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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 venomous 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-