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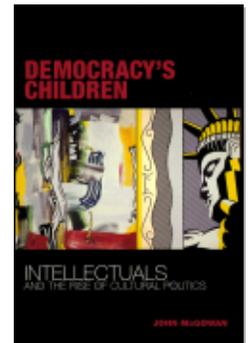
## Democracy's Children

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## CHAPTER 5

# *Modernity and Culture, the Victorians and Cultural Studies*

John Stuart Mill (1965, 28) begins his 1831 essay "The Spirit of the Age" with the conviction that his very subject matter is new.

The "Spirit of the Age" is in some measure a novel expression. I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity. The idea of comparing one's own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, had occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age.

My thesis in this chapter is, in some ways, a simple one. I will argue that the very enterprise of cultural studies marks our Victorianism. We inherit the proclivity to characterize eras, to read the events and fashions of a particular historical moment as indices of an era's "spirit," its profound way of being, from a group of German-influenced English writers who were the first literary (or artistic) intellectuals cum social critics: S. T. Coleridge, J. S. Mill, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, and William Morris, to name just a few.<sup>1</sup> Overlaid on top of this *Zeitgeist* assumption is its "materialist" twin, which locates a systematic or structural unity in terms such as "capitalism" or "modernity." But my thesis is complicated by the fact that I want to trace the consequences of proceeding from the assumption that an era has a

1. For venerable, but still valuable, studies of Victorian intellectuals, see Holloway (1965), Brantlinger (1977), Goodheart (1978), and Morgan (1990).

spirit and/or a structure, while also trying to be skeptical about that assumption. My exploration of this terrain will unfold in three sections. The first connects the notion of a *Zeitgeist* to the corollary concepts of the “modern” and of “culture.” The second considers how the basic categories describing political orientation—left, right, center—since the French Revolution derive from the concept of the modern. Finally, I want to turn back upon my whole essay and speculate on what the critical enterprise would look like if we somehow managed to dispense with the “modern” and “culture” as signposts. This last move is crucial because I am guilty, throughout these pages, of the very patterns I wish to question. I am operating close to the limits of my own intellectual paradigms—which, of course, following *Zeitgeist* logic, I deem others’ paradigms as well.

Mill’s “The Spirit of the Age” is a great place to start, because it offers just about every notion entailed in the belief that time is divided into “ages” in its first five pages and because its identification of searching out the *Zeitgeist* as itself “the dominant idea of [the] age” already pushes almost to the point of parody the whole enterprise. Mill provides a new way of doing intellectual work, and the concept of “the dominant” is essential to this new paradigm. The spirit of any era cannot be described unless the plurality of actions, motives, and beliefs of human beings is organized according to a rubric which identifies the dominant, the truly determinative. What explains, what gives meaning to, the individual event or utterance? The answer, since 1800, has very often been “modernity,” understood as a relational matrix within which particulars are held.

Isobel Armstrong (1993) follows Mill’s characterization of his age almost exactly when she stresses the “modernism” of the Victorians, a modernism best indicated by their attention to change.

Victorian modernism . . . describes itself as belonging to a condition of crisis which has emerged directly from economic and cultural change. In fact, Victorian poetics begins to conceptualise the idea of culture as a category and includes itself within the definition. . . . [T]o be ‘new’ or ‘modern’ . . . was to confront and self-consciously to conceptualise *as* new elements that are still perceived as the constitutive forms of our own condition (3).

To understand ourselves—or those from the past whom we study—is to examine the “dominant” or “constitutive” lineaments of thought, belief, values, and practices. And part of being “modern” is to have self-consciously taken up this critical task.

Mary Poovey's work (1988 and 1995) offers a sophisticated and highly influential contemporary version of reading particulars in relation to an overarching modernity. Her theoretical goal is to avoid a simplistic mapping of part to whole; adopting Althusser's definition of ideology, she wants, like him, to short-circuit an "expressive" model in which the part expresses unproblematically the qualities of the modern matrix.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the part stands in tension with that matrix, which it both contests through the inadvertent mobilization of contradictions and "reproduces" (1988, 123) through the symbolic resolution of those contradictions. The novel *David Copperfield* thus "construct[s] the reader as a particular kind of subject—a psychologized, classed, developmental individual" that "is the modern subject," and also indicates "the contradictions inherent in this subject" (90). The both/and relationship of *David Copperfield* to the ideological constitution of the social field is generalized to all literary texts: "'Literature' cannot exist outside a system of social and institutional relations, and in a society characterized by systematic class and gender inequality, literature reproduces the system that makes it what it is" (123). But literary texts can also "expose the operations of ideology within class society" because "they provide the site at which shared anxieties and tensions can surface as well as be symbolically addressed" (124). Poovey does not consider whether "exposure" might be a subset of "reproduction." In other words, must exposure always threaten an ideology? Is an ideology consciously held always more vulnerable than one that is unexposed? If so, why?

I want to highlight three features of Poovey's work. First, the significance of *David Copperfield* rests on its connection to "shared anxieties" and the construction/exposure of the modern subject. In other words, both meaning and knowledge rely on identifying an overarching constitutive

2. See Poovey (1988, 3), for her definition of ideology. See Althusser (1969, esp. 200–218) for the critique of "expressive totality" and the notions of "uneven development" that Poovey adopts. See also Althusser (1971) for the understanding of ideology on which Poovey draws. Poovey's more recent *Making A Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1832–1864* (1995) makes much more extensive use of the terms "modernity" and "culture" (especially in chapter 1) than *Uneven Developments* (1988) and, thus, might seem even more suited to my concerns in this chapter. My choice of the earlier book has been governed by the neatness of the example of how she reads *David Copperfield*. I do think the more recent work evidences the same intellectual paradigm, although admittedly stretched to the breaking point since Poovey strives mightily to accept "that modern culture's imaginary totality" is not "effective" (1995, 14) and to argue that in "early nineteenth-century Britain . . . the groundwork was laid" for "this representation of a single culture [mass culture]" that "competed with and then gradually replaced another representation, which emphasized the differences among various groups within England" (1995, 2 and 4).

framework (historically limited though it be to one era and one place) to which the literary text is related. Secondly, the critic's work is absolutely vital because that framework is "the very condition of its [the novel's] intelligibility . . . even if the reader is not conscious of this pattern" (90). The epistemically privileged critic describes these conditions of intelligibility.<sup>3</sup> Third, despite Poovey's insistence that "causation is never unidirectional" (18), it is hard to see how texts are more than reactionary in her view. *David Copperfield* "reproduces" (not *produces*) modern subjecthood, which seems inevitable because there is no sense in Poovey that a text could rewrite the very terms of intelligibility. Textual reproductions do introduce differences, but the processes by which fundamental changes (from a pre-modern to a modern subject, say) would occur are less clear, although we are told "that the conditions that produce both texts and (partly through them) individual subjects are material in the ever elusive last instance" (17). These (material) "conditions of intelligibility," then, are the container within which the parts are held or, to switch metaphors, the sub-basement on which all particulars rest.

Only this working assumption justifies the general statements about the Victorian context which undergird all the individual readings in Poovey's book. For example, within the general contention that the movement from the eighteenth to the nineteenth-century can be characterized by "the consolidation of bourgeois power," she can claim that during the Victorian era, "as the liberal discourse of rights and contracts began to dominate representations of social, economic, and political relations . . . virtue was depoliticized, moralized, and associated with the domestic sphere, which was being abstracted at the same time . . . from the so-called public sphere of competition, self-interest, and economic aggression" (10). This dominance of liberal discourses could be and was contested in all kinds of ways in Poovey's readings; what is not possible is to write a text that is not related to the framework of intelligibility created by that dominant discourse. The priority of framework to text justifies the vocabulary of Poovey's literary criticism: texts "expose" (124) contradictions that are "inherent" (90) in the modern subject and in modern ideology.

My uneasiness with this type of criticism stems somewhat from a skepticism about generalizations. To characterize Victorian ideology is always

3. The contradictions in the conditions of intelligibility provide the possibility that readers, as well as critics, "can achieve" some "distance" from the matrix, Poovey tells us (90). But she also says that her "reading" of *David Copperfield* "is not an interpretation that a nineteenth-century audience would have been likely to devise" (89).

ham-handed—and generates both endless revisionist histories that contest previous generalizations by way of citing specific counter-instances and repeated efforts to stake out ever wider conceptualizations of the fundamental conditions so that everything will be caught in their net. Such generalizations become more vacuous, less perspicacious, the wider they become. The irony of Poovey's work is that she recognizes the need for and brilliantly exemplifies focused engagements with the specific, yet still can only theorize the significance of such engagements through anchoring them in the wide generalizations. What I really want to question is not historical accuracy, but the models of meaning, knowledge, and the social that "Zeitgeist" thinking implies. Must we assume that the meaning of individual acts and texts unfolds against or in relation to the backdrop of a containing social context? What kind of knowledge does work like Poovey's claim to provide and what does it imagine the consequences of producing such knowledge? Must we know the conditions of intelligibility to alter them? Does knowing the conditions of intelligibility in 1850 impact on our relation to the conditions of intelligibility in our own day? Is there any way to keep identified contexts from spiraling out into concatenated relations with other contexts to eventually form a totalized image of the social field?

I want to ask: Is pluralism possible? And I also want to know why pluralism is so hard. The logic of criticism seems to push us to ever-widening fields of relation. What would it take to argue that some one thing is not related in any way to some other thing? Any criticism that talks of "shared anxieties" or, even more globally, of "conditions of intelligibility" which are beyond conscious awareness is not likely to recognize unrelated spheres of human endeavor, except across the gulf that separates one era or one culture from another. Spice up your totality with tensions and contradictions to the max, there will still be a container postulated as guarantor that the bits are in relation to one another.

Before tackling the pluralist question, however, I want to examine the assumptions of *Zeitgeist* thinking a bit further. Such work is oriented toward questions of power and identity. It seeks to answer the question "who we are" and to identify what or who made us that way. We express our identities through what we produce and consume, but such expression is constrained (at least) and determined (at worst) by the matrix within which we live. The continual return of cultural studies to the problematic of identity locates it squarely on this terrain.

The names offered for the constitutive framework vary—culture, ideology, habitus, lifeworld, national character. The social critic's task is to

describe us to ourselves; we live the life underwritten by the present age, but only half-consciously. We are the very stuff of culture, but not fully aware of how culture is the very stuff of each one of our individual selves. We suffer from delusions of individuality.

Of these various names, I am particularly interested in modernity and culture, because of the current prominence of cultural studies, multiculturalism and the like, and because the terms “modernity” and “culture” have a complicated history, sometimes related, sometimes not. *Zeitgeist* discourse is ostensibly temporal. The division of time into “then” and “now,” into “premodern” and “modern” is a primary organizing device of intellectual analysis since the end of the eighteenth-century. The whole rhetoric of “development” as applied to nations and to children relies on a unified, holistic model of time in which all humans can be tracked and the location of various behaviors as “modern” or “advanced” is not taken as problematic. This diachronic scale assumes continual change, so that what was modern yesterday will not be particularly modern tomorrow. Change does not necessarily sweep the old away entirely, and so we get Althusser’s “uneven developments” or Raymond Williams’s (1977, chap. 8) “residual, emergent, and dominant.” Such concepts try to explain why the “modern” is not everywhere present in modern times.

Culture enters because once temporal analyses admit different paces of change, it is tempting to isolate the differential spatially in order to still be able to identify the modern. In other words, if the modern is inextricably mixed in with the premodern everywhere, then how does it effectively act out its modernity? The holistic assumptions in the term modernity discourage analyses that cannot separate out the modern from the nonmodern. Grafted on top of the temporal differentiation of modern/nonmodern, then, is a spatial differentiation. These two things both exist in the same moment in time, but one is modern and one is not. How can that be? Culture provides the answer. Some places and the people who inhabit them are less modern, more resistant to change, than others. It is their culture—a set of habits, beliefs, and practices which characterizes them as a group—that explains this resistance.

We can see immediately that the concept of “culture” makes the same unified and holistic assumptions that inform the concept of *Zeitgeist*.<sup>4</sup> But culture stands in an ambiguous relation to temporal discourses. In J. G. Herder’s work, “culture” serves to resist the yardstick of modernity; his

4. Much of what I have to say about culture has been influenced by Herbert (1991), which traces English notions of “culture” from 1770 to 1870.

arguments for the incommensurability of cultures claims that modernity does not give us a way to judge all cultures together.<sup>5</sup> Certainly in our own time raising the banner of culture has been a persistent and perhaps the most successful (if never fully so) strategy in battles against modernization. But the holism of culture has also made it easier to characterize peoples as “backward,” “primitive,” “underdeveloped” and the like; in such cases, the discourses of modernity and of culture work hand in glove.

I am even more interested, however, in how a discourse of culture supplements the temporal discourse of modernity imaginatively. If all humans now live in a modern moment, their different relations to the modern can only be figured in spatial terms. The temporal, it seems to me, is inevitably abstract in a way the spatial is not. The modern is an abstract notion to which we are all held accountable. We are judged in terms of our relation to the cutting edge, the up-to-date. But the image of that most current thing is always out ahead of us; it must be continually produced (at various sites from the Hollywood studios to corporate R & D units to “original” academic research) because it is so seldom (if ever) lived. The modern is rarely concretely possessed—and only fleetingly before it becomes obsolete. The spatial is what we live, that messy compromise between the traditional/habitual and the new. If the modern has its own abstract unity by virtue of an imagined development that is not “uneven,” then the spatial has the unity of its messy mixture of old and new secured by the concept “culture.” Here, we say, is a lived life that coheres, that functions. The unity and holism that informs the notion of *Zeitgeist* attains local habitation and a name in culture, understood in the anthropological sense as “a whole way of life.”

Modernity in its full purity is never lived anywhere; thus the (presumed) unity of the lived must be designated otherwise. In some discourses, culture then becomes a way to explain the modern’s inability to fully install itself. Proponents of modernization will talk (as does E. B. Tylor in his 1871 classic *Primitive Cultures*) of “survivals,” pieces of the past that a culture cannot or will not give up.<sup>6</sup> Dystopic views of modernization will insist that its predilection for endless change dissolves various stabilities (designated as “traditional” and “cultural”) necessary to life.

5. See Herder (1969), as well as Berlin (1976).

6. Tylor’s (1994; first published in 1871) foundational definition of “culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense” as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”(1) is followed very quickly by the assertion that various cultural

Mill takes a more middle-of-the-road position: "The first of the leading peculiarities of the present age is, that it is an age of transition. Mankind have outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and have not yet acquired new ones" (1965, 30). It is commonplace to quote Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse" at this point—"Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born, / With nowhere yet to rest my head"—and to attribute Victorian melancholy and doubt to the fact that Mill was right. The Victorians exist in an uneasy transition from Romanticism to Modernism (if you are doing literary history) and from the premodern to the modern (if you are doing history proper). But my claim is that the very notion of the modern inevitably places us in a moment of transition. The modern is always out in front of us. The abstract ideal of the modern leads us to ask anxiously in every moment, "Are we being modern yet?" And the answer, inevitably, is "not quite yet."

This anxiety can be assuaged somewhat (never fully) by shifting the focus from the temporal (modernity) to the spatial (culture). One strategy is to celebrate what we have now: our culture. Here an attempt is made to escape the tyranny of temporal judgments by affirming what is and has been over what is to come. Culturalism of this sort is a hallmark of Lyotardian postmodernism, which sometimes pursues a policy of trying to value the local and particular apart from the master narrative of progress and development.<sup>7</sup> It's worthwhile to note that culturalism is hardly a new strategy; arguably, the majority of the world's population since 1500 on (meaning, in large part, the non-European populations who had to confront the imposed presence of Europeans) has never been modern, if being modern entails a fundamental valuation of change as continual and as an improvement. What is new in postmodernism is only the first adoption by leftist intellectuals of spatial over temporal priorities.

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stages "may be consistently arranged as having followed one another in a particular order of development" (14) and by the introduction of the concept of "survivals," which are defined as the "customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried by force of habit into a new state of society . . . [and] remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved" (15).

7. Skepticism about modernity necessarily entails skepticism about postmodernity. For the most part, I think postmodernism is a word that has outlived its usefulness; for a while during the 1980s it did serve to focus attention on a set of intellectual debates and choices. Lyotard's influential *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), specifically, poised the local as incommensurate against larger frameworks that would subsume it. His strategy is culturalist, although his argument is couched in rather different terms. The local in his book abides in "language games" rather than in cultures or sub-cultures.

Culturalism, however, seems only fitfully successful. The lure of the modern is not easy to cast aside. Syncretism—various deals with the devil—seems the order of our day. Even the most fervent attempts to maintain cultural integrity tolerate various kinds of accommodation with the modern, while a self-conscious theatricality inflects many efforts to live traditional cultures. The prefix “re” becomes crucial: cultural practices are re-enacted, re-vitalized, re-produced, re-presented. The staged, ritual character of these events marks their quaintness. They exist only within the charmed space of re-enactment.

I don’t want to trivialize all attempts to maintain traditional cultures. Many such efforts are (all too) deadly earnest. But earnest efforts will inevitably court fanaticism because only constant vigilance, an obsession with purity, can keep out all traces of the new. At one end of the spectrum, culturalism is weekend play-acting, dressing in clothes you would never wear during the week, and performing/watching “traditional” activities that have no part in daily modern life. At the other end of the spectrum, culturalism is an attempt to say a thunderous no to modernity in all its forms. Not surprisingly, most expressions of culturalism fall somewhere between these two extremes, leaving us in a hybrid space that feels both unsettled and peculiarly (postmodernly?) ours. When I name my children Kiernan and Siobhan, I really don’t know what I am doing, since I long ago opted out of the last piece of my Irish heritage (Roman Catholicism) that marked me in any way Irish. So why this ethnic gesture in naming my children? What bit of Irishness beyond pretty names am I wishing upon them?

A certain kind of contemporary humor plays this doubleness to the hilt. We love the image of the Navaho rug maker who tells us she can only weave while watching TV since the weaving is so monotonous. Tourism and Hollywood play this doubleness somewhat differently. The staged past both calls us to a quaint life less hectic, less comfortable, less complex than our own *and* reassures us of our modernity. We get to be proud of being modern (at least, more modern than them) while also indulging in the fantasy of sloughing off the burden of modernity. The fate of the Victorian as marker of the past in the late twentieth-century reveals that our current time-sense not only involves a modernity always fading out in front of us into the far future, but also the receding of the past. If my students are any indication, the past in 2000 comes in two flavors: Victorian and then some obscure, undifferentiated far past beyond the Victorian, a time when people lived in castles (or was it caves?) and knights in

armor tilted at dinosaurs. Where their period was the modern for Mill, Carlyle, and Ruskin, the Victorian is now quintessentially the past, the period against which we gauge our own modern-ness. The Bloomsbury group played a large role in this transformation of the Victorian into the non-modern by organizing the (subsequently) endlessly repeated narrative of our (ambivalent) progress around sexuality. No re-staging of Victorian life is complete without reassuring us that we are more enlightened sexually than those repressed Victorians. (For my students, interestingly, the salient belief is not that the Victorians were sexually repressed, but that all their marriages were arranged by tyrannical parents.) Yet many of these re-stagings also ruefully contrast the complexities of our sexual world against the simplicities of the Victorian (when men were men, and women were women—and they liked it that way). The film version of *A Room with a View* offers a perfect example. It pushes Forster's tale from Edwardian times firmly back into the Victorian. Then it ridicules Victorian prudishness throughout. But we also get the joyous innocence of the men's naked bathing, untroubled by the threat of homosexuality (either Forster's or our own).

The recent *Wings of the Dove* is more interesting. The narrative is located in a transitional period, *between* the Victorian and the modern. From my point of view, of course, the issue isn't whether such a transitional time ever really existed, but that viewing any time as transitional is one of the hallmarks of the problematic of the modern. The film, however, locates that transitional moment in the past, not in the here and now (as Mill and Arnold do). Still, the film is trying to break down the easy assumption that we know who the Victorians are (repressed pre-moderns) and who we are (enlightened moderns). And it tries to make us see that James's characters, although dressed in ways we associate with simpler times, occupy a social landscape every bit as complex, as unscripted and under-normed, as our own. That is, the rules of the game, which designate social standing and suitable sexual partners, are all changing in the world the film presents, so that the possibilities for and significance of actions are radically unclear. The film suggests that things are in flux, that our assumption of simpler, more innocent, times is backward projection, not historical accuracy.

To the question "Are we being modern yet?" the only possible answer is "Yes and No." No, we will never be fully modern, because the modern is out in front of us. Yes, we are modern because immersed in constant change, the surest sign of modernity. If we live in a world where

change is the norm, then we live in the modern world. The modern is its own continual negation. Anything substantial, no matter how advanced, will yield in its turn to the even further advanced. We cannot, substantively, be modern. But we can (must?) have the *form* of modernity, a form which requires an odd ascesis, a withholding of full investment in any substantial thing. Computers offer an extreme version of this relationship to things and time. A computer is outdated a month after its purchase. This obsolescence is not simply a result of our cultivated craving for the new, but stems also from the need to be in touch with our contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> We cannot communicate with others if we lag behind them. We all need to be on the same page in the book of (modern) time. But how can we be on the same page in a speed-reading world of constant change? "Culture" is a term that taps the brakes. We can say something about the here and now, identify regularities and stabilities within the horizon of change, through the concept of culture. It is our pole star within the swirling heavens.

Let me summarize the argument thus far before taking up the way we chart political positions in relation to this narrative of modernity. What interests me is the organization of much intellectual work around two concepts which I see as related to each other supplementally. The temporal concept judges events, practices, and social structures according to their modernity, their development. But this model also posits a holistic matrix within which change occurs. Modernity is a dynamic whole, nowhere fully present, but a process that figures prominently (often determinately) in the constitution of particulars. The spatial concept "culture" gives the here and now a coherence that modernity (always in transition) cannot provide. Various elements of culture can be judged as more or less modern. Culture can be a rallying point against the blackmail of the modern, but it also assuages the anxiety of not being modern enough. Maybe we are not fully modern yet, but that culture over there is even less modern than us.

"Modernity" and "culture" between them organize a huge amount of our intellectual landscape (most prevalently in the humanities and the social sciences). Mapping the particular to the modern and/or to the cultural began with the Victorians and has become particularly prominent

8. See Douglas and Isherwood (1979) for an argument that consumption is always about social involvement and thus primarily oriented toward gaining information and establishing social relations. We must buy computers in order not to be poor, if we accept their assertion that "the rightful measure of poverty . . . is not possessions, but social involvement" (11).

among American academics during the past twenty years.<sup>9</sup> Current efforts to map the Victorian (either to characterize a shared Victorian culture or to identify the clashing forces within a contradiction-ridden social matrix) hoist certain Victorian writers (Mill, Carlyle, and Ruskin especially) on their own petard.



I now want to turn to the use of modernity as a political measuring rod. The terms “left” and “right” in their political sense are contemporaneous with the “discovery of time” and the birth of the term “culture.”<sup>10</sup> Dating from the French Revolution, left and right are coordinated with responses to change. Actually there are three possibilities: left, right, and liberal. The liberal is the champion of modernity, at home in its cities, and a proponent of its economic and social arrangements, which are legitimated as the best possible (in an imperfect world) way to approach justice (on the basis of meritocracy) and freedom (civil rights and free enterprise). Mill is, of course, the great spokesman for liberalism in the Victorian age. And he, along with Arnold, points toward one version (the Ted Kennedy variety) of twentieth-century liberalism when he abandons *laissez-faire* positions in favor of state interference in training, protecting, and rewarding citizen-workers. In the late twentieth-century, we think of *laissez-faire* liberals as conservatives or rightists, sometimes called neo-conservatives, less often called neo-liberals. The last label is the most accurate historically. The important point here is that the definition of left and right in the United States today represents the complete triumph of liberalism which has split in two since 1789, thus giving us our current internecine struggles between interventionist and *laissez-faire* liberals. Both groups are proponents of modernity, which means they favor economic and technological growth, change, and innovation. They support rights-based democracy, and they are adherents of market economics.

Liberalism’s middle-aged paunch has pushed nonliberal versions of left and right to the margins. Nonliberal positions are characterized by at-

9. Michaels (1996) writes: “[I]f we return to the revised version of the question with which we began—which myths do Americans believe—we can see that culture, not visitors, races or even history, is the correct answer. Americans, especially American academics, believe in the myth of culture; indeed, with respect to American academics, the point could be put more strongly—we do not simply believe in the myth of culture, many of us have accepted as our primary professional responsibility the elaboration and promulgation of the myth” (13–14).

10. For an argument that historical paradigms of thought are a late-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century phenomenon, see Toulmin and Goodfield (1965). For accounts of “culture” as a concept dating from the same period, see Jenks (1993), Williams (1976), and Kroeber and Kluckhorn (1960).

tempts to reject modernity *tout court*. (As with culturalism, such attempts in politics are often compromised in one way or another, which yields the usual obsessions with purity and the inevitable schismatic breakdowns into splinter groups asserting their integrity against the complicities of their erstwhile allies.) The rightists can be characterized as premoderns, nostalgic for premodern social and economic arrangements. During the Victorian era, rightists were often medievalists, pointing to that age of faith and social hierarchies as a model for a just and well-ordered society. The defining concern of true-blue rightism is order. The right's prime objection to modernity is its chaos, its anomie, its individualistic anarchy. Thus, when a liberal like Arnold plays the anarchy card in a text like *Culture and Anarchy*, he is halfway to becoming a reactionary. In this view, modern political and social arrangements undermine all authority and leave the unchecked individual to do as he pleases, while modern economic arrangements promote the war of all against all in unbridled competition. Modern society lacks any "social glue," principles of authority or bonds of affection, respect, or obligation that establish relations beyond interest-driven give-and-take in political and economic bargaining. Patriotism, and its cousins ethnic and racial loyalties/hatreds, have, in practice, proved the most potent elixirs concocted to prevent modern societies dissolving into the individualistic war of each against all. Perhaps if we could reassess the threat and lose this fixation on the bogeyman of anomie, we would be spared cures that have been disastrous while addressing a disease that has never manifested itself.

In our own day, premodernism flourishes fitfully among "cultural conservatives," a group the Republican Party in the United States managed to incorporate and exploit during the 1980s, but which has damaged that party in presidential elections in the 1990s. The increased visibility of culturalism and various fundamentalisms in religion during the last quarter of the twentieth century demonstrates that abhorrence of modernity and all its works still exists. For much of the world's population, modernity has brought no palpable benefits, and the program of jettisoning the modern entirely in favor of the premodern "survivals" which have persisted alongside the modern has gained new and vocal adherents. Such movements have highlighted the extent to which modernity is the province of (primarily professional) élites. Workers in the West were brought into modernity's fold before World War II through nationalistic patriotism, racism, or brute force, and after World War II through economic participation in prosperity. But the move toward a global economy has widened the economic gap between professional (upper) middle classes and less skilled (lower)

middle classes, a widening that has made the cultural gaps (which had never disappeared) between these two groups prominent once again.

There are various litmus tests for attitudes toward the modern, for marking the gulf between the sophisticated élites who feel at home in modernity and the much larger numbers who have never experienced modernity as anything more than a threat. Three such tests are attitudes toward religion, cities, and ethnic identities. The liberal proponent of modernity (whether Democrat or Republican) is likely to be a-religious, at ease in large cities (even if living in the suburbs), and unlikely to take ethnic identity very seriously (professional identity is probably primary; family life, while crucial, is not organized ethnically for élites, who marry along class lines, not ethnic ones). The élites—and the two political parties—are not going to roll back modernity significantly. But each party needs to court constituencies that are hostile to modernity in ways the élites are not. And when, as has happened in the Republican Party, the non-élites manage to move from being the foot-soldiers to being elected representatives, disarray can follow as the modernism of the business class clashes with the premodernism of the cultural right.

But what of the radical left? If the radical right are premodernists, does that make the radical left postmodernists? If only it were that simple. The nineteenth-century radical left divides between the Marxists and the anarchists.<sup>11</sup> Bypassing theoretical and/or factual accuracy somewhat, let me say that Marxism's great strength and its great flaw as a political pro-

11. What, you might ask, about left Hegelians and their descendants, later in the century, the social democrats? In my *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (1991), I have tried in chapter 4 to delineate a left Hegelian position that is neither Marxist nor liberal. Such a position dovetails with some (but hardly all) elements of contemporary communitarianism (of the Charles Taylor rather than the Alasdair MacIntyre variety) while also picking up some hints from attempts to resuscitate a republican civic virtue tradition. But I think now that left Hegelianism is more liberal than not—and certainly liberal in its attitudes toward modernity, change, and individual rights. Liberalism is a capacious house, and I think we need to come to terms with its variants, instead of believing we can reject it wholesale. We can no more banish liberalism by fiat than we can make the modern disappear. Liberalism and the modern (along with capitalism, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, etc.) are the nontotalized horizons within which we operate, and the clean choice of affirmation/rejection should be swapped for the messy task of working through the details of what opportunities (for good and for evil) our intellectual, political, and emotional predilections, our past, and our present afford us (fully recognizing that different groups and individuals located within this horizon have different purposes which inflect their assessment of possibilities). In other words, liberalism is no more of a piece than modernity is. I remain a left Hegelian (or a “radical democrat” in today’s parlance), but I think this position stands in a more complex relationship to liberalism than “it is” or “it isn’t” can encompass.

gram are one and the same: it ignores all cultural objections to modernity and hence all protests against how modernity destroys “ways of life.” Therefore Marxism is only interested in modernity’s economic sins, how it creates “poverty amidst plenty.” The typical Marxist is the engaged intellectual (not the proletariat he tries to woo to the party) and he, like other élites, is at home in modernity and its godless frenetic cities. He doesn’t so much reject modernity as he expects to come out on its other side. Modernity is a stage on the way to socialism—and much of modernity will survive into the socialist future. Marxism, in other words, can only appeal to those who are temperamentally modern, not to premodernists. A leftist political party can only attract premodernists if it succeeds in getting them to check all their cultural allegiances at the door and focus political activity on the sole issue of a bigger slice of the economic pie. The cultural recidivism of our times followed from the discovery by Reagan’s Republicans and Thatcher’s Conservatives that if played right, certain hot-button cultural issues like flag-burning could supplant economic interest. (Of course, it didn’t hurt that Reagan was playing off the oil-crisis inflation of the 70s and Thatcher off the same energy crisis, symbolically centered around the coal miners in Britain.)

Anarchism is less easy to track, but the energies of the *enragé* must be noted because they are also with us today. By tapping into culturalist energies through the thematics of hostility to the state, reverence for religious and social authority, abhorrence of modern cities (figured as a-religious, homosexual, and the home of nonworking non-whites), and traditional family values, political fanatics have unleashed a rage that has spawned para-military groups, violent confrontations with federal agencies (especially out West), and “domestic terrorism” (the Oklahoma City and Atlanta bombings, as well as the blowing up of various abortion clinics around the country). The left’s engagement with these energies has been troubled. Starting with the civil rights and student movements of the 1960s, but accelerating with the “identity politics” of the 1970s and 1980s, the left has tried to face up to the fact that economic issues are not primary for some constituencies still willing to associate their politics with the left. It turns out that the indignities most crucial to many people willing to take vigorous political action involve issues of equality, recognition, appreciation, respect, and tolerance more than economic concerns. For people who want to be taken seriously on their own terms—and want to resist changes that seem to threaten those terms—traditional leftist economic issues and tactics (the ballot, strikes, revolutions) are less compelling than cultural issues

(or representation and recognition) and symbolic tactics (demonstrations, civil disobedience, media access and coverage).<sup>12</sup>

If this analysis is correct, then postmodernism (as an intellectual movement) can be read as the left's attempt to process the fact that its political agenda cannot simply be the transformation of modernity's economic arrangements within the context of a general acceptance of the modern. Rather, the left has to re-invent itself, first by grasping just what are the complaints/grievances of the groups crudely lumped under the inadequate label of "identity politics," and secondly by thinking through a social vision which gets at the root causes of the abuses that underlie those grievances. I think this work has hardly begun. Old (economist) ways of thinking are hard to put aside, although I'd say the most progress has been made on this front. Less successful has been the attempt to understand fully the stakes in cultural politics for groups on both sides. For example, despite all the current focus (both theoretical and historical) on racism, analyses of intolerance are never going to get us very far until the powerful appeal of racism can be presented in nonpathologized terms. So long as leftist intellectuals provide descriptions of *their* benightedness, the gap between those intellectuals and their purported allies cannot be closed.<sup>13</sup>

Along with its repudiation of Marxist economism, postmodern theory has (more fitfully) considered the left's entire relation to modernity. Various bits and pieces of the modern (its addiction to universalist arguments and solutions, for example) have been questioned, and there have also been repeated flirtations with anarchistic jettisoning of the modern altogether. But neither total rejection nor Habermas's attempted embrace of modernity's unfinished emancipatory project has proved attractive to many. The dramatic choices the postmodernist debate of the 80s appeared to offer have faded into a more meticulous project of picking through, piece by piece, the modernist heritage, figuring where and how each piece

12. My characterization of these leftist, but non-economically motivated, political agents connects up to long-standing controversies about the "new Left," "the new social movements," and "identity politics." Readers will find the essays collected in Nicholson and Seidman (1995); Rajchman (1995); and Charles Taylor et al. (1994) a good place to start.

13. I am attracted to, without having worked out all the implications of, the "principle of symmetry" promoted by Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1997, chap. 3). The principle recommends that we take as a starting assumption that others with whom we disagree have as reasonable a basis for their beliefs as I have for mine. The difficulty of enacting the principle becomes apparent when that other is someone who strongly believes in racial differences. But it is equally hard to imagine progress in an argument in which the only move is my repetition that you are wrong—really, truly, and fundamentally wrong.

might be useful or harmful. Such salvage work is hardly heady; it yields few moments of stunning, all-illuminating epiphany. As a result, we passed through the millennium in a peculiarly undramatic way. The ending of the twentieth-century brought neither a whimper nor a bang. Perhaps we peaked too soon, but that's fine by me. (I'm prone to semi-serious baby-boom determinism; that we hit the millennium in middle-age may account for its not living up to its hype.) 1989 put the apocalyptic East-West face-off to bed in an inconclusive non-ending which was at least semi-triumphant given the possible scenarios. The big one was never dropped. If our current situation is innumerable intractable local conflicts, each of which requires sustained, fine-grained attention with a minimum of general commitments/beliefs if any solution is to be found, should we bemoan the lost clarity of global schemes, globally envisioned progress, and enemies identified as evil empires? I don't think so.

The political stakes, then, in my desire to question the Victorian heritage that has us gauge political positions and possibilities in relation to modernity lie in my conviction that the terms "left" and "right" have lost their usefulness, and that holistic covering terms such as "modernity," "capitalism," "disciplinary society," "patriarchy," "socialism," and the like are similarly more of a hindrance than a help.<sup>14</sup> We need more nuanced, more particularist analyses that consider situational utility, situational harm. Progress here would be greatly enhanced by abandoning the belief that modernity is of a piece, that each element of contemporary life stands in relation to other elements more or less modern, and by acknowledging that modernist themes like "universal rights" cannot be judged apart from the situations in which they are deployed. Current appeals to the "global economy" are the blackmail of the modern in a new guise. "Survivals" (in Tylor's sense) like France's social safety nets cannot survive long, the pundits assure us, for only streamlined modern economies will be able to compete. Retaining any local differences that hamper productivity or subtract the cost of social goods from the shareholders' bottom line will prove short-sighted and self-destructive. The price paid for local difference, of uneven development, is too high.

The left would do better to resist such holistic analyses and the prescriptions they warrant. Its political analyses and programs should be uncou-

14. J. K. Gibson-Graham's wonderful *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It)* (1996) provides a sustained attempt to consider the political and epistemological consequences of abandoning the term and concept "capitalism."

pled from both a sensibility that says yes or no to modernity *tout court* and from theories that identify any new practice as the thin edge of the wedge. Production for export markets is not necessarily bad, does not necessarily destroy local communities, while some local communities are hardly to be celebrated and protected. All the grounds for judgment and decision are in the details of the particular situation. Instead of trying to hold out against modernity, or of bemoaning the fact of being already implicated in some way with the modern, the left might try to stop taking the modern as a yardstick. Certain actions (for example, rural industrialization or the growth of web-based communication) need not carry certain inevitable consequences. Modernization does not everywhere take the same form and have the same results. If we can disconnect individual actions from the overarching matrix of the modern, we can be more attentive to the very different consequences that can follow from similar actions taken at different times in different places and handled differently. We should cherish what works, but recognize how much doesn't—while recognizing that modernity does not prescript results. Yes, there are various pressures of various sorts, including the pressures of a world economic situation, but various creative responses to those pressures are always a possibility.

Such pragmatic particularism comes with its own attendant risks. But that is to be expected; much of the point is that theory and its models cannot offer magical nostrums that protect us from failure. What worked elsewhere may not work here and now. The temptation can be to cultivate one's garden, to build enclaves (restricted, "intentional" communities) against the general uncertainty. The watchwords could become "family" and "community," two local forms of relatedness that eschew connection or intervention in wider social structures named "state," "corporation," or "United Nations."

In such a climate, images of the Victorian can function to reinforce a certain sheltered ideal of community. All the recent films set in that generalized English past that covers Jane Austen to E. M. Forster are essentially drawing-room comedies or melodramas. These films ignore the hungry forties specifically and the working classes generally, while presenting an astoundingly insular view of England when we consider that the time period in question saw England at its most expansive, that is, as ruler of the empire on which the sun never set. We get England only. Even the recent spate of (vaguely anti-English) films set in Scotland and Ireland all avoid the 1850 to 1910 time period. (A counter-example, *Mrs. Brown*, gives us the ultra-devoted Scottish servant to the British monarch, not the Scottish

rebel.) The golden age of Victoria provides a very popular contemporary image of domestic felicity—domestic in both its senses of confined to the family home and confined to the home country. Contented relatedness is a function of sealed-off relations, in unremarked tension with the outward directed imperial grasp of the actual historical period. Depicted this way, the Victorian dovetails with a prominent isolationist mood in a prosperous America and England disinclined to take much responsibility for, or remediating action toward, the less well-off, either abroad or at home.

My point in this section has been that our way of understanding the political categories left and right has shrunk since the early part of the Victorian period, because political and intellectual élites (for the most part) have lost the sense that these categories chart fundamental orientations to modernity itself. Modernity is not at stake in our politics; left and right are defined within a framework that takes modernity as the unalterable given, and thus focuses only on possible maneuvers within modernity. The narrow focus of contemporary filmic representations of the Victorian replays this narrowing of possible political positions and political options in contemporary two-party democracy in both England and the United States. To re-ask the question of modernity gives us a useful alternative take on what is at issue in contemporary politics and on the vicissitudes of the two major parties in both countries over the past thirty-five years. Postmodernism can be seen as the intellectual discourse that attempts (especially from the left's point of view) to reconfigure the primarily economic view of politics that prevailed before the 1960s. However, we can also view postmodernism as calling us to eschew the fixation on modernity altogether, to organize our thinking along entirely different lines, to stop being modernists in exactly the way the Victorians were modernist: that is, in taking modernity as the key reference point when examining allegiances, beliefs, practices, and outcomes. In other words, I believe that my raising the question of modernity in the way I do in this essay is part and parcel of an effort to rethink the whole political landscape, to get beyond inherited (and currently very confused) configurations of left and right.



The reader will have noted that this chapter, thus far, commits the very sin it strives to describe. I have characterized a certain type of cultural criticism as modern and have claimed that we and the Victorians are both modern since we practice that type of criticism. To say that critical generalization since 1800 is usually temporally and/or culturally organized

is to enact the very critical move to which I am trying to draw attention. As recent (1975–1995) criticism geared toward uncovering ideological taken-for-granted amply demonstrates, even tonally neutral accounts of unacknowledged assumptions convey a skeptical, if not downright denunciatory, relation to the material described. Some positions, it seems, are hard to occupy self-consciously. If, as an ideology or a *Zeitgeist* critic, you are doomed to be no different from those whom you critique, does the critique lose all its value? Or is there some pay-off for self-consciousness, for the examined life? Is there any way to use self-consciousness about the intellectual paradigm this essay discusses?

From the outset, let's acknowledge a fascinating, if perhaps, infinite regress here. *Zeitgeist* thinking would suggest we pose this question: "What about the current moment allows the paradigm of *Zeitgeist* thought to become a consciously raised issue?" What in the temper of our times or in our current intellectual situation allows us to identify, as Walter Benn Michaels (1996) does, a belief in culture as our prevailing myth and to examine the structures and consequences of that belief? I have, as you can imagine, various thoughts on this topic that I would love to try out on you, the gentle reader, for plausibility. But that path leads back into the labyrinth just when I want to consider if we can by-pass the labyrinth. Can we do our intellectual work in other ways?

One solution, of course, is to opt for pure particularity, for singularity. Certain strains in poststructuralism (especially in Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault) point us in this direction.<sup>15</sup> These writers indicate a tension between the particular and the categories by which we envelop it, and consider (at least tentatively) the possibility of encountering the specific thing without subsuming it under a more general term. The problem of such an approach is dramatically conveyed by the Borges story, *Funes the Memorius*. The title character has perceptions so fine that today's tree is completely different to him than yesterday's, so much so that they cannot be identified by the same name or grouped in a single category. Funes is an idiot; the narrator tells us he "suspect[s] . . . that [Funes] was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract (1962, 115)." Funes finds the world overwhelming and ends up in bed in a darkened room, the only way he can survive in a world of countless singularities impressing themselves upon him.

15. See Foucault (1979, 251–55), and (1980, 42–45) for passages that indicate his attempt to disconnect appearances from a "depth hermeneutic" and that locate their meaning in essences or identities hidden from view.

Still, it is tempting to pursue the Foucauldian dream of taking appearances as all there is, thus eschewing our habitual mapping of appearances to identity, essence, causal matrices, or deep foundational regularities like culture. Yes, singularities are inflected by, gain significance through, their relations and interactions with other singularities. And many of these relations may exist over fairly long stretches of time, institutionalized and maintained by various social arrangements, some of which are enforced against opposition. But there is no reason to think that these various relations and these various arrangements map onto some deeper and unifying reality that is acquired differently, is possessed unconsciously and thus more tenaciously, and is more fundamental than any of our other beliefs about the world and our place in it. The systematic relationships and fiercely held commitments that do exist are human products, no more and no less than my casual preference for blue over yellow shirts. Depending on context, what is casual now could become all-important and vice versa; there are a variety of ways in which we acquire beliefs and commitments, none of which is more fundamental or exists on a deeper level than any other. Similarly, there are many different kinds of social pressure (power) brought to bear on individual belief formation and such pressure is brought to bear in many different ways, but none operates on a different level than any of the others, and they form cohesive or contradiction-ridden wholes only as a result of specific human actions aimed at establishing such encompassing relations among things. We live in a world where lots of energy is expended trying to change each other's minds and actions; such efforts often involve attempts to rescript the meaning of things through recontextualization and forging new connections. The results of such efforts are mixed.

Because the results are mixed, my argument throughout this essay has been skeptical of any easy generalizations about what constitutes either Victorianism or our own moment. My argument suggests that it makes sense to identify various specific conditions of specific historical moments; we might even claim that some of these conditions are "modern," meaning that they did not exist prior to some designated date (say 1600). But we should avoid thinking that there is some substrate called "modernity" or "Western (or American or English) culture" which actively structures the relations of all of these conditions to one another. The elements of the modern exist in contingent, problematic, and ever-changing relation to one another. In other words, the elements are not necessarily related to one another at all. We live in a modern world, but it is not systematic in

the way that terms like “modernity” would have us believe. My approach suggests that we ask: who (in any particular historical or cultural analysis) is trying to make what kind of connection between what elements of the past and what elements of the present; and how; and why? Relationships and meanings are forged through various (contingent) human actions, one of which is the telling of stories in fiction and film, another of which is making interpretive arguments in criticism.

I will close by indicating, all too briefly, that Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on story-telling and judgment might help us re-orient our notion of what criticism can accomplish. Arendt, especially in the posthumous *Life of the Mind* (1981), was committed to an ontology of appearances.<sup>16</sup> The real for Arendt is that which exists between humans in publicly apprehensible forms. But the real is not purely singular in Arendt because of the requirements of story-telling and judgment. Story-telling is necessary for two reasons: to maintain the reality of that which is not itself apprehensible now and to consider the meaning of the real. Things appear. Many of these “things” are human deeds (action) or the products of human efforts (work). Action and work would seem futile if they left no on-going impress on the world. Work’s legacy is very often the things it creates which now furnish our world. But action that does not create a material object depends on stories for preservation—and for an impact on future deeds.

Stories, however, do more than just memorialize. Appearances are not self-evident; their possible meanings unfold over time through a process of re-telling. Story-telling records, but it is also productive. The story elaborates and speculates; it ponders possible ways of being in the world as exemplified by the actions it relates. Here is where story connects to judgment. Each of us has to decide how to live a life. Or, if that is too grand, each of us has various decisions to make in various situations. We are guided, certainly, by the particulars of the situation, which include our particular purposes as well as the possibilities afforded by the situation and our estimate of possible success. In other words, judgment involves gauging what is possible in these circumstances in relation to what I desire to achieve. Any situation offers a number (more than one but less than

16. I discuss Arendt’s notions of story-telling and judgment in detail in McGowan (1998, chap. 3). Arendt’s own texts on these topics are widely scattered, from the essays on Lessing, Isak Dinesen, and Walter Benjamin in *Men in Dark Times* (1968), and the essay “Truth in Politics” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1977), to the posthumous *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1982). See Arendt (1981, 42–46) for the most succinct statement of her ontology of appearances.

infinity) of options for action. Judgment entails both identifying the options and choosing among them. Stories often offer examples of creative or otherwise extraordinary actions that invite us to expand our notions of the possible.

What has this model of the interaction among situations, stories, and judgments have to do with academic work which explains *Bleak House* by mapping it onto typical Victorian attitudes or (in the more sophisticated version of this kind of work) to a constitutive Victorian social field? Primarily I think it shifts the focus of our mapping efforts. Judgment aided by stories still must decide which stories (among many) are relevant to the situation at hand—and in what ways those stories are instructive. No fit is perfect; we are always proceeding by analogy and approximation. The fluidity of the process is crucial, since the absence of exactitude keeps judgment supple and creative in the attempt to respond to novel circumstances. My suggestion, then, is to re-orient our relationship to various elements of the past. Instead of understanding the element's meaning as a function of its dynamic relation to the defining discourses, ideology, or beliefs of its age or culture, we should be considering what elements of the past can mean in relation to our purposes in the present. Instead of viewing things that appear as indices of who they (the Victorians) were and/or who we (postmoderns?) are, those things would be elaborated through stories that ponder what we might become. Instead of asking (anxiously) "are we being modern yet?" and looking over our shoulders for the preceptor who bears the report card registering how well we've passed the test, we would see in stories of the past images of being in the world that tell us there are multiple ways to be human and that we are engaged in the project of living out some of those ways.

Whether such an approach would lessen the pressure on the "we" which I invoke in the previous sentences is an open question. I hope that a focus on the future we are trying to enable rather than describing the characteristics of the past might make images of the "we" more fluid, less a group solidarity we necessarily share or can be blamed for not accepting than forms of human relatedness that must be continually re-created.<sup>17</sup> The "we" is precisely what the storyteller, the user of discourse, is trying to create through the appeal to an audience, with success in that endeavor blessedly hard to achieve and only temporarily stable even when

17. I highly recommend Young (1995) for a way of thinking about the existence of groups that gets us beyond the stalemate of essentialized identities versus mobilized differences.

achieved. Just as the elements of the modern do not cohere into an all-encompassing “modernity” which organizes them once and for all in one way, so individual human existences touch each other in some ways and in some times, but not in others. Just exactly what connections are made and when is the product of human action, not the result of systemizing unities that lurk beneath or behind or beyond that contact of humans, one with another.