the rightful occupant of this public space, with the proponents of 'culture' adopting various strategies to supplant it. All these latter figures have now been brought together as 'the tradition of Kulturkritik', all logically committed to attempting to displace politics. Against this flawed tradition he now proposes an understanding of 'cultural politics' that takes place within, and makes creative use of, the 'discrepancy' between culture and politics. But earlier forms of cultural criticism do not seem to be permitted their own versions of this discrepancy: they are committed to the 'categorial dissolution of politics as such'.

However, if there is a virtue to recognizing and working within 'a tension between culture and politics', then this tension must surely be allowed to work productively in *both* directions: there can be fruitful cultural criticism of politics, just as there can be fruitful political criticism of culture. There can also be exaggerated forms of each, attempting to resolve all cultural questions into 'politics' or all political questions into 'culture'. Mulhern focusses on this latter deformation, though he

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<sup>17</sup> *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. xx–xxi, 156, 100.

precisely does not represent it as an *exaggeration*, but as the ineluctable 'logic' of the appeal to culture itself. All this raises the question of whether, for Mulhern, there can be such a thing as legitimate 'cultural criticism', and that in turn prompts the subordinate historical question of whether there have been 'cultural critics', in the period stretching roughly from Herder to Hoggart, whose work has *not* manifested the defining errors of Kulturkritik. Everything seems, again, to turn on definitions; but one cannot help suspecting that, if any given historical figure wrote in a vein that naturally allowed them to be described as a 'cultural critic', then in terms of Mulhern's conceptual grid they will be bound to manifest the failings of metacultural discourse.

### 3. 'THE DAMNED WORD'<sup>18</sup>

At this point, we need to pause and attend more closely to the senses of the key terms of 'culture' and 'politics' deployed in this argument. Mulhern's handling of 'culture' presupposes and extends the discussion in Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*. This is, of course, true of most treatments of the topic in Britain now, especially those conceived under the joint stars of left politics and literary studies. In this style of work, Williams's account has been internalized and naturalized to the point where it has ceased to be recognized (as it originally was) as one polemical re-interpretation of a complex story, and has come to be regarded simply as the accepted history of the category of 'culture'. This is not the occasion to take issue with Williams's account in any detail but it is relevant to call attention to certain of its features, which have become almost invisible.

First, as Williams later took some pride in emphasizing, it was he who selected, arranged and christened the 'culture-and-society tradition': it did not exist as a tradition except as constituted by his argument.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, this tradition is represented as part of the response to a single, cataclysmic social change: the supersession of the older form of society by the 'new civilization' introduced by the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century. Thirdly, what supposedly unites its members is not a shared recognition of belonging, nor a common body of doctrine, nor even a collective use of the term 'culture'. It is, rather, a negative

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Raymond Williams's understandable sigh about 'culture': 'the number of times I've wished that I had never heard of the damned word'. *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, London 1979, p. 154.

<sup>19</sup> *Politics and Letters*, p. 99.

criterion: ‘The development of the idea of culture has, throughout, been a criticism of what has been called the bourgeois idea of society’. Fourthly, this new civilization was understood to have been inherently oppressive and inhumane in a way no previous form of society had been; as a result, there was a unique need to create a ‘court of appeal’ in the form of culture (‘over the England of 1821 there had, after all, to be some higher Court of Appeal’).<sup>20</sup> Note also the implication here that the politics of the new civilization were assumed to be inadequate for this purpose—a part of the problem rather than any form of remedy.

The result of operating within the conceptual geography of these assumptions about ‘culture and society’ is that the idea of culture is necessarily seen as something reactive, a primitive critique of ‘the bourgeois idea of society’ which needs to be superseded by a more sophisticated one—from whose vocabulary the very identification of ‘the bourgeois idea of society’ is taken. Part of the legacy of Williams’s hugely influential book has been to represent any invocation of ‘culture’ as a call for wholeness and organic unity *by definition*, because the ‘reality’ that culture was supposed to ‘compensate’ for was (also by definition, apparently) ‘fragmented’, ‘atomistic’, ‘disintegrating’, and so on.

Of course, it was part of Williams’s argument that the notion of culture whose development he claimed to have plotted was insufficient—that it had become ‘an abstraction and an absolute’—and that what was required was to re-think the notion of culture-as-a-whole-way-of-life in terms of the ethic of solidarity and community, evident in the institutions and achievements of working-class life during this period.<sup>21</sup> But that aspiration, pursued in the long concluding chapter of *Culture and Society*, only casts his predecessors further back into a critically distanced past, and it is this intellectual gesture, it seems to me, that Mulhern—re-stating some of Williams’s historical case, even if going beyond his theoretical conclusion—in effect repeats. In this connexion, it is illuminating to recall that Williams’s interviewers in 1979, in urging a wider international perspective than the

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<sup>20</sup> *Culture and Society*, pp. 328, 48.

<sup>21</sup> I am puzzled by Mulhern’s passing observation that this is a ‘questionable’ reading of Williams’s conclusion (‘Beyond Metaculture’, p. 90). Of course, Williams also distinguished the ‘idea of service’, but he did not see this as a genuine supersession of ‘that version of social relationship which we usually call individualism’. ‘The crucial distinction is between alternative ideas of the nature of social relationship’, and ‘The idea of solidarity is potentially the real basis of society’: *Culture and Society*, pp. 325, 332.

purely 'English' scope of *Culture and Society*, alluded to the then recently published work of Göran Therborn and summarized the whole European tradition of sociology in terms almost identical to those in which Mulhern now identifies Kulturkritik: 'In one form or another the antidote of classical sociology to the disintegrating forces of industrialism and democracy was always a more organic culture—a coherent order of values capable of conferring a new meaning and unity in society'. (The very next reference is to Mann's *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*, a constant reference-point of Mulhern's work right up to the present.)<sup>22</sup>

However, there is a sense in which *Culture/Metaculture* builds not so much upon *Culture and Society* itself but upon the criticisms of that work made by Williams's New Left Review interviewers in 1979. This is particularly the case with the *political* omissions and inadequacies of that book as the interviewers represented them—the way the book 'appears to exclude the middle term of politics', that it is marked by 'a general depreciation of politics', that 'there does appear to be a virtually systematic depreciation of the actual political dimension of all the figures whom you are discussing', and so on.<sup>23</sup> But where the NLR panel were precisely calling for, as they saw it, the re-introduction of politics as a 'middle term' (i.e. between culture and society), Mulhern's latest statement of his case appears to go further and to see any valorization of the critical perspective of culture as entailing the 'systematic depreciation of politics'. The danger then is that Williams becomes an early victim, even if one of the most sympathetically treated, of the intellectual dynamics of the zero-sum game I identified a moment ago.

### *Senses of politics*

Let me now turn to the other semantic player in this game. The rhetorical pivot around which much of Mulhern's argument turns, both in this exchange and in his work more generally, is a contrast between two senses of 'politics'. When he is discussing Kulturkritik's jeremiads against the failings of contemporary 'civilization', 'politics' appears in the conventional, newspaper reader's sense—the everyday doings of politicians, parties and parliaments. But when he is indicting that tradition, from his own analytic standpoint, for attempting to 'displace politics'

<sup>22</sup> *Politics and Letters*, p. 114; cf. *Present Lasts a Long Time*, pp. 85–6, and *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. 4–7.

<sup>23</sup> *Politics and Letters*, pp. 108, 103, 100.

or to 'dissolve political reason itself', something more encompassing and more elevated is in play. 'Politics' here means all that bears on the attempt to order social relations in the light of conceptions of human possibility: it is the continuing activity of trying to refine and give practical effect to such conceptions within a field of conflict. 'Politics is the struggle to determine the totality of social relations in a given space'. Cultural criticism's complaints against current versions of politics in the narrower sense are then held to be part of a broader 'logic' wherein it is attempting to displace politics in the second, larger sense.<sup>24</sup>

The structural importance to Mulhern's position of this movement between senses of 'politics' is obliquely confirmed by its being the occasion for a slight misrepresentation of my argument in 'Culture Talk':

Politics, in the language of Collini's critique, is a negative value, normally qualified as 'everyday', 'instrumental', 'present-driven', or pejoratively associated with 'narrow pragmatism' and 'partial or specialized perspectives'. It is the lesser moral reality against which culture-as-subject exercises its power of general reflection.<sup>25</sup>

A footnote then refers to my article 'pp. 48–51, *passim*'. Now, it is of course true that my argument involved appealing to some conception of the standpoint from which 'cultural criticism' offers to speak, and that that standpoint involves making a distinction (perhaps only a preliminary or opportunist distinction: it doesn't require to be more at this point) between the world of instrumental activity and the world of culture. But what is not true is that I equate the former with 'politics'. For example, on the first of the pages cited, I refer to the notion of culture as 'a useful mnemonic for the kinds of values that those principally engaged in

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<sup>24</sup> 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 101. It is interesting here to note that Raymond Williams, when pressed by his NLR interviewers (of whom Mulhern was of course one) about the 'virtually systematic depreciation' of politics in *Culture and Society*, acknowledged some truth in the charge by saying that when he wrote the book he had 'reached a conclusion that I do not wholly disavow today, although I sharply watch myself through it: that there is a kind of politics whose local tactical modes positively prevent people from seeing what is happening in society—as distinct from a politics that is based on an understanding of the main lines of force in society and a choice of sides in the conflict between them. Politics often functions, not as I think you are using the term, as a conscious struggle or strategy formed by history and by theory, but as a routine reproduction of controversies or competitive interests without relation to the basic deep movements of society.' *Politics and Letters*, p. 103.

<sup>25</sup> 'Beyond Metaculture', pp. 100–1.

controlling the wealth and power of the world habitually tend to neglect', and I speak of the effect such appeals to 'culture' can have upon 'those processes that are governed by the need to bring about proximate instrumental ends'. Insofar as any one conventional term embraces the greater part of such 'instrumental' activity, it is clearly the 'economic', not the 'political'. Similarly, Mulhern takes my remark about 'partial or specialized perspectives' as a further pejorative characterization of politics. But in this case, the quoted phrase occurs in my discussion of Raymond Williams's claim that the concept of 'culture' evolved as 'the effort at total qualitative assessment'. I at that point suggest that 'the *generality* of the perspective is the key here', and immediately go on: 'The contrast is with all partial or specialized perspectives'. Throughout my discussion, a familiar set of contrasts is reiterated (it is part of my point that these are long-established pairings, not at all original to me): 'autotelic' versus 'instrumental', 'general' versus 'partial', and so on.

Most of everyday social activity is necessarily and rightly 'instrumental' and 'partial' in these senses. Their opposites, various forms of non-practical creative and reflective activity which, in turn, enable a degree of 'standing back' from instrumentality, are exceptional; and such standing back is, I argue, one of the defining marks of what is usually termed 'cultural criticism'. Clearly, a search for perspectives of greater generality may also inform political activity at its most reflective, and it is neither an explicit nor implicit part of my case here to devalue politics as a 'lesser moral reality'. The thought that the practice of politics may sometimes fall short of the ideal of ordering social relations in the light of conceptions of human possibility, that it may exhibit some of the short-sightedness and narrow calculation characteristic of instrumental activity, and that it may fruitfully be subject to 'criticism', is not to represent politics as a 'negative value'. But all this underlines that it is an important part of Mulhern's argument to represent cultural criticism as unwarrantedly dismissive of 'politics' (conceiving it only in the narrow sense), while reserving for his own position the full recognition of the intellectual reach and human dignity of the activity of 'politics' (in the broad sense). The corresponding danger might appear to be that of asserting a 'political principle' every bit as imperial as the 'cultural principle' he claims to find at the heart of metacultural discourse.

In the end, the ghost at the feast is the notion of a real, or properly serious, 'politics' (in the more general sense) which underwrites Mulhern's

criticisms of rival positions. He stigmatizes these positions as being able to offer no more than ‘metapolitics’. Even the apparent ubiquity of a form of political commitment in Cultural Studies remains self-frustrating, he argues, because still governed by the logic of metaculture. ‘Metacultural discourse’, he concludes, damningly, ‘is metapolitics’.<sup>26</sup> But so, too, one may retort, is the critique of metacultural discourse in the name of an abstract idea of ‘politics’. Indeed, perhaps I may retrieve the truth inexactly expressed in the italicized sentence from ‘Culture Talk’ quoted above, by now saying that *discourse about metapolitical discourse is still a form of metapolitical discourse*. Metapolitics, one might say, adapting another of Mulhern’s dicta about metaculture, urges politics as the necessary, unregarded truth of society, whose curse is the inadequacy of the prevailing forms of general authority.

But metapolitics—to abuse a phrase of Auden’s—makes nothing happen. This is not a failing in itself: most intellectual activity is not an attempt to (in the relevant sense) make something happen. The objectionable element comes when intellectuals delude themselves that what they are doing in their intellectual activity is, somehow, ‘really’ politics. Mulhern is an acute diagnostician of this delusion when discussing some of the recent manifestos for Cultural Studies, but I wonder whether a form of the criticism cannot also be levelled at his own gestures towards ‘cultural politics’. The invocation of the *concept* of ‘politics’, however sophisticated or radical, is not itself politics.

In this context, it also seems legitimate to query the credentials of the position that allows Mulhern to distinguish so confidently between politics and metapolitics. One of his re-statements of the case against Kulturkritik is that it proposes, in the name of culture, ‘to mediate a symbolic metapolitical resolution of the contradictions of capitalist modernity’. But from my perspective, it appears to be both the strength and the weakness of a broadly Marxist approach to such issues that it can indict other positions for offering no more than such a ‘symbolic metapolitical resolution’ of these contradictions. The strength lies, of course, in Marxism’s strenuously analytical account of the centrality of class conflict, and its consequent commitment to political mobilization organized around objectively differentiated relations to the means of production. But the weakness lies in the status of the promised ‘resolution’ itself,

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<sup>26</sup> *Culture/Metaculture*, p. 157.

for it is surely now clearer than ever that there is something culpably gestural about Marxism's promise to re-make social relations on some other basis and to abolish those economic and social antagonisms that it identifies as having hitherto been the motor of historical change. That claim always relied too heavily on Marx's re-working of Hegel's philosophy of history; and, notoriously, his vision of what kind of society might then succeed capitalism was sketchy in the extreme. In these terms Marxism, too, could be said to offer (no less but also no more than) 'a symbolic metapolitical resolution of the contradictions of capitalist modernity'. Those who find any cogency in this thought will not easily be persuaded that Mulhern is speaking from a position of strength in indicting cultural criticism for falling short of some 'fully political' resolution of these contradictions.

#### 4. CULTURAL CRITICISM VS CULTURAL POLITICS

By this point, readers could be forgiven for feeling some frustration that Mulhern and I appear to agree on so much yet to differ on everything. We both insist on the non-identity of culture and politics. We both recognize politics as the important, inescapable and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space. We both have reservations about the extent to which so many on the left, especially the academic left, now treat questions of cultural identity, variously conceived, as the defining issues of politics. We both believe that those forms of criticism that seek to resolve the problems they diagnose simply by asserting the desirability or inevitability of some kind of harmony are indeed guilty of an evasion of politics. And we both seem drawn to a similar tone or writerly stance in discussing these matters, including a taste for certain kinds of intellectual irony. So is there, in the end, any real difference between what he chooses to term 'cultural politics' and what I prefer to persist in calling 'cultural criticism'?

I think there is. It turns in part on the issues discussed so far—Mulhern's 'compensatory' notion of culture and the corresponding insistence on the primacy of a certain conception of politics. But perhaps it also turns to some extent upon my understanding of the part to be played in public debate by representatives of imaginative and intellectual activity, and the necessarily disjunctive character, and correspondingly limited effectiveness, of 'criticism'.

I mentioned at the outset of this essay that it still seems to me helpful, for present purposes, to use the term ‘culture’ in its primary sense of ‘artistic and intellectual activities’. Understood thus, ‘cultural criticism’ signifies the movement from this complex of artistic and intellectual work outward, towards society. Perhaps only ‘towards’, because such criticism does not usually grapple in any very sustained or detailed way with the perceived defects of that society. After all, to grapple really closely is in the end to *become* politics, as Mulhern emphasises in respect of particular examples of ‘deliberately culturalized politics’.<sup>27</sup> But this is where what I referred to as the necessarily disjunctive character, and correspondingly limited effectiveness, of ‘criticism’ comes in. Criticism cannot aspire to ‘replace’ politics, not least because, as criticism, it cannot do what politics requires. Indeed, I do not think that ‘cultural criticism’ in my sense can or should claim to be terribly effective or influential *as politics*. It issues reminders from time to time, reminders of things not sufficiently taken into account in the prevailing local (and more than local) public discourse; but then its practitioners tend to return to their own preferred preoccupations. Writing, painting, composing, and so on are legitimate, if somewhat rarefied, human activities, and the category to which they belong is not best understood as a form of escape from, or compensation for, the unsatisfactory qualities of (other aspects of) ‘reality’. But they are activities that may, from time to time, help prompt the kind of reflections on those other aspects of reality that immersion in those aspects themselves does not so readily tend to foster.

Of course, to identify two realms as disjunctive is not to condemn them to an eternity of non-communication. It is surely quite common for a perspective that will eventually be developed into a political critique and, later still, elaborated into a political programme, to have been nourished and partly shaped at an early stage by ideals drawn from ‘culture’ in this way. The development of the thinking of the young Marx provides one familiar example of this pattern, as notions of self-creation and free activity encountered in the writings of the German Romantics helped stimulate his extraordinary pursuit of explanations of the mechanisms by which the tendentially dominant form of modern society systematically denied these possibilities to its members. In this sense, the *1844 Manuscripts* bears a family resemblance to, say, *Culture and Anarchy*—at times quite a close resemblance, given their common debts to the German Romantics—despite the enormous differences in theoretical

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Beyond Metaculture’, p. 103.

ambition, intellectual idiom, mode of address, and so on. Moreover, both works were disparaging of much that counted as ‘politics’ in the everyday, newspaper reader’s sense; yet it would surely seem odd to want to charge either of them with aiming ‘to dissolve political reason itself’. In citing Marx and Arnold, I am not proposing either of them as models for contemporary cultural criticism to emulate, but merely indicating some of the ways in which, historically, cultural criticism has had a bearing on what may be conventionally distinguished from it as ‘political thought’, without attempting illegitimately to supplant the latter.

### *A critical engagement?*

Mulhern’s response to my earlier version of these claims is one of the few places where he seems to proceed more by assertion than by argument, and this is where our differences may become most explicit. He summarizes my position in the form of an embedded quotation: “‘Disciplined reflection partly grounded in an extensive intellectual and aesthetic inheritance can furnish a place to stand” in “critical engagement” with politics’. He then retorts:

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.<sup>28</sup>

I am not certain I know how to construe these sentences. The first point appears to involve a charge of circular reasoning—Mulhern introduces the section by saying ‘the formulations in which he sets out his position are circular’. Presumably, he is suggesting that ‘critical engagement’ with politics more or less *means* ‘disciplined reflection partly grounded in an extensive intellectual and aesthetic inheritance’. This is surely to make the relation between these phrases excessively tight: the kind of ‘critical engagement’ with politics that, for example, environmentalists or feminists could be said to have may not seem to them to be even partly grounded in an extensive aesthetic inheritance. But even if, for the sake of the argument, one granted some such internal relation between these phrases, I am still not sure that the charge of disabling circularity sticks. Although I do not at all wish to accuse Mulhern of serious or deliberate misquotation at this point, his abbreviation of my sentence

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Beyond Metaculture’, p. 100.

does, I think, alter its emphasis a little, and the original makes the non-circularity clearer. What I actually wrote was that the appeal to culture

does not require the positing of 'culture' as some kind of given or transcendent locus of value; it only requires the presumption that disciplined reflection partly grounded in an extensive intellectual and aesthetic inheritance can furnish a place to stand in attempting to engage critically with the narrow pragmatism (or 'specialism') of any particular political programme.<sup>29</sup>

The contrast between 'the extensive intellectual and aesthetic inheritance' and 'the narrow pragmatism . . . of any particular political programme' is surely great enough to avoid circularity: 'critical engagement' with the latter is not co-extensive with the former. Nor is this defence weakened by acknowledging, first, that criticism which speaks from a base in such an 'inheritance' may not actually manage to make much of a dent in the certainties of the relevant political programme; and secondly, that of course one could imagine a politics in which this level of critical engagement was constitutive of its own forms of reasoning, but that level of reflectiveness is hardly characteristic of 'political programmes' in general—and, where it is to be found, it may anyway be part of a politics that has drawn with advantage upon earlier forms of cultural criticism.

Mulhern's second point, about 'a location in the contested order of social value', I take to be one about finding an alignment or affiliation within a field of social conflict, where the 'standing' involves standing shoulder to shoulder with some against others. That is an intelligible and indeed familiar notion, but clearly not the sense of 'place to stand' to which I was referring. It looks here as though Mulhern is simply asserting that such a *social* location is the only meaningful sense that could be (or ought to be?) given to that phrase.

The sense, hereabouts in our exchange, that we may each be blundering about in the other's prose, trying to cope with the unfamiliar by re-clothing it in more familiar garb, is strengthened by Mulhern's going on to assimilate what I say to the position explored (and criticized) in Marcuse's classic 1937 essay 'The Affirmative Character of Culture'. Mulhern quotes my observation that 'culture' can be seen as

an allusion to the bearing which that kind of disinterested or autotelic exploration of human possibility, characteristically (but not exclusively) pur-

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<sup>29</sup> 'Culture Talk', p. 51.

sued in artistic and intellectual activity, can have upon those processes that are governed by the need to bring about proximate instrumental ends.

He then comments that this ‘simply assumes what it needs to establish. The word “characteristically” is an ideological wand’.<sup>30</sup> I am particularly puzzled by this last phrase. Presumably, Mulhern would agree that such exploration *is* pursued in artistic and intellectual activity, so perhaps he is suggesting that my statement exaggerates this truth or thereby obscures another more important one. But the metaphor of the wand suggests more than this: it suggests a shady or unconvincing attempt to transform something into something else. Perhaps the objection to ‘characteristically’ is that it functions to turn what is really the activity of politics (in Mulhern’s most ambitious sense) into the activity of culture. But that reading, I have to say, ‘simply assumes what it needs to establish’. Nor am I cowed by the thought that ‘Marcuse might have seized on it [my use of ‘characteristically’] 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’. Marcuse might indeed have done so; but that, in my view, would have been for him merely to have extended the intellectual high-handedness of his original characterization of ‘the affirmative character of culture’. For it would be, first, to have assumed too complete and contrastive a distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘society’ (despite my qualification ‘characteristically but not exclusively’); second, it would have been yet again to work with an excessively functionalist analysis of culture, which sees it as some form of ‘compensation’ for the injustices of the prevailing social order; and third, it would be to assign criticism of instrumental activity to ‘another world’, to require it to inhabit a ‘transcendental’ realm. Working with the categories derived from a Marxist re-casting of the broader German Idealist tradition of philosophy and social theory, Marcuse was able to make each of these claims in their positive form seem like necessary conceptual truths, but it is not a necessary truth that everyone who writes about culture has to work within those categories.

## 5. INTELLECTUALS AND THEIR WORK

Perhaps part of the emerging pattern of differences between Mulhern and myself on these issues can be traced back to contrasting attitudes to the role of intellectuals. Mulhern has long objected to what he identifies

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Beyond Metaculture’, p. 100.

as the assertion of the claims of a 'new priesthood' implicit in the tradition of cultural criticism, since it presumes a notion of culture as the possession of the cultivated few, 'by definition inaccessible to the great majority'. I believe myself to be no more in favour of a 'new priesthood' than Mulhern (though he may still think this is the 'logic' of my position), but I also believe that the activity of cultural criticism need not entail any such notion. As I have indicated, it seems to me a drawback of his expanded category of Kulturkritik that it makes such caste-consciousness inescapable. Thus, a given writer's 'personal democratic convictions do not cancel the fact' that in writing in this vein he is 'simply updating the claims' of what, speaking of Karl Mannheim in 1988, he called 'a pseudo-aristocratic authoritarian liberalism'. Or as he puts it in his most recent piece: "That superordination of culture-as-principle, and of an intellectual corps privy to its meaning, can only be authoritarian, in final effect, even where the associated social aspiration is benign and progressive".<sup>31</sup>

The dangers of talking too freely of the 'logic' of an ascribed intellectual position surely become evident here. Describing a 'benign and progressive' position as 'authoritarian, in final effect' seems to me all too reminiscent of that mid-twentieth-century Communist jargon in which positions could be dismissed as 'objectively fascist' no matter what their ostensible political orientation. 'Final' effect seems to presuppose knowledge of a process and its outcome that is beyond any epistemology legitimately available to the intellectual historian.

In this vein, Mulhern sees a form of 'humanism' at work here: 'Humanism and its distinctive guardian—the intellectual, the Arnoldian "best self" of an "ordinary" world—are living, more vigorously and more variously than many of us would like to think.'<sup>32</sup> I, predictably, do not find 'humanism', used in this sense, a very helpful label, and I certainly see no reason to tie the inescapable sociological category of 'the intellectual' to a dubious and unappealingly dated notion of the Arnoldian 'best self'. But metacultural discourse is represented as the characteristic or occupational failing of intellectuals, precisely because it attempts to assert the primacy of their defining activities. A kind of corporatism is made to appear inescapable, therefore: speaking in the name of culture is inherently 'authoritarian', an assertion of the esoteric knowledge

<sup>31</sup> *Present Lasts a Long Time*, p. 87–8; 'Beyond Metaculture', p. 91.

<sup>32</sup> *Present Lasts a Long Time*, p. 92; cf. *Culture/Metaculture*, pp. xvi–xvii, 34–5.

possessed by the privileged few, whereas speaking in the name of ‘politics’ allows an implication of some kind of democratic labour, subserving the interests of others.

Behind Mulhern’s various strictures on the ‘elitist’ and ‘pseudo-aristocratic’ failings of past cultural critics there lies, it seems to me, not just a theoretical antipathy but a more personal unease with the fact of *being* an intellectual. After all, we need to ask how we should understand the activity of writing books and essays about the relation of culture and politics—in other words, the activity that Mulhern himself is engaged in. For there can be no question but that he is writing as an intellectual: drawing upon the kind of disciplined engagement with history, literature and philosophy that has been facilitated by his education and employment, he aspires to persuade his readers to adopt his way of thinking about these large issues. The proponent of ‘cultural politics’, no less than that of ‘cultural criticism’, speaks from a more general perspective than that currently—perhaps only temporarily—occupied by those whom they are both trying to persuade.

This is not a reprehensibly ‘elitist’ conception of the role of the intellectual. It is an inevitable feature of the form taken by intellectual labour, insofar as it participates in public debate. There is no sense, therefore, in which to speak from the perspective of ‘culture’ is inherently authoritarian while to speak from that of ‘politics’ is inherently democratic or egalitarian. Obviously the manner in which either is done may be more or less democratic in any given instance—as may what Mulhern calls the ‘associated social aspiration’. Nonetheless, the structural position of drawing upon certain intellectual or cultural advantages in order to try to persuade others to understand the world (or some bit of it) in the recommended way is the same, in both cases. The fact that some cultural critics may have made unwarranted assumptions about a kind of caste superiority does not mean that attempts to bring the perspective of culture to bear on the common discussion of common problems must always be dismissed as ‘elitist’, even assuming that that much mis-used word still retains any dismissive force. Conversely, the fact that the ideal to which Mulhern ultimately looks forward is one in which all may participate in the ‘general labour’ of pondering ‘human possibility’ and its translation into social practice does not mean that, in recommending this conception *now*, he escapes the necessarily asymmetrical relations of intellectuals and publics.

But (to avoid misunderstanding) I should declare still more emphatically that I do not endorse the condescension and cultural pessimism of those inter-war cultural critics whom Mulhern so effectively criticizes. Cultural criticism does not have to assume an authoritarian relation between a priesthood of cultivated adepts and a merely passive mass of the uninstructed. Equally, it does not require the disparagement of a set of phenomena selectively grouped as 'modernity', nor the assumption of a fall from some previously better or more 'organic' state. But nor, by the same token, does it *have* to aim at the displacement or supersession of politics: only at critically supplementing it. Speaking about broadly political matters from a broadly cultural perspective is both legitimate and likely to be of limited effect. It is only one among the valuable forms of public debate, and by no means always the most important one.

In the perorations to both his book and his subsequent article, Mulhern celebrates the 'discrepancy' between culture and politics as a space of creative possibility. Expressed in those terms, his case might seem bound to win one's enthusiastic support. But, as I have tried to show, the whole critical machinery at work in his category of 'metacultural discourse' presumes that the sphere of public determination of the pattern of social relations as a whole is to be regarded as properly, and exclusively, the domain of 'politics'. Culture enters it as an intruder; indeed, the sphere itself is characterized in such a way that culture can only figure as an illegitimate usurper, always attended by a train of discredited intellectual gestures and dubious political aspirations. Mulhern concludes his most recent re-statement by saying that socialists may ponder the precedents of recent forms or episodes of cultural politics 'as they face their own unknowns, chief among them the shapes of an adequate—imaginative and capable—contemporary politics'. I warm to the pluralism of 'shapes' while in the same movement bridle at the drama of 'chief'. Perhaps that movement encapsulates my response to Mulhern's case more generally. Perhaps the differences between us can be crystallized by my wanting to say that, for all the manifold virtues of *Culture/Metaculture* in particular and Mulhern's writings on this theme in general, they still leave us facing another quite important unknown: the shapes of an adequate—imaginative and capable—contemporary cultural criticism.