CULTURE
THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS' ACCOUNT

Adam Kuper

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, England
INTRODUCTION:

CULTURE

WARS

I don’t know how many times I’ve wished that I’d never heard the damned word.

Raymond Williams

American academics are waging culture wars. (Not many dead.) Politicians urge cultural revolution. Apparently a seismic cultural change is needed to resolve the problems of poverty, drug abuse, crime, illegitimacy, and industrial competitiveness. There is talk of cultural differences between the sexes and the generations, between football teams, or between advertising agencies. When a merger between two companies fails, it is explained that their cultures were not compatible. The beauty of it is that everyone understands. “We tried to sell ‘semiotics,’ but we found it a bit difficult,” reported a London company called Semiotic Solutions, “so now we sell ‘culture.’ They know that one. You don’t have to explain it.” And there is no call to sell culture short. “Culture rules the roost in terms of motivating consumer behavior,” claims the company brochure, “more persuasive than reason, more ‘mass’ than psychology.” There is also a thriving secondary market in cultural discourse.
In the mid-1990s, bookshops set up “cultural studies” sections in the prime positions that were once devoted to New Age religion and before that to self-improvement. The book manager at Olsson’s in Washington, D.C., Guy Brussat, explained: “Somebody sees sociology, and they think, dry, academic text. You see cultural studies and you think, Oh, culture! It’s a subtle, psychological thing.”

Everyone is into culture now. For anthropologists, culture was once a term of art. Now the natives talk culture back at them. “Culture”—the word itself, or some local equivalent, is on everyone’s lips,” Marshall Sahlins has observed. “Tibetans and Hawaiians, Ojibway, Kwakiutl, and Eskimo, Kazakhs and Mongols, native Australians, Balinese, Kashmiris, and New Zealand Maori: all discover they have a ‘culture.’” The monolingual speakers of Kayapo in the South American tropical forest use the Portuguese term cultura to describe their traditional ceremonies. Maurice Godelier describes a migrant laborer returning to his New Guinea people, the Baruya, and proclaiming: “We must find strength in our customs; we must base ourselves on what the Whites call culture.” Another New Guinean tells an anthropologist, “If we didn’t have kastom, we would be just like white men.” Sahlins cites all these instances to illustrate a general proposition: “The cultural self-consciousness developing among imperialism’s erstwhile victims is one of the more remarkable phenomena of world history in the later twentieth century.”

These erstwhile victims may even develop critical discourses on culture. Gerd Baumann has shown that in Southall, a multi-ethnic suburb in West London, people “question what the terms ‘culture’ and ‘community’ may signify in the first place. The terms themselves become pivotal points in the making of a Southall culture.” However, even anti-Western nationalists may simply appropriate the dominant international rhetoric of culture to affirm the unique identity of their own people, with no fear of self-contradiction. “We consider the main threat to our society at the present time,” says a fundamentalist Iranian politician, “to be a cultural one.” (But surely to speak of cultural identity is very... American?) Akio Morita, one of the founders of Sony, rejects pleas that Japan should liberalize its trading arrangements to permit more competition from foreign firms. “Reciprocity,” he explains, “would mean changing laws to accept foreign systems that may not suit our culture.” (Fortunately, selling Sony TV sets to Americans and making Hollywood movies is perfectly in accordance with Japanese culture.)

Perhaps the future of the whole world depends on culture. In 1993, Samuel Huntington announced in an apocalyptic essay in Foreign Affairs that a new phase of global history has begun, in which “the fundamental sources of conflict” will not be primarily economic or ideological. “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural.” Elaborating this thesis in a recent book, he argued that we can expect a titanic clash of civilizations, each representing a primordial cultural identity. The “major differences in political and economic development among civilizations are clearly rooted in their different cultures,” and “culture and cultural identities... are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post–Cold War world... In this new world, local politics is the politics of ethnicity; global politics is the politics of civilizations. The rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations.”

It goes without saying that culture means something rather different to market researchers in London, a Japanese mogul, New Guinean villagers, and a radical clergyman in Teheran, not to mention Samuel Huntington. There is nevertheless a family resemblance between the concepts they have in mind. In its most general sense, culture is simply a way of talking about collective identities. Status is also in play, however. Many people believe that cultures can be measured against each other, and they are inclined to esteem their own culture more highly than that of others. They may even believe that there is only one true civilization, and that the future not only of the nation but of the world depends on the survival of their culture. “The multiculturalists notwithstanding,” Roger Kimball insists, “the choice facing us today is not between a ‘repressive’ Western culture
and a multicultural paradise, but between culture and barbarism. Civilization is not a gift, it is an achievement—a fragile achievement that needs constantly to be shored up and defended from besiegers inside and out.” Huntington suggests that the clash of civilizations in the post-Cold War world is but a stage on the way to the climactic struggle that is to come, “the greater clash, the global ‘real clash,’ between Civilization and barbarism.”

Whereas the patriots of Western Civ claim the high ground of the great tradition, the multiculturalists celebrate the diversity of America and champion the cultures of the marginal, the minorities, the dissidents, the colonized. The culture of the establishment is denounced as oppressive. Minority cultures empower the weak: they are authentic; they speak to real people; they sustain variety and choice; they feed dissent. All cultures are equal, or should be treated as equal. “So culture as a theme or topic of study has replaced society as the general object of inquiry among progressives,” Fred Inglis writes, with only a touch of irony. But while conservatives reject these arguments, they agree that culture establishes public standards and determines national destiny. And when people of different nations and ethnic groups meet, whole cultures confront each other. Something must give in this confrontation.

Culture is also often used in a different sense, to refer to the high art that is enjoyed by the happy few. But it is not simply a private accomplishment. The well-being of the whole nation is at stake if art and scholarship are threatened. For Matthew Arnold, the true class struggle was not between rich and poor but between the guardians of culture and the people he called the philistines, who were in thrall to Mammon. Radical writers, however, deny that the culture of the elite spreads sweetness and light. High culture can be represented as an instrument of domination, a trick of caste. Within the elite, Pierre Bourdieu has argued, the value of high culture lies precisely in the fact that the ability to judge works of art, to make distinctions, itself confers “distinction.” Culture is the gift of educated taste that marks off a lady or a gentleman from the upstart. For those in the Marxist tradition, culture has its place in the larger class war. High culture cloaks the extortions of the rich. Ersatz mass culture confounds the poor. Only popular cultural traditions can counter the corruption of the mass media.

Although there has been a striking efflorescence of culture talk, arguments of this sort are, of course, not new. They all cropped up in the course of a similar burst of cultural theorizing between the 1920s and the 1950s, as the following chapter will show. (Perhaps this long argument was simply interrupted for a generation by the ideological preoccupations of the Cold War.) Then as now, the more reflective authors cited their forerunners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, recognizing that discourses on culture tend to fall into well-established categories.

A French, a German, and an English theory of culture are often loosely identified. Alternatively, and equally loosely, Enlightenment, Romantic, and Classical discourses are distinguished. These are rough-and-ready labels for complex constructs that have regularly been taken to pieces and reassembled in new patterns, adapted, pronounced dead, revived, renamed, revamped, and generally subjected to a variety of structural transformations. Yet however crude, this classification does provide an initial orientation. Even the most imaginative and original thinkers can generally be placed in one or another of these central traditions, each of which specifies a conception of culture and puts it to work within a particular theory of history.

In the French tradition, civilization is represented as a progressive, cumulative, distinctively human achievement. Human beings are alike, at least in potential. All are capable of civilization, which depends on the unique human gift for reason. No doubt civilization has progressed furthest in France, but in principle it may be enjoyed, if perhaps not quite to the same degree, by savages, barbarians, and other Europeans. According to Louis Dumont, a Frenchman will therefore “naively identify his own particular culture with ‘civilisa-
tion' or universal culture.” To be sure, a reflective Frenchman would readily admit that reason does not have things all its own way. It must struggle against tradition, superstition, and brute instinct. But he could rest secure in the belief that the ultimate victory of civilization is certain, for it can call to its aid science: the highest expression of reason, and indeed of culture or civilization, the true and efficient knowledge of the laws that inform nature and society alike.

This secular creed was formulated in France in the second half of the eighteenth century, in opposition to what the philosophes considered to be the forces of reaction and unreason, represented above all by the Catholic church and the ancien régime. As it took hold in the rest of Europe, its most formidable ideological opposition came from German intellectuals, often Protestant ministers, who were provoked to stand up for national tradition against cosmopolitan civilization; for spiritual values against materialism; for the arts and crafts against science and technology; for individual genius and self-expression against stifling bureaucracy; for the emotions, even for the darkest forces within us, against desiccated reason: in short, for Kultur against Civilization.

Unlike scientific knowledge, the wisdom of culture is subjective. Its most profound insights are relative, not universal laws. What is true on one side of the Pyrenees may be error on the other side. But if the cultural faith is eroded, life loses all meaning. While material civilization was tightening its iron grip on every European society, individual nations therefore struggled to sustain a spiritual culture, expressed above all in language and the arts. The authentic Kultur of the German people was surely to be preferred to the artificial Civilization of a cosmopolitan, materialistic French-speaking elite. In any case, cultural difference was natural. There is no common human nature. “I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians,” wrote the French counter-revolutionary de Maistre. “But as for man, I declare that I have never in my life met him; if he exists, he is unknown to me.” (Henry James may have had this aphorism in mind when he wrote, “Man isn’t at all one, after all—it takes so much of him to be American, to be French, etc.”)

These two traditions of thinking about culture developed in dialectical opposition to each other. A central theme of Enlightenment thinkers was human progress, whereas their opponents were interested in the particular destiny of a nation. In the Enlightenment view, civilization was engaged in a great struggle to overcome the resistance of traditional cultures, with their superstitions, irrational prejudices, and fearful loyalties to cynical rulers. (Diderot said he would rest in peace only when the last king was strangled in the entrails of the last priest.) For the party of the Counter-Enlightenment, the defining enemy was rational, scientific, universal civilization: the Enlightenment itself. Associated with material values, with capitalism, and often with foreign political and economic influence, this civilization menaced authentic culture and condemned age-old crafts to obsolescence. Cosmopolitanism corrupted language. Rationalism disturbed religious faith. Together they eroded the spiritual values on which the organic community depended.

These contrasting ideologies could fuel nationalist rhetoric, and stir up popular emotions in time of war, but even at their most envenomed they were never merely national discourses. There were French intellectuals who sympathized with the Counter-Enlightenment, if only because it came to the defense of religion against the insidious subversion of reason. After the Battle of Sedan in 1870 (won, it was said, by the schoolmasters of Prussia), the idea of a national culture penetrated a humiliated France, and “la culture Française” was increasingly contrasted to “la culture allemande,” though without necessarily compromising French claims to superiority. (As late as 1938, the Dictionary Quillet noted that the term culture could be used ironically, as in the phrase “la culture allemande.”) In Germany there was a long tradition of Enlightenment thinking, which was never completely submerged, though it sometimes took strange, almost unrecognizable forms. Nietzsche condemned his countrymen
for their chaotic Bildung, or cultural formation, corrupted by borrowing and fashion, which he contrasted to its detriment with the organic Kultur of France, and he equated that in turn with Civilization itself. He opted for civilization—in other words, for France: home to “the most spiritual and refined European culture.” A French dissident like Baudelaire, on the other hand, could call France “a truly barbarous country,” and speculate that perhaps civilization “has taken refuge in some tiny, as yet undiscovered tribe.” The First World War was fought behind the rival banners of Western Civilization and German Kultur, but in the war’s very shadow the brothers Thomas and Heinrich Mann took opposite sides—the German and the French—in a famous debate about culture and civilization.

In both these traditions, culture or civilization stood for ultimate values. It has been suggested that these concepts spread in the eighteenth century because religion was losing its grip on many intellectuals. They provided an alternative, secular source of value and meaning. Each tradition, however, had affinities with a specific Christian outlook. The idea of Civilization recalls the universalist claims of the Catholic church. Comte and Saint-Simon created a religion of positivism for which they borrowed Catholic rituals. Its central dogma was progress, which stood for secular, this-worldly salvation. The German notions of Bildung and Kultur, characteristically expressed in a spiritual idiom, engaged with the needs of the individual soul, valuing inner virtue above outward show, pessimistic about secular progress, are in turn imbued with the values of the Reformation, and Thomas Mann suggested that the Reformation had immunized Germans against the ideas of the French Revolution.

The English, as ever, stood somewhat aloof from these Continental arguments. John Stuart Mill had tried to bring the French and German traditions together, in his famous essays on Bentham and Coleridge, but the English had their own specific preoccupations. As industrialization transformed England, intellectuals identified a spiritual crisis, a defining struggle between what Shelley called Poetry and Mammon. The technology and materialism of modern civilization represented the enemy. Against this, the liberal intellectuals pitted eternal cultural values, distilled from the great tradition of European art and philosophy. Matthew Arnold defined culture as “the best that has been known and said,” an enduring, cosmopolitan canon. Acquiring culture, we acquaint ourselves with “the history of the human spirit.” The possession of culture marked off the elect from the unlettered barbarians. But now this humanist legacy was under siege from the armies of industrial civilization. A great question of the day was whether the intellectual culture of the educated elite could somehow sustain the spiritual values of society. Perhaps culture would falter, overwhelmed by the Gradgrind materialism of hard-faced men who knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. “As civilisation advances,” Macaulay concluded, “poetry almost necessarily declines.”

Yet it will not do to exaggerate the distinctiveness of the English tradition. Arnold drew on Coleridge, and Coleridge on the German romantics. Concerns and values overlapped. Everywhere, culture stood for the sphere of ultimate values, upon which, it was believed, the social order rested. Since culture was transmitted through the educational system, and expressed most powerfully in the arts, these were the critical fields that a committed intellectual should study to improve. And because the fortunes of a nation depended on the condition of its culture, this was a crucial arena for political action.

Modern arguments do not precisely recapitulate earlier controversies. Contemporary contexts make their mark. Each generation modernizes the idiom of debate, usually adapting it to current scientific terminology: evolutionism in the late nineteenth century, organicism in the early twentieth century, relativity in the 1920s. Tropes borrowed from genetics compete today with the jargon of contemporary literary theory. Yet even if they are expressed in novel idioms, discourses on culture are not freely invented; they refer back to par-
ticular intellectual traditions that have persisted for generations, spreading from Europe throughout the world, imposing conceptions of human nature and history, provoking a series of recurrent debates. Ancestral voices haunt contemporary writers. New formulations can be set in a long genealogy, even if they are related to the needs of the moment.

As the human sciences crystallized, competing schools of thought drew on these classic perspectives. Central themes of the Enlightenment view of the world, or of the French ideology, reemerged in nineteenth-century positivism, socialism, and utilitarianism. In the twentieth century, the idea of a progressive, scientific world civilization was translated into the theory of modernization, and then the theory of globalization. In the short run, culture was a barrier to modernization (or industrialization, or globalization), but modern civilization would in the end trample over local, less efficient traditions. Culture was invoked when it became necessary to explain why people were clinging to irrational goals and self-destructive strategies. Development projects were defeated by cultural resistance. Democracy crumbled because it was alien to the traditions of a nation. Rational choice theories could not account for what economists despairingly call "stickiness," entrenched ways of thinking and doing that persist in the face of the most compelling arguments. Culture was the fallback, to explain apparently irrational behavior. Culture also accounted for the disappointing outcome of many political reforms. Tradition was the refuge of the ignorant and fearful, or the recourse of the rich and powerful, jealous of any challenge to their established privileges.

From another point of view, the resistance of local cultures to globalization might be respected, even celebrated. This was the perspective of the heirs to the Counter-Enlightenment. The romantic, or German, tradition was also not static. It underwent its own transformations, though always exhibiting an elective affinity with idealism, relativism, historicism, a hermeneutic style of analysis, and what we now call identity politics. Richard A. Shweder has even attempted to construct a genealogy that connects the romantic movement of the nineteenth century with what he calls anthropology's contemporary "romantic rebellion against the enlightenment."

But even if they decked themselves out in the latest fashions, the classical ideas about culture did not have the field to themselves. They confronted new rivals, the greatest of which made its appearance with the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Even the least scientific thinker could not ignore the challenge after Darwin extended his argument to human beings in *The Descent of Man* in 1871. The possibility now had to be faced that human universals and human differences could be explained in biological terms. Culture might follow natural laws. Nevertheless, Darwinian theory did not necessarily make the classical ideas obsolete. The theory that all human beings had a common origin reaffirmed the Enlightenment faith in the unity of humankind. Civilization might still be celebrated as the defining human trait. The evolution of life might also provide a model for the evolution of civilization. Human beings were an advance on the apes, and higher races—or higher civilizations—were in the same way an advance on lower races and their civilizations. Darwin himself shared this view, but some of his followers were recruited to the cause of the Counter-Enlightenment. Cultural difference might be an expression of more fundamental racial differences. Racial purity could be a political imperative, linked inextricably to the defense of a cultural identity. History might be written in blood, its theme the struggle for survival between races.

The challenge of a biological theory of human progress and human difference provoked the development of what was in some ways a new conception of culture. Culture was now conceived of in opposition to biology. It was culture that marked human beings off from other animals, and nations from other nations. And it was not inherited biologically, but learned, acquired, even borrowed. Christopher Herbert has argued that this notion of culture has, again, an origin in a religious controversy. He associates it with the early nineteenth century Evangelical revival in Britain, which propagated a
notion of original sin that he calls “the myth of a state of ungoverned human desire.” The idea of culture offered the countervailing hope of secular salvation: culture was our defense against human nature. Human beings raised themselves from their fallen condition by the grace of taboos and laws. Herbert argues that “one can think of the ideas of culture and of free desire as two reciprocal, complementary elements of a single pattern of discourse, albeit a conflict-laden and necessarily unstable one.” Perhaps Herbert is right, and this conception of culture first took shape in response to religious concerns, but it came to maturity in reaction to the Darwinian revolution, which threatened to give scientific authority to something like the doctrine of ungoverned human desire.

Nowhere was the cultural argument against Darwinism formulated with greater urgency and power than in Berlin in the 1880s. The leading Darwinian in Germany, Ernst Haeckel, adduced political conclusions from Darwin theory that made Darwin himself rather uneasy. According to Haeckel, Darwin provided irrefutable, scientific arguments for free trade and against hereditary aristocracies. His theory could also be used to demonstrate the superiority of the Prussian race and to underwrite the politics of Bismarck, which demonstrated the wonderful effects of struggle and selection.

Haeckel’s dogma appalled his former teacher, Rudolf Virchow, who was the leading medical scientist in Germany, a prominent politician of liberal views, and the guiding spirit behind the Berlin Society of Anthropology. Methodologically, his objection was to premature theoretical closure. The multitudinous accidents of evolutionary change could not yet be reduced to laws. Substantively, he was especially hostile to Haeckel’s racial determinism, and to the cultural nationalism with which it was associated. Races were unstable categories, with shifting boundaries, and racial mixing was widespread if not universal. Biological traits cut across the conventional racial classifications, which were in any case influenced by local, environmental factors. Cultural difference was not a sign of racial difference. Race, culture, language, and nationality did not necessarily, or even usually, coincide. The Huguenot refugees, Virchow insisted, “are Germanised, just like the numerous Jews, whom we accept from Poland or Russia, and [who]... have become a powerful ferment of cultural progress for us.”

Virchow’s associate, Adolf Bastian (who became the first director of the great Berlin museum of ethnology in 1886), attempted to demonstrate that, like races, cultures are hybrids. There are no pure cultures, distinctive and enduring. Every culture draws on diverse sources, depends on borrowings, and is in flux. Human beings are very much alike, and every culture is rooted in a universal human mentality. Cultural differences were caused by the challenges presented by the local natural environment, and by the contacts between human populations. Borrowing was the primary mechanism for cultural change. And since cultural changes were the consequence of chance local processes—environmental pressures, migrations, trade—it followed that history has no fixed pattern of development.

This liberal Berlin anthropology has been characterized as a blend of Enlightenment and Romantic ideas, but it is actually based on a double rejection. If cultures are open, syncretic, and unstable, then obviously they cannot express unchanging, essential identities, or an underlying racial character. And if cultural changes are the consequence of chance local factors, then it must follow that there are no general laws of history. Above all, however, the Berlin school insisted that culture works in a very different way from biological forces—and might even override them.

Franz Boas, a student of Virchow and Bastian, introduced this approach into American anthropology. As American anthropology developed into an organized academic discipline at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was defined by the epic struggle between Boas and his school and the evolutionist tradition, represented in the United States by the followers of Lewis Henry Morgan, whose triumphalist narratives of progress borrowed the metaphors of Darwinian theory. The Boasians were skeptical about universal laws of evolution. They also repudiated racial explanations of difference, a
matter of enduring political importance in the United States. The fundamental Boasian thesis was that culture makes us, not biology. We become what we are by growing up in a particular cultural setting; we are not born that way. Race, and also sex and age, are cultural constructs, not immutable natural conditions. The implication is that we can be made over into something better, perhaps learning from the tolerant people of Samoa, or the perfectly balanced Balinese.

This was a powerfully attractive idea in twentieth-century America, but the alternative, racial understanding of cultural difference remained a potent challenge. The idea of culture could actually reinforce a racial theory of difference. Culture could be a euphemism for race, fostering a discourse on racial identities while apparently abjuring racism. Anthropologists might fastidiously distinguish between race and culture, but in popular usage “culture” referred to an innate quality. The nature of a group was evident to the naked eye, expressed to equal effect in skin color, facial characteristics, religion, morals, aptitudes, accent, gestures, and dietary preferences. This stubborn confusion persists. In the 1980s Michael Moffatt, an ethnographer studying white and black students who shared a dormitory at Rutgers University, reported that the students virtually refused to talk about race but believed that talking about cultural differences was up-to-date and politically correct. In practice, however, they drew a line between whites and blacks, despite the fact that these students seem to have differed mainly in their tastes in pop groups and fast food.

Culture is always defined in opposition to something else. It is the authentic, local way of being different that resists its implacable enemy, a globalizing, material civilization. Or it is the realm of the spirit, embattled against materialism. Or it is the human capacity for spiritual growth that overcomes our animal nature. Within the social sciences, culture appeared in yet another set of contrasts: it was the collective consciousness, as opposed to the individual psyche. At the same time, it stood for the ideological dimension of social life as against the mundane organization of government, factory, or family. These ideas were developed by the founding fathers of European sociology and were introduced into a traditionally empiricist and utilitarian American sociology by Talcott Parsons.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the social or “behavioral” sciences were better funded, better organized, and generally in better spirits than ever before (or since), certainly in America, and their leaders were convinced that the future—which could only be better still—lay with large scientific projects that would deliver a rational plan for an even better world. Talcott Parsons, the great figure of social science in America in the period, insisted that further progress required a more efficient division of labor, in the social sciences as in any modern enterprise. The psyche was, of course, studied by psychologists. The social system, politics, and the economy were being dealt with by appropriate specialists, which was satisfactory as long as all concerned accepted that sociology had priority. Culture, however, had been entrusted for too long to the amateurish hands of the humanists. From now on it was to be allotted to the anthropologists, who might make a science of it at last, if only they could be persuaded to concentrate on the task at hand and to abandon their picturesque hobbies.

Not every anthropologist was best pleased with this prospect. Some regarded it as a definite come-down to be a culture maven rather than, say, the expert on every aspect of a tribal community, or even an authority on the whole story of human evolution. Moreover, demarcation disputes with other social scientists persisted. Nevertheless, it came to be generally accepted in the 1950s that culture was a matter of scientific concern, and that the anthropologists were its specialists. In 1952 the twin deans of American anthropology, Alfred Kroeber at Berkeley and Clyde Kluckhohn at Harvard, published a magisterial report on the scientific, anthropological conception of culture, confident that it was poised to render the traditional approaches obsolete. Two decades later, Roy Wagner could introduce
an essay on culture with the observation that the concept “has come to be so completely associated with anthropological thinking that . . . we could define an anthropologist as someone who uses the word ‘culture’ habitually.” By the 1990s, culture talk has become so pervasive that on Wagner’s definition practically everybody who writes about social issues would have to be counted as an anthropologist. However, a commentator could still remark that “a modern anthropologist disbelieving in culture is something like a contradiction in terms.”

But before anthropologists could investigate culture scientifically, they had to agree what they meant by the word. Kroeber and Kluckhohn made an exhaustive search of the literature and finally had to agree that Parsons had hit upon the correct definition of culture, for the purposes of science. It was a collective symbolic discourse. What it discoursed on was knowledge, beliefs, and values. It was not equivalent to the high arts, as the humanists believed, for every member of a society had a share in its culture. It was also quite distinct from the universal human civilization that had given the world science, technology, and democracy, for every community had its own culture, with its specific values, that marked it off from all others.

If this was culture, then how important was it? According to Parsons, people fashion a symbolic world out of received ideas, and these ideas impinge on the choices they make in the real world. Nevertheless, he was quite sure that ideas on their own seldom determine action. Similarly, collective symbols enter into the individual consciousness but do not take it over completely. However, the more the anthropologists committed themselves to their new specialization, the more convinced they became that culture was much more powerful than Parsons made it out to be. People not only construct a world of symbols; they actually live in it. The leaders of the next generation of American anthropologists, Clifford Geertz, David Schneider, and Marshall Sahlins, created a gallery of native types of unparalleled spirituality. Their subjects appeared to live only for ideas, whether they were Hawaiian priests, or Balinese courtiers, or middle-class citizens of Chicago. In Geertz’s *Negara*, the play’s the thing—or rather, what he calls court operas are the epitome of the whole way of life. Politics and economics are merely noises off-stage. For Schneider, kinship is a matter of the ideas that people have about procreation. Biology is in the mind, or it is nothing. For Sahlins, history is the endless acting out of an old script, a saga in performance. Earthquakes, the rough intrusion of conquistadores, even capitalism, must be translated into cultural terms, mythologized, before they can affect peoples’ lives.

The next question was how to go about the investigation of culture. Parsons himself offered little practical guidance on this matter, but in mid-century America two models presented themselves, one old, one new. The first recommended the sympathetic exploration of a native world view, its translation and interpretation. Weber’s name was evoked, the word *Verstehen* pronounced reverently, if not always accurately. Geertz chose this course, which he identified initially as Parsonian, then as Weberian, and later as a form of hermeneutics. Gradually he became less eager to claim that it was a scientific procedure, having come to the conclusion that while culture could be interpreted, it could not be explained (and certainly not explained away). There were no general, cross-cultural, laws of culture. You could, perhaps, work out what a symbolic performance meant to an audience, but you could not detach it from its vernacular meaning and treat it as a symptom of a more fundamental and culture-free biological or economic cause, of which the patient was unaware.

The alternative approach was, in contrast, scientific, reductionist, generalizing. It began with the premise that culture—a symbolic discourse—was very like language. Accordingly, the study of culture should follow the path that was being blazed by modern linguistics, which was on the verge of discovering the universal laws of language. “For centuries the humanities and the social sciences have resigned themselves to contemplating the world of the natural and exact sciences as a kind of paradise which they will never enter,” Claude
Lévi-Strauss remarked at a conference on linguistics and anthropology at Bloomington, Indiana, in 1952. “All of a sudden there is a small door which is being opened between the two fields, and it is linguistics which has done it.” This door led beyond language and culture to their ultimate source. There was, he told the conferees, an “uninvited guest who has been seated beside us during this Conference, and that is the human mind.” If a new science of culture was to follow the lead of linguistics, then together these sciences would ultimately establish the deep structure that all languages and cultures shared, and that was (surely) etched in the brain itself. A scientific, Cartesian anthropology was waiting to be born.

This was all very exciting, but it had to be admitted that the linguists themselves were not in agreement on the best route to their great goal. Lévi-Strauss had been introduced to linguistics during his wartime exile in the United States by a fellow exile, Roman Jakobson. His model was accordingly the structuralist phonology that had been developed by the Prague School. This he applied first to systems of marriage, then to modes of classification, and finally to myths. The American structuralists preferred to take their lead from the transformational grammar of Chomsky. The Yale school of Lounsbury and Goodenough (which recruited a number of graduates of the Harvard Department of Social Relations) launched a formal, scientific investigation of the underlying structures that generated kinship terminologies, botanical classifications, symptoms of illness, and other folk taxonomies that constituted specialized semiotic domains.

These structuralist programs flourished for a while, producing remarkable accounts of specific bodies of native thought, but at some point in the late 1960s (precisely in May 1968, Lévi-Strauss has suggested) French structuralism lost its fashionable appeal. It gave way to a variety of “poststructuralisms” of a decidedly relativist cast. Their adepts abandoned the scientific ambitions of classical structuralism, insisting upon the ultimate indeterminacy of words and symbols. American ethnosience fell out of fashion at much the same time, but some former enthusiasts discovered an alternative scientific promise in cognitive science. Computer models of the brain processes, knowledge schemas, and connective networks were now sought instead of the grammatical rules in which the practitioners of the new ethnography had previously put their faith. Another faction seized upon fresh developments in linguistics, and determined to adapt pragmatics, or discourse theory, to the study of culture.

The Geertzians were consistently dismissive of any suggestion that there could be a science of culture. Culture was indeed rather like language, but their preferred model of culture was the text. Accordingly, they drew upon literary theory rather than linguistics. It was this approach that prospered, and interpretivism became the orthodoxy in mainstream American cultural anthropology. Although the younger Geertzians rebelled against the father, they did not opt for a more scientific project, but moved in the same direction as the French poststructuralists. A culture could not be so readily understood by a sympathetic outsider as Geertz had suggested. Culture may be a text, but it is a fabricated text, a fiction written by the ethnographer. Further, the clear message of deconstruction is that texts do not yield up unequivocal messages. Discordant voices dispute the official line. Culture is contested, as the new slogan says. As there is no canonical text, so there are no privileged readers. The postmodern anthropologists prefer to imagine the realm of culture as something more like an unruly democracy than a theocratic state or absolutist monarchy. Uneasy about the totalitarian overtones of the term culture, some prefer to write about habitus, or ideology, or discourse, although, as Robert Brightman points out, the net effect of these rhetorical strategies is to “(re)construct an essentialized culture concept in the antipodes of contemporary theoretical orientations.” The assumption remains that people live in a world of symbols. Actors are driven and history is shaped by (perhaps unconscious) ideas. Mainstream American cultural anthropology, in short, is still in the grip of a pervasive idealism.

Idealism has been in the ascendant more widely in recent decades, together with its handmaiden, relativism. Each culture was
founded on unique premises. Generalization was impossible, comparison extremely problematic. A similar tendency was evident in philosophy, which greatly emboldened the anthropologists. Even fashionable Marxism became obsessed with ideology. ("La fantaisie au pouvoir," chanted the Parisian students of '68, as they hurled paving stones at the flâneurs.) Nevertheless, the idealists and the culturalists did not have everything their own way. On the contrary, they felt that they were besieged by the great battalions of their rivals, who marched behind the familiar banners: The Market Decides, The Ruling Class Rules, We Are Our Genes. Culturalist arguments had to be pitted against the established models of economic rationality and biological determinism, but a growing if motley collection of aesthetes, idealists, and romantics agreed that Culture Makes Us.
Chapter 1

CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION:
FRENCH, GERMAN, AND ENGLISH INTELLECTUALS, 1930–1958

Civilisation naît à son heure.
([The word] “civilization” was born at the right time)
Lucien Febvre

“To reconstruct the history of the French word ‘civilisation,’” remarked the historian Lucien Febvre, “it would be necessary to reconstitute the stages in the most profound of all the revolutions through which the French spirit has passed from the second half of the eighteenth century to the present day.” This was the topic he chose for his address to a weekend seminar he convened in 1929 on the theme “Civilisation: Le mot et l’idée” (the word and the idea, not, it should be noted, the thing itself). It was very much the issue of the day. As the storm clouds gathered over Europe for the second time in a generation, intellectuals were moved to think again about the meaning of culture and civilization, and their relationship to the destiny of their nations. The German sociologist Norbert Elias was drawn to these questions at the same time, and he remarked that while theories of culture and civilization had been current (with the words themselves) since the second half of the eighteenth century,
they became matters of general concern only at certain historical moments when “something in the present state of society finds expression in the crystallization of the past embodied in the words.”

Fevvre (1878–1956) was educated at the École Normale Supérieure, where he specialized in history and geography. During World War I he saw active service with a machine-gun unit, and when peace came he took up an appointment at the University of Strasbourg, reestablished as a French university in 1919 when Alsace was returned to France. The brilliant young faculty members recruited to the university included some of the leading social scientists and historians of the next generation, among them Maurice Halbwachs, Charles Blondel, Georges Lefebvre, and, along with Fevvre himself, the historian Marc Bloch, with whom he began a long collaboration that was to transform French historiography. In 1929 they founded the journal Annales, which became the forum of a school of historians closely aligned to the social sciences. Cultural, psychological, and social themes were to be brought back into a historiography that had been dominated by the study of politics, diplomacy, and war, and intellectual history was revived.

Opening the seminar on “Civilisation,” Fevvre began by noting that a dissertation had recently been presented at the Sorbonne on the “civilization” of the Tupi-Guarani of South America, whom, he remarked, an earlier generation would have called savages. “But for a long time now the concept of a civilization of non-civilized people has been current.” (He added the barbed comment that one might imagine an archaeologist “coolly dealing with the civilization of the Huns, who we were once told were ‘the flail of civilization.’”) Yet while now ready to grant that the Tupi-Guarani, and even the Huns, had a civilization, the French nevertheless still tended to believe that there was progress in civilization. Apparently the word had come to designate two quite different notions. One of these Fevvre characterized as the ethnographic usage; it referred to the set of characteristics that an observer might record in studying the collective life of a human group, an ensemble that embraced material, intellectual, moral, and political aspects of social life. This usage implied no judgment of value. In the second sense, the word connoted our own civilization, which was highly valued, and to which some individuals enjoyed privileged access. How could a language known for being clear and logical have arrived at two contradictory usages for one word?

Fevvre had been unable to find a source that used the term civilisation in either of its modern senses before 1766. Civilisation had previously occurred only as a technical legal term, referring to the conversion of a criminal prosecution into a civil matter. However, the terms civilité, politesse, and police (meaning law-abiding) go back to the sixteenth century. Throughout the seventeenth century, the terms “savage” and, for more advanced peoples, “barbarian” were current in French for people who lacked the qualities “of civility, courtesy, and, finally, administrative wisdom.” In time, civilisé displaced the term policié, but by the eighteenth century, Fevvre suggested, there was a need for a new substantive term, to describe a new notion. Born at its hour, in the 1770s the neologism civilisation “won its papers of naturalization,” and in 1798 it forced the doors of the Dictionary of the French Academy.

This was a time of great scientific activity in all fields, and daring theoretical syntheses. The enormous range of materials on exotic cultures and the ancient past brought together in the Encyclopédie provoked reflections on the great pattern of history. The growing literature on exploration at first tended to reinforce belief in the superiority of civilization. French intellectuals began to conceive the outlines of a universal history in which savagery led to barbarism, and barbarism to civilization. This model of cultural development imitated Lamarck’s representation of the relations between the species in his version of the great chain of being. Soon, however, this triumphalist history of progress began to be questioned. Not only levels of civilization but even states of civilization were gradually distinguished. The immense empire of “la Civilisation” was divided into autonomous provinces. It was admitted that distinctive ways of being civilized had been developed in different parts of the world. In 1819,
according to Fevre, the plural form, *Civilisations*, was first introduced.

Fevre dated this relativization of the notion of civilization to the half-century from 1780 to 1830, noting that it represented the climax of a long and patient effort of documentation and reasoned inquiry. There was a simultaneous transition in biology, history, ethnography, and linguistics from the universalism of the eighteenth century to a more relativist perspective. Lamarck’s theory now also came under fire. Cuvier insisted that there was not one great chain of being but many separate ones. These changes in scientific thinking reflected a more general shift in the intellectual mood. The optimism of the revolutionary period had waned. The survivors of the revolution had learned something new: that a civilization may die. (“And they did not learn this simply from books,” he remarked.) Faith in a philosophy of progress and the perfectibility of humanity was eroded. There was renewed sympathy for the pessimism of Rousseau and for his concern with the ills of civilization.

With the restoration of the monarchy, the optimistic belief in a progressive civilization returned, with fresh force. It was presaged most powerfully in Guizot’s *De la civilisation en Europe* (1828) and *De la civilisation en France* (1829). Fevre quotes Guizot’s bald statement of faith: “The idea of progress, of development, seems to me to be the fundamental idea contained in the word civilization.” Progress could be measured both on the level of society and that of the intellect, though these did not necessarily go together. In England, according to Guizot, there had been social progress, but not intellectual; in Germany, spiritual progress had not been matched by social progress; only in France had both advanced hand in hand.

Fevre noted that a different line of thinking had developed in Germany. Initially, the German notion of culture was very similar to the French idea of civilization, but in time a distinction came to be drawn between the external trappings of civilization and the inward, spiritual reality of culture. Alexander von Humbolt, for instance, had suggested that a savage tribe could have a civilization, in the sense of political order, without a high level of “culture de l’esprit”—and, indeed, vice versa. Nevertheless, both traditions of thought posed a similar philosophical problem. Is a relativist appreciation of the differences between cultures compatible with “the old concept of a general human civilization”? The question was left hanging in the air.

In a companion paper, delivered at the same seminar under the title “Les Civilisations: Éléments et formes,” the sociologist Marcel Mauss outlined the conception of civilization that he and Emile Durkheim had expounded for many years in the *Année Sociologique*. He passed quickly over what he termed vulgar usages, in phrases such as French civilization, or Buddhist or Islamic civilization. What was at issue in these cases was particular modes of thought, specific casts of mind, for which he preferred to use the word *mentalité*. Nor should civilization be restricted to mean only the arts, or be equated with *Kultur*, in the sense of cultivation. These were folk representations, of no scientific value.

From the point of view of a sociologist, civilization is, first of all, collective and distinctive. But it is not equivalent to what the Durkheimians called the “collective consciousness” of a society, because it is not confined to any particular population. Moreover, in contrast to purely local cultural traditions, civilization is rational and universal, and above all progressive. For that reason, it was spreading irresistibly across the whole world. With the international diffusion of science and of new technologies like the cinema, the phonograph, and the radiotelephone, a new world civilization was coming into being, which “penetrates all forms of music, all accents, all words, all the news, despite all the barriers. We are just at the beginning [of this process].” As civilization advances, it will impose sacrifices. There is no guarantee that it will promote individual happiness or advance the common good. “But the capital of humanity increases in any case . . . all nations and civilisations are in fact tending to become more—more powerful, more general, and more rational.”

Fevre had begun his essay with the famous comment that time spent in discovering the origin of a word is never wasted. His exam-
people inspired later French scholars to extend his inquiry. In 1954 the linguist Emile Benoist noted that patient research had traced the first use of the term *civilisation* to the physiocrat Mirabeau, in 1757. This use was in the sense of *policie*, of political order, but in the 1760s the term was generally used to mean “the original, collective process that made humanity emerge from barbarity, and this use was even then leading to the definition of *civilisation* as the state of civilized society.” He also observed that before the revolution few French words ended in *-sation*.

In an essay published in 1989, Jean Starobinski points out that *civilisation* was just one of many nouns formed in those revolutionary years with the suffix *-sation* from verbs that ended in *-iser*. In 1775 Diderot had defined the new term in relation to another *-sation* coinage: “Emancipation, or what is the same thing by another name, civilization, is a long and difficult work.” Regarding Diderot’s usage, Starobinski comments that “already there are abundant signs that civilization might well become a secularized substitute for religion, an apotheosis of reason.”

The new noun assimilated related notions of polish and refinement, and of intellectual and political progress. But whereas Fevrel argued that the word *civilisation* had come into being in order to designate a new idea, albeit one only vaguely perceived at first, Starobinski makes the word the precursor of the idea. “Not surprisingly, as the term gained currency due to its synthetic powers, it, too, became a subject of theoretical reflection.” This reflection was stimulated by the fact that the word became current at the same time as the word “progress” in its modern sense: “The two words were destined to maintain a most intimate relationship.” Reflecting on these twin neologisms, the *philosophes* concluded that they “describe both the fundamental process of history and the end result of that process . . . The action suffix *-sation* forces us to think of an agent. If that agent is confounded with the action itself, it becomes autonomous.”

But the word did not suggest just one idea. “No sooner was the word *civilisation* written down . . . than it was found to contain a possible source of misunderstanding.” Mirabeau himself had written of “false civilization” and “the barbarity of our civilizations.” The term could refer both to extant modern societies and to the ideal of a civilized condition of social life. “The critique thus took two forms: a critique of civilization and a critique formulated in the name of civilization.” In either sense, the term implies a contrary; but the contrary—natural, savage, or barbarous—might appear to be preferable. Civilization may be decadent, and the remedy may be re-Christianization, as Benjamin Constant would argue, or re-barbarization, so that Rimbaud demanded “new blood . . . pagan blood.” But normally civilization was valued, and identified with progress. In general usage, the term took on a sacred aura. To represent something as contrary to civilization was to demonize it.

A few years after Fevrel’s seminar, Norbert Elias, a German Jewish exile writing in London on the eve of the Second World War, compared the evolution of the German notion of *Kultur* and the French idea of *Civilisation*. Elias (1897–1990) was born in Breslau and studied sociology in Heidelberg under Karl Mannheim and Alfred Weber. Alfred’s brother, Max Weber, had recently died, but his legacy was very much alive in his old university. In 1929 Mannheim was called to the chair in sociology at Frankfurt, and he invited Elias to accompany him as his academic assistant. Here Elias became associated with the inner circle of the “Frankfurt School,” a creative group of Marxist scholars that included Theodor Adorno, with whom Elias established a close bond, though he was always skeptical about Marxist theory.

Elias once noted that the Jews, although outsiders politically, were “at the same time carriers of German cultural life.” “I was steeped in German *Kultur,*” he remarked, at the end of his long life, but emphasized that “one can identify oneself strongly with the German cultural tradition—as I still do—without thereby being, let’s not say a patriot, but a nationalist.” However, as a Jew (associated, more-
over, with the radical Mannheim), he was obliged to leave Germany after the rise of Hitler. After a spell in France he moved to England and spent the immediate prewar years in the Reading Room of the British Museum, working in isolation on his masterpiece on the civilizing process, which was published in German in 1939. Recognition came very late, and it was only during his prolonged retirement, first in Bielefeld, in Germany, and then in Amsterdam, that he became an iconic figure for a new generation of European sociologists.

Alfred Weber and Karl Mannheim stood for two opposing approaches to the study of culture. For Alfred Weber, culture represented the self-contained world of art and religion, which had no external, rational ends to serve, and which was opposed to the material world of civilization. This was the orthodox view of culture in Heidelberg, and the philosopher Karl Jaspers encouraged the young Elias to write a seminar paper on the debate between Thomas Mann and the despised Zivilisationsliteratur. For Mannheim, in contrast, cultural productions were rooted in social situations, and they were to be understood as expressions of particular political and economic interests.

In the first volume of The Civilizing Process, Elias explored the relationships between the German notion of culture and the French idea of civilization. In the French tradition, civilization was conceived of as a complex, multifaceted whole, encompassing political, economic, religious, technical, moral, or social facts. This broad concept of civilization “expresses the self-consciousness of the West... It sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or 'more primitive' contemporary ones.” To the Germans, however, civilization was conceived of as something external and utilitarian, and in many ways alien to their national values. Civilization moves forward over time and transcends national boundaries, in contrast to Kultur, which is bounded in time and space and is coterminal with a national identity.

When Germans expressed pride in their achievements, they spoke not of their civilization but of their Kultur. This term “refers essentially to intellectual, artistic, and religious facts,” and the Germans typically “draw a sharp dividing line between facts of this sort, on the one side, and political, economic, and social facts, on the other.” Kultur was not only national but personal. The term had been introduced into modern discourse by Herder, and he had taken the term from Cicero, who wrote metaphorically of cultura animi, extending the idea of agricultural cultivation to apply to the mind. Kultur therefore implied cultivation, Bildung, a personal progression toward spiritual perfection. A French or English person might claim to be “civilized” without having accomplished anything on his own account, but in the German view every individual had to achieve a cultured state by way of a process of education and spiritual development.

The notion of Kultur developed in tension with the concept of a universal civilization that was associated with France. What the French understood to be a transnational civilization was regarded in Germany as a source of danger to distinctive local cultures. In Germany itself, the threat was very immediate. Civilisation had established itself in the centers of political power, in the French-speaking and Francophile German courts. In marked contrast to French and British intellectuals, who identified with the aspirations of the ruling class, German intellectuals defined themselves in opposition to the princes and aristocrats. In their eyes, the upper class lacked authentic culture. The civilization of the French-speaking elite was borrowed; it was not internalized but was a matter of forms, and of outward show. The moral principles of the aristocracy derived from an artificial code of honor. Excluded from the circles of power, German intellectuals chose to emphasize the claims of personal integrity and of scientific and artistic accomplishment. The individual achievement of spiritual growth was esteemed above inherited status and the artificial trappings of courtly style. The base of the intellectuals was the university, “the middle-class counterweight to the court,” and here they fostered a literary and philosophical culture that was German, achieved, inward.
Following Mannheim, Elias identified social reasons behind these ideological differences. The concept of a universal civilization appealed for obvious reasons to the dominant classes in imperial states, like France and Britain, while “the concept of Kultur mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation [like Germany] which had constantly to seek out and constitute its boundaries anew, in a political as well as spiritual sense.” Bound up as they were with political circumstances, these ideas ebbed and flowed with historical changes. In the aftermath of the French revolution, the antithesis between a false, aristocratic civilization and a genuine national culture was projected into an opposition between France and Germany. This antithesis was renewed with fresh vigor after the defeat of Germany in the Great War, a war that had been waged against them in the name of a universal civilization. The idea of Kultur was brought into play in the subsequent struggle to redefine the identity and destiny of Germany. Kultur and Zivilisation summed up the competing values that (in the view of some Germans) divided Germany and France: spiritual virtue and materialism, honesty and artifice, a genuine morality and mere outward politeness.

But in contrast to Mannheim, Elias did not believe that ideas were merely ideological productions, instruments of domination that were degraded by their uses. Whatever their origins, and however they had been manipulated, concepts such as culture and civilization might have an analytical value. Like Marcel Mauss, Elias therefore put the idea of civilization to work, and the second volume of his study illustrated what he called the civilizing process in European history. The European courts gradually refined their manners, subjecting the body and its functions to a series of cumulative checks. The “social constraint towards self-constraint” grew in force, and the “threshold of embarrassment” was raised. This argument was further developed in The Court Society, first published in German in 1969 but also largely written in the thirties. In both these studies, Elias chose to illustrate the classic German view of the civilization process as external, merely customary, imposing formal rules on what had been expressive or instinctual acts, a process he linked to the extension of control by the state.

Elias remarked that at the time he was working on his book he was more influenced by Freud than by any sociologist, even Mannheim. Freud had recently published two books on culture or civilization: The Future of an Illusion (first published in German in 1927) and Civilization and Its Discontents (1930). Here Freud spoke of “human civilization, by which I mean all those respects in which human life has raised itself above its animal status and differs from the life of beasts—and I scorn to distinguish between culture and civilisation.” This disavowal perhaps excused his English translator, who systematically used the term civilisation where Freud used Kultur, but in any case the central opposition that Freud proposed was that between the cultivated human being and the instinctual animal. Culture makes a mere human into a god (if, he joked, a god with a prosthesis). But this power is dearly won. The process of human cultivation is conceived of as purely external, impressed by force. Just as the individual makes the anguished sacrifice of Oedipal fantasies, so “every civilisation must be built on coercion and the renunciation of instinct.” Sublimation fosters cultural creativity, but it imposes great sacrifices of sexual freedom and requires the control of aggression.

Perhaps the rise of Fascism impelled central European Jewish intellectuals like Freud and Elias to question the saving power of personal culture. When the crunch came, the frail, external, human controls that civilization had fabricated were powerless to restrain the uncivilized masses, who, Freud wrote, are “lazy and unintelligent; they have no love for instinctual renunciation.” The masses will accept the sacrifice of an animal freedom only if they are compensated by improvements in their material circumstances. “If the loss is not compensated for economically, one can be certain that serious dangers will ensue.”

In contrast to Elias and Freud, the right-wing, nationalist writers preferred to identify instinct and culture. They reserved their suspicion for civilization. The growth of culture is organic, that of
civilization artificial. Culture and civilization will tend to conflict as their forms of growth diverge. Civilization eventually becomes an empty material shell, devoid of animating spirit, and collapses. This theme—an old one—was revived by German conservatives as the optimism of the Hegelians was checked by the catastrophe of the First World War. An extreme exponent was Spengler, who drew a moral diametrically opposed to that of Freud and Elias, excoriating "the bloodless intellect whose criticism gnaws away everything that is left standing of the genuine—that is, the naturally grown—Culture." Like a number of German intellectuals, Spengler welcomed the Nazis as the harbingers of a cultural renewal of the race, and as the enemies of an artificial civilization.

Although Elias emphasized the role of the universities in the development of this discourse on culture and civilization, he did not discuss in any detail the academic disciplines that developed in Germany to study the products of culture and the human spirit, the Geist (the Kulturwissenschaften and the Geisteswissenschaften). Fritz Ringer, in The Decline of the German Mandarins (1969), extended Elias's analysis to embrace the development of these fields of study in the critical years that followed the Franco-Prussian war. Germany enjoyed a period of rapid but turbulent economic growth, which accelerated from about 1890. The intellectuals, fearful of materialism and what Weber was to call the rationalization of public life, faced what they saw as a renewed but more powerful challenge to culture from a soulless civilization, and they reacted by drawing upon the resources of philosophical idealism and of romanticism, and by encouraging national pride. Rational, universal civilization threatened the spiritual culture of a Volk, and infringed on the inner freedom of the individual. Nations should not allow their unique values to be swallowed up in a common civilization. The world is made up of "contending national spirits . . . qualitatively different cultures."

Scientific materialism was the most insidious agent of civilization, corroding moral values, devaluing spiritual insights, contemptuous of traditional wisdom. The mandarins rejected the notion that ideas are imprinted on the mind by sensations, that values have a material origin. Geist was not to be treated as if it were part of nature. The science of the spirit was completely different from a natural science. In the 1880s, Dilthey adapted the Hegelian notion of the "objective Geist." The work of the collective spirit was made manifest and public in documents and forms of language, and so it was available for study, but only by way of a subjective, intuitive approach, leading to an empathetic understanding. The methods of the natural sciences were not appropriate. A furious debate developed between the positivists and Dilthey and his sympathizers, coming to a head in a great methodological controversy, the Methodenstreit, which began in 1883 and which eventually led to the development of a new cultural history. It also provoked Max Weber to set out the principles of his cultural sociology in a series of methodological statements that appeared between 1903 and 1919.

Weber defined culture as "the endowment of a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of events in the world with meaning and significance from the standpoint of human beings." Its most characteristic expression was in religious life. Although culture was a matter of ideas, often implicit, that could be grasped only by a sympathetic exercise of the imagination, Weber insisted that "beliefs and values are just as 'real' as material forces" and that they may "transform the nature of social reality." Culture was vulnerable, however. Its foundations were being undermined by civilization, by the irresistible and corrosive forces of science, rationalization, bureaucratization, and materialism. In its defense, culture can muster only the chaotic chances of charismatic renewal and the defensive work of the intellectual.

More recently, Woodruff D. Smith has refined Ringer's genealogy in Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany, 1840–1920 (1991). He extracts a specific line of liberal academic reflection on culture, a Kulturwissenschaft that was distinct from the Geisteswissenschaften of the hermeneutic tradition. This was a way of thinking with closer affinities to French and British liberal ideas; and Smith
suggests that Herder and Humboldt were more sympathetic to the Enlightenment than they appear to be from some other accounts. The academics in the liberal tradition approached culture in a scientific spirit, seeking laws of development. They defined culture, Smith remarks, in an anthropological sense: “That is to say, they were interested primarily in the patterns of thought and behavior characteristic of a whole people rather than the intellectual and artistic activities of the elite.” The fortunes of this liberal tradition—and of the more conservative hermeneutic tradition—fluctuated with the fortunes of the liberal and nationalist movements in German politics. The years 1848 and 1870 were watersheds for both traditions of thought, and Smith traces the revival of a somewhat chastened liberal, scientific concern with culture in the ethnological school that was built up by Rudolf Virchow in Berlin in the 1870s and 1880s.

In Britain, as in France and Germany, the European political crisis of the 1930s provoked renewed, anxious debates on the questions of culture and civilization. However, intellectuals drew more directly on a very English tradition of reflections on the place of high culture in the life of a nation; its point of reference was Matthew Arnold’s thesis, presented most famously in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Culture, they believed, was under threat from two sides: from material civilization, on the one hand, and mass culture on the other.

After the humiliation of Munich, T. S. Eliot found himself stirred not so much by a revulsion against the particular policies of the Chamberlain government as by something more profound, “a doubt of the validity of a civilization.” (When Eliot wrote of materialism, or of finance and industry, he used the term “civilization” in preference to “culture.”)

Was our society, which had always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?

Reflecting on these issues in the immediate aftermath of the war, Eliot was moved to rethink the whole question of culture. By culture, he told a German audience,

I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs; in their religion. But these things added together do not constitute the culture... a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs. These things all act upon each other, and fully to understand one you have to understand all.

In his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), Eliot contrasted this anthropological idea of culture (“as used for instance by E. B. Tylor in the title of his book *Primate Culture*”) with the conventional humanist view, which has to do with the intellectual or spiritual development of an individual, or of a group or class, rather than with the way of life of a whole society. The traditional literary notion of culture was inadequate, for “the culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class,” and “the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society.” Each class “possesses a function, that of maintaining that part of the total culture of the society which pertains to that class.” Eliot’s image of society was hierarchical but organic. “What is important is a structure of society in which there will be, from ‘top’ to ‘bottom,’ a continuous graduation of cultural levels.”

In short, culture “includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people.” It was not confined to a privileged minority, as Matthew Arnold believed, but embraced both grand and humble, elite and popular, sacred and profane. By way of illustration, Eliot offered an indicative list of English cultural traits: “Derby Day, Henley
Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth century Gothic churches, and the music of Elgar.” Again in contrast to Arnold, Eliot was not out to denigrate the soulless pleasures of the philistines. Rather, he was illustrating the diverse constituents (for Eliot, a necessary diversity) that make up a national culture.

This national culture was an integrated whole. Arnold, Coleridge, and Newman had—from different points of view—all insisted that a culture is bound up with a religion. “We may go further,” Eliot wrote, “and ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people.” (Consequently, he suggested, “bishops are a part of English culture, and horses and dogs are a part of English religion.”) Culture and religion may serve the same great purpose: “any religion, while it lasts, and on its own level, gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair.” But it is also the function of culture to imbue life with purpose and meaning. “Culture may even be described as that which makes life worth living.”

In the aftermath of the world war, Eliot adopted a qualified relativism. It was true that civilization had become more complex, social groups more specialized, the arts more sophisticated, but there had not been any obvious moral progression. Moreover, he insisted that other cultures must be treated on their own terms. “We can also learn to respect every other culture as a whole, however inferior to our own it may appear, or however unjustly we may disapprove of some features of it: the deliberate destruction of another culture as a whole is an irreparable wrong, almost as evil as to treat human beings like animals.” The very diversity of cultures is to be valued. The ideal of a common world culture is therefore a monstrous notion: “a world culture which was simply a uniform culture would be no culture at all.

We should have a humanity de-humanised.” Rather, “we must aspire to a common world culture which will yet not diminish the particularity of the constituent parts.” He also warned that cultural variety would provoke conflict. “Ultimately, antagonistic religions mean antagonistic cultures; and ultimately, religions cannot be reconciled.”

A decade later, in 1958, Raymond Williams produced a genealogy of English theorists on culture (parallel to the essays of Fevvre on the French tradition, and of Elias on the German). Dismissing Eliot's appeal to a specialized, anthropological approach, he placed him squarely within the English tradition of thinking on culture, a tradition that he insisted was quite distinct from the German and French traditions.

Raymond Williams (1921–1988) came from a working-class, socialist milieu on the Welsh border. He went up to Cambridge University to read English, but his studies were interrupted by the outbreak of World War II, in which he saw active service. Briefly a member of the Communist Party before the war, he was nevertheless greatly influenced by the theory of literature and culture that had been developed by a charismatic but profoundly conservative dissident in the Cambridge English faculty, F. R. Leavis.

Despite very different political sympathies, their approaches had much in common, and E. P. Thompson's description of Williams as “a moralist wearing a literary habit” could be applied just as well to Leavis. In 1948 Leavis had published The Great Tradition, in which he defined a canon of texts in modern English literature that offered a “life-enhancing” cultural alternative to the values of modern, mass, industrial society. In Culture and Society, 1780–1950, published in 1958, Raymond Williams constructed a parallel tradition of literary intellectuals (including both Leavis and Eliot) who had authored theories about the saving role of culture in industrial society—or, more precisely, in modern England.
In an introduction to a new edition of the book in 1983, Williams said that his argument had been based on "the discovery that the idea of culture, and the word itself in its general modern uses, came into English thinking in the period which we commonly describe as that of the Industrial Revolution." The term had entered into English discourse together with other new words: "industry," "democracy," "class," and "art." The notion of culture was shaped by its relationship to these other ideas. In particular, the idea of culture had developed in tension with what Carlyle called "industrialism."

According to Williams, the English discourse on culture was initiated by Romantic poets, particularly Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats. While he recognized that many of their themes could be found in Rousseau, Goethe, Schiller, and Chateaubriand, Williams insisted that there was a specific English cast to their thinking, forged by the reaction of the poets to the Industrial Revolution. Their slogan was Shelley's: "Poetry, and the Principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world." But Williams argued that this Manichean opposition between art and commerce could not be sustained. "The positive consequence of the idea of art as a superior reality was that it offered an immediate basis for an important criticism of industrialism. The negative consequence was that it tended... to isolate art... and thus to weaken the dynamic function which Shelley proposed for it."

Coleridge and Carlyle developed a more sophisticated critique of industrial civilization. Civilization meant modernity, materialism, industry, and science: the world of progress celebrated by the utilitarians. It touted positive science as the only reliable basis of knowledge. Carlyle denounced the view that "except the external, there are no true sciences; that to the inward world (if there be any) our only conceivable road is through the outward; that, in short, what cannot be investigated and understood mechanically, cannot be investigated and understood at all." Coleridge proclaimed in thunderous italics "the permanent distinction and occasional contrast between cultivation and civilisation."

But civilisation is itself but a mixed good [Coleridge wrote], if not far more a corrupting influence, the hectic of disease, not the bloom of health, and a nation so distinguished more fitly to be called a varnished than a polished people, where this civilisation is not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our humanity.

Matthew Arnold provided the most influential statement of the opposition between the values of culture and the values of modern civilization. Industrial civilization was "to a much greater degree than the civilisation of Greece or Rome, mechanical and external, and tends constantly to become more so." The philistines are content with the material progress that civilization delivers. But:

Culture says: "Consider these people then, their way of life, their habits, their manners, the very tones of their voice; look at them attentively; observe the literature they read, the things which give them pleasure, the words which come out of their mouths, the thoughts which make the furniture of their minds; would any amount of wealth be worth having with the condition that one was to become just like these people by having it?"

Williams noted sorrowfully that Arnold imbued the tradition with a new priggishness and spiritual pride, reacting to vulgarity in a way that was itself vulgar. In his view, Arnold was infected with "largely self-regarding feelings of class." And if he despised the philistine bourgeoisie, Arnold trembled in the face of the common people. Despite his progressive concern with popular education, he stood ready to call on the state for protection against the threatening masses, toward whom "the lovers of culture may prize and employ fire and strength."

Arnold might be dismissed as a reactionary, but Williams believed that in general the great English theorists had failed to grasp
the permanent importance of industrialism, and the nature of the civilization it had created. He devoted a long chapter to the two essays by John Stuart Mill on the ideas of culture and civilization in the philosophies of Bentham and Coleridge (essays that had been edited by Leavis). Mill had attempted to find a way of synthesizing the science of practical life, represented by Bentham, with what he called “the philosophy of human culture,” whose spokesman was Coleridge. But Mill’s synthesis inevitably fell short, because he wrote generally of “Civilisation” when he should have addressed specifically the question of “Industrialism” (by which Williams really intended, capitalism). Because Mill did not grasp the nature of the changes in England, he did not recognize that Coleridge’s reaction to industrialism transcended the bounds of Mill’s own “humanized Utilitarianism.”

Coleridge, according to Williams, had foreshadowed a more radical critique of capitalist society, and Coleridge’s insights were developed by Ruskin, Carlyle, and William Morris. Williams identified Morris in particular as “the pivotal figure of the tradition” because he began to articulate a proto-socialist critique of industrialism, suggesting the possibility of a popular cultural revival. Later, D. H. Lawrence was to be a more explicit spokesman for a popular sensibility, a witness to the liberating possibilities in the working-class experience. Eliot, in contrast, represented a conservative position on culture, but he was original and important because he analyzed the place of culture in a class society. (“We can say of Eliot what Mill said of Coleridge, that an ‘enlightened Radical or Liberal’ ought ‘to rejoice over such a Conservative.’”) Williams also praised Eliot for his anti-individualist perspective, even if his ideal of an integrated society could not be reconciled with the reality of the atomized, individualist society that capitalism inevitably produced.

Nevertheless, Williams insisted that Eliot’s approach to culture was firmly situated within the English literary tradition. For Eliot, the main components of culture were religion and the arts, as they had been for Coleridge and Arnold, and its enemy, as ever, was mod-
ern civilization. Williams played down the significance of Eliot’s introduction of the idea of “culture” as “a whole way of life.” He admitted that the use of the term in this sense “has been most marked in twentieth-century anthropology and sociology,” but insisted that even the anthropological usage was not new.

The sense depends, in fact, on the literary tradition. The development of social anthropology has tended to inherit and substantiate the ways of looking at a society and a common life which had earlier been wrought out from general experience of industrialism. The emphasis on “a whole way of life” is continuous from Coleridge and Carlyle, but what was a personal assertion of value has become a general intellectual method.

Williams was not familiar with the social sciences, but his wife, who had studied anthropology at the London School of Economics, “got him to read the sociologists on the LSE syllabus of the 1930s” while he was writing Culture and Society. However, he was prepared to concede that two lessons may be learned from the anthropologists. The first was that change may be positive, but it cannot be piecemeal: “one element of a complex system can hardly be changed without seriously affecting the whole.” The second lesson was that there are other alternatives to industrial civilization besides the medieval world evoked by so many English writers on culture. But this was “perhaps of more doubtful value,” since neither primitivism nor medievalism represented a realistic option in our own case.

The true importance of what Eliot had to say, for Williams, in his argument that culture varies from class to class in complex societies. An elite culture cannot flourish in isolation, but neither can it be stretched across the classes without adulteration. This suggests a very different issue. Must popular culture contaminate a higher, or more authentic, culture—or could it be a source of renewal? Leavis had addressed the same issue in his book Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture (1930). However, Leavis accepted Arnold’s view that “it is
upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends.” This small elite constitute the consciousness of the race (or a branch of it) at a given time . . . Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experiences of the past . . . In their keeping . . . is the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By “culture” I mean the use of such a language.

Williams suggested that where Arnold confronted Industrialism, Leavis recognized and challenged another monster, which had emerged from the smoke and grime of the satanic mills: Mass Culture. It was represented for Leavis by the popular press and even the intellectual weeklies, and was epitomized by Middletown, a community in Illinois that had been described by two American ethnographers, Robert and Helen Lynd, in a book boldly subtitled A Study in Contemporary Culture. Leavis was frankly appalled at the picture the authors presented of small-town life in the Midwest. Judging by the culture of Middletown, the contemporary world was in a very bad state indeed. “Middletown is a frightening book,” Williams agreed, but he insisted that the manufactured culture of suburbia must be distinguished from the genuine culture that emanates from the experience of working-class people, an experience that fosters opposition to established standards and prefigures the values on which a better society might be established. Williams was accordingly impatient with Leavis’s nostalgic references to a golden age when, he imagined, English culture had rested firmly on the base of an organic communal life. A socialist, he could not join Leavis in mourning the “momentous change—this vast and terrifying disintegration . . . which is commonly described as Progress.”

The authors in Williams’s canon had developed a distinctive national discourse on culture. In contrast to the German intellectuals, they did not appeal to a specifically national culture (and perhaps this would have been problematic, for what would they have made of Welsh, or Scottish, or Irish culture?). Unlike the French, they were not inclined to celebrate the universal values of a scientific, rational civilization. They wrote instead of a high culture that was at once European and English. Their central problem—the relationship between high culture, popular culture, and material progress in industrial society—was recast by Williams in Marxist terms, as a dimension of a more fundamental class conflict.

In the introduction to a new edition of his book, published in 1983, Williams remarked somewhat defensively that critics had asked why he ignored non-English writers on culture. A biographer notes that he “couldn’t read German, and didn’t read French for fun,” but Williams was in any case convinced that the English discourse on culture had emerged from a very particular historical experience. The industrial revolution had begun in England, and its effects were first appreciated there.

At the beginning, and indeed for two or three generations, it was literally a problem of finding a language to express them. Thus though it is true that comparable changes happened in other societies, and new forms of thought and art were created to respond to them, often in equally or more penetrating and interesting ways than in these English writers, it is nevertheless of some permanent general importance to see what happened where it happened first.

This is not a persuasive argument, if only because priority does not guarantee superior insight, and by the late nineteenth century the English experience of industrialism was widely shared. In any case, the writers with whom Williams was engaged were often profoundly influenced by Continental debates. Wordsworth was possessed by the language and ideas of the French revolution; Coleridge was steeped in German philosophy (indeed, Mill wrote of the “Germaino-Coleridgian school”); Mill was perhaps the most sophisticated commentator on Comte’s positivism; Carlyle wrote extensively on Goethe and the German Romantics; Arnold was insistently Euro-
pean, a scourge of English cultural insularity; and Eliot drew on the ideas of the right-wing French Catholic writer Charles Maurras.

Williams's own project must surely be seen as a contribution to the wider European debate in the middle decades of the twentieth century about the origins and meaning of culture and civilization. His account parallels those of Febvre and Elias; and, as Williams himself later came to recognize, the arguments he made were similar to those that had been developed by the Frankfurt School in Germany, and by Gramsci in Italy. As Europe endured its greatest crisis, a long-standing European discourse on culture had suddenly burst into life again. Throughout Europe, the same themes recurred in the most diverse debates, drawing in radicals and reactionaries—and also both humanists and social scientists.

Chapter 2

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE ACCOUNT:
TALCOTT PARSONS AND THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGISTS

We suggest that it is useful to define the concept culture for most usages more narrowly than has been generally the case in the American anthropological tradition.

Alfred Kroeber and Talcott Parsons (1958)

Febvre, Elias, and Williams constructed genealogies for particular traditions of thinking about culture and civilization, which they identified as French, German, and English, respectively. In 1937, in the United States, Talcott Parsons published a parallel intellectual genealogy, The Structure of Social Action, which, however, featured only social scientists. But he was not content to trace the history of an idea. Like John Stuart Mill, Parsons reviewed both the French and the German traditions, which he identified as the positivist and idealist discourses, and like Mill he offered his own synthesis.

Born in 1902, Talcott Parsons was educated at Amherst College (where he majored in biology); at the London School of Economics, to which he was attracted by the socialist thinkers Laski and Tawney, but where he came under the influence of the anthropologist Bronis-