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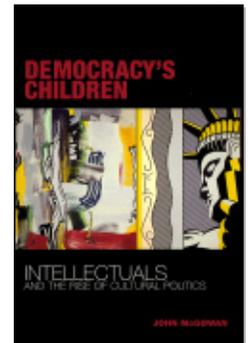
## Democracy's Children

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## CHAPTER 6

# *The Narrative of Culture: A Burkean Perspective*

### I. SKEPTICAL MUSINGS, OR AGAINST CULTURALISM

My starting point is a deep skepticism about the term “culture.” My skepticism takes two forms: one political, the other epistemological. To make the political point will require a (greatly truncated) genealogy of the term. Our contemporary infatuation/enthralment with culture has complicated roots which I am going to dramatize with a partial (in all senses of the word) narrative about how a conservative, Romantic concept was appropriated by twentieth-century Western Marxism. This narrative lies aslant models of culture and agency offered by cultural studies and by poststructuralist versions of the performative—both influenced by them and taking up different issues than them.

If we go back to Romanticism—German Romantics such as Herder and the Brothers Grimm, English Romantics such as Coleridge and Carlyle—culture enters the scene as a player in the struggle with science for explanatory power. My take on Romanticism—hardly novel, but hardly uncontroversial—is that these writers attempt to recuperate under another name what religion represented in the Enlightenment battles between religion (figured as superstition by *les philosophes*) and science/philosophy/reason. The Romantics accept that religion is a dead letter, but work

to revivify spiritual factors that, according to them, scientific materialism ignored. (Abrams [1971] offers one standard version of this argument.) One branch of Romanticism takes the tactic of championing an animistic, living Nature to pose against the dead mechanical nature of science; but another version of Romanticism turns to culture, not nature, as the locus of what transcends reason. There are intangibles—like *esprit de corps*, patriotism, English phlegm—that science can not recognize, but which have consequences in the world we inhabit. Culture acts as a substance term, the “stuff” to which such intangibles adhere as we struggle (in a post-Enlightenment age) to give them a local habitation and a name—and to consider their production, their coherence, and their reproduction. Culture, then, is a repository for all kinds of things that Enlightenment reason threatens to exclude.<sup>1</sup> Let the word “culturalism” designate those who appeal to culture in order to insist “that ideas and practices have their foundation in neither logic nor empirical science, that ideas and practices fall beyond the scope of deductive and inductive reason, that ideas and practices are neither rational nor irrational but rather *nonrational*” (Shweder, 1984, 28).

Culture as a repository of the extra-rational and supra-sensible is a curious amalgam of left and right, especially from an early to mid-twentieth-century perspective. Traditionally, leftist thought—dominated by Marx—embraces Enlightenment reason, the aspiration to rational control, and a hostility to religion and nationalism (insofar as the Workers’ International represents the height of leftist aspirations). But just as, in our post-Marxist era, these clear lines of leftist allegiance have been blurred by post-modernist attacks on Western reason and by the identity politics of new social movements, the first Romantic adherents of culture—dare we say of a “cultural politics”—are not easily characterized as left or right. This is as true of Edmund Burke (purported godfather of conservatism) as it is of the Tory Radicals who combine Burke’s paeans to tradition, cultural values, and hierarchical authority with denunciations of capitalism that are as ferocious as anything Marx ever penned. Burke—like Coleridge, Carlyle, Disraeli, and Ruskin after him—already saw that capitalism is the great destroyer of traditional social life, that capitalism itself is the

1. Critiques of Enlightenment reason are, of course, standard fare in post-structuralist theory. Two crucial sources for this critique are Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) and Foucault (1965). Many of the most repeated post-structuralist criticisms can be found in Romantic writers, especially German Romantics. See, for one example, Herder (1993), along with Berlin’s (1976) discussion of Herder’s critique of the Enlightenment.

direct manifestation of instrumental reason put to work. Culture is trotted out as the champion which will do battle for all that is about to be lost.

Despite the teaser of my title, the Burke in whom I am primarily interested is Kenneth, not Edmund. But we need to think a bit more about Edmund now in order to gauge just how conservative the notion of culture is. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1993; first published 1791) establishes (at an incredibly early date) the battle lines between tradition and modernity, a move paralleled by the contemporary establishment of *droit* and *gauche* by the French revolutionaries themselves.<sup>2</sup> I think it fair to say that the narrative of a transition from the traditional to the modern is the founding gesture of history (as it comes down to us from Hegel), sociology, and anthropology. Each of these discourses is built upon the supposition that the West has undergone a "great transformation," to use the title of Polanyi's (1944) classic work on the birth of capitalism. This transformation is figured as progress or as loss in different versions. Societies are characterized in relation to their position on a time line of development, in a continuum from advanced to primitive. And, again quite quickly, the self gets mapped on an analogous time line, from primitive childhood to an appropriate maturity. In one of its manifestations (which are multiple, complex, and contradictory), "culture" stands as the spatial marker between "traditional" (primitive) and "modern"—a necessary supplement to the temporal line of development, a way of accounting for the fact that some societies that exist now (in "modern times") are categorized as "pre-modern" (as discussed in the preceding chapter.)

Burke's thought is conservative (reactionary and nostalgic) insofar as he argues against modernity in favor of tradition, against change in favor of continuity. But Burke also introduces two themes that are less consistently conservative: a downplaying of human agency in the making of history and an emphasis on the situated, communal component of human individuality. Michael Oakeshott, perhaps this century's greatest conservative thinker, takes this mistrust of human agency as his starting

2. Eagleton (1995, chap. 2) provides a superb reading of how Burke relies on culture to enable authority to win allegiance and obedience from those over whom it holds sway. "At the centre of Burke's political thought lies the belief that colonial power must cling tenaciously to the contours of a native culture . . . . It was the violation of this principle which led to the loss of America, and which has wreaked havoc in Ireland. To achieve hegemony, colonial rule must be refracted through the traditions of those it governs, miming their cultural gestures and conforming to their customs . . . . It is thus that power will found itself securely" (40-41).

point.<sup>3</sup> The great evils of our century, he insists, stem from a misplaced faith in rationalism, a belief that humans can plan and then implement a better world. Just as we muck up breathing once we start thinking about it, deliberate interventions into ongoing social processes invariably cause more harm than good. Here is Burke's insistence that culture is like a living organism, which changes "naturally" according to its own rhythms and needs, and which is beyond rational comprehension. The would-be physician is just a meddler, someone who has no real idea of how the various parts of the organism interact, and who is just blindly experimenting with a hubris unjustified by the results he actually can procure. Things are better left alone to work themselves out in their own way, according to their own wisdom—a wisdom that far exceeds anything human ingenuity or reason could devise.

Such an attitude might very well seem the quintessence of conservatism until we remember that *laissez-faire* is the very cornerstone of nineteenth-century liberalism and of the neo-liberalism of our own day. A mistrust of planned collective action can co-exist with a recommendation for rational individual action (admittedly, where "rational" is pared down to mean self-interest) in ways that come to praise capitalism and modernity, not to bury them. Similarly, even Marx's attack on liberal political economy maintains an element of not trusting human action to bring about the desired socialist future. The dialectic will do that work for us. Of course, Marx usually claims that the revolutionary action of the proletariat is also necessary, but the point is that an uneasiness with human action makes its appearance in the writers ranging from Burke to Smith to Marx, which suggests that such uneasiness is not exclusively conservative, liberal, or radical. More likely, the concern is with the legitimacy of human action. What claim does such action have on others? Why should others join in the efforts of one group or (even more problematically) obey the strictures of that group?

Modernity is often associated with a crisis in authority, as the traditional non-human sources of authority are replaced by human ones. In a writer like Kant, reason serves as the principle of authority, the self-legislating

3. Oakeshott (1962) writes: "How deeply the rationalist disposition of mind has invaded our political thought and practice is illustrated by the extent to which traditions of behavior have given place to ideologies, the extent to which the politics of destruction and creation have been substituted for the politics of repair, the consciously planned and deliberately executed being considered (for that reason) better than what has grown up and established itself *unconsciously* over a period of time" (21, my emphasis).

inner voice that every man (this view is gendered; it's hardly clear if women and children have reason) possesses. In non-Kantian, more Romantic figures, culture functions as the supra-individual principle of authority to which individual humans feel bound, and over which no individual human has control. The fact that a culture is both "ours" and beyond the control of any particular person or group can make culture seem a safeguard against tyranny in a modern age in which transcendent forms of authority have been lost. Certainly Burke conceives of culture as precisely a semi-transcendent guarantee against abusive power.

Culture is, also, of course a collective term, and as such it stands against the individualism of capitalism as conceived by Smith and the other proponents of enlightened self-interest. It doesn't take too much extrapolation from Burke to argue that he presents identity as intersubjectively constituted and that he understands achievement of the good life as contingent upon full participation in a human community. Such a critique of liberal individualism is not confined to conservatives. Various leftist utopian visions, along with some aspects of Marx, look toward a fuller public life, while even a liberal like John Dewey (1980) critiques capitalism for its destruction of the public sphere. The activist liberalism (of the Ted Kennedy sort) which defines the most commonly understood meaning of the term "liberal" in our own day stands as firmly against the laissez-faire, individualistic liberalism of Smith and Bentham as Burke would. In this configuration, culture is often used to designate binding loyalties and shared values that exist apart from—or even that serve to mitigate—the sheer individualism of competitive market exchanges.

I recognize the usefulness of culture to counter laissez-faire capitalism or even tyranny through the naming of motivations and concerns that escape an individualistic social calculus. But my skepticism about culture's political usefulness stems from the indirection of the means it proposes for political intervention and the hopelessness about possible success that it encourages. I don't think these two are unrelated; resorting to indirect means is a strategy inspired by despair. To explain this connection requires the second part of my genealogy: how a mostly conservative culturalism (used to authorize the traditional way things are done against conscious, rational critique and/or action) comes to the practitioners of "cultural studies" in the late twentieth century refracted through the radical Marxist tradition. The linchpin is the fact that "culture" names a social collectivity that both explains the failure of the Marxist collective agent, the proletariat, to act in the predicted ways *and* serves as a displaced site

for the collective action that the leftist looks to inspire. It is through culture that the proletariat has been rendered quiescent, and it is within culture that the leftist intellectual (and/or empowered and hence nonquiescent couch potatoes) can do the radical work that the working class hasn't done economically or politically

Marx's allegiance to Enlightenment rationality explains his lack of interest in culture, his dismissal of it as mere superstructural froth. (Yes, I do recognize that this dismissal is not consistent and, like all searchers for the subtle Marx, the Marx who avoids the "vulgar Marxism" of the base/superstructure model, I have dutifully read *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. But allow me, for the sake of considering Marx's legacy, to stress that Marx's emphasis on the economic base is the most obvious facet of his views on culture, views that will only be rendered more subtle by much later commentators.) The other result of Marx's Enlightenment rationalism, the result that seems most fatal to us in our own particular post-communist moment, is his confident faith in human rational action. Marx reduces public questions to matters of economic welfare—and he believes that rational action (what he calls "administration") can insure welfare for all. Politics understood as the agonistic give-and-take of public debate among citizens—debate spurred not just by different interests, but also by the fact that what is the best course for collective action is never obvious—disappears in Marx's communist utopia. It seems terribly clear now (it was suspected by many in the past) that Marx's hostility to politics was anti-democratic, since democracy is the most intensely political of governmental forms. Marx utterly misses the fact that in politics (as I have just defined it, with a huge debt to Hannah Arendt [1958, chaps. 2 and 5]), the process is as important (probably more important) than the result. It is in the give-and-take of the debate that one has a political existence at all, that one acts in front of and with others.

In his impatience with political wrangles, with the literally unending process of political contestation, and with his belief that each problem has one and only one correct solution, Marx authorizes administration by experts, which proves to be one very characteristic form of modern tyranny.<sup>4</sup> Maybe we would find such tyranny acceptable if it worked. But there also seems to be an imp in the machine. So it is not just that Marx's hostility to politics has bad consequences, but that he severely underestimated the

4. Weber [1964, 324–41] and Foucault [1979] are just two of the many writers who have delineated this form of tyranny for us.

problems to be faced. No administration, no matter how capable, seems up to the task of creating a just society. To anticipate my argument a bit: culture has come to be one name we conjure up to explain these intractable difficulties. Consider the failure of the civil rights movement and the legal reforms that it won to appreciably better the economic lot of a majority of African-Americans in this country. Cultural factors—from an ineradicable racism among whites to a culture of poverty among blacks—are trotted out to explain that stateways cannot change folkways, and that the optimism of the 1960s about the effects of legislated integration were obviously unwarranted.

My argument is that the first versions of this use of culture to explain the disappointment of optimistic hopes can be found in Western Marxism, most obviously in Horkheimer and Adorno (1972, 120–67), but also in Gramsci (1971, 24–43 and 419–72) and Marcuse (1964, ix–83). I have said (with, I hope, pardonable exaggeration) elsewhere that Western Marxism can be best understood as the attempt to correct, sometimes it seems to reverse altogether, the base/superstructure model and the economic determinism to which it is linked.<sup>5</sup> There are various reasons why so many twentieth-century Marxists are obsessed with cultural causes, but—to simplify a complex tale—one crucial factor is the need to explain why the proletariat has not been revolutionary despite the fact that it is in their “rational” self-interest to be so. (Let me confess that the logic of Marx’s position still enchants me; the worker is so obviously getting screwed that his or her lack of perpetual rage *is* baffling.) With the renewed emphasis on “ideology” (spurred by the publication of the hitherto unknown *The German Ideology* in 1933) and the subsequent formulation of theories of ideology and hegemony that stress the proletariat’s manufactured consent to the economic and political relationships of capitalist society, we get the confluence of two intellectual currents, one of which (the Romantic discourse of culture) was largely forged as a hostile reaction to the other

5. “These contemporary Marxists do not appeal to the economic in the last instance or in any instance, granting a complete autonomy to the cultural processes by which subjects are constituted and meaning produced. The forefathers of Western Marxism . . . already attack ‘vulgar’ Marxism’s reduction of consciousness, interest, and motivation to economic concerns; they begin to examine cultural processes for explanations of why groups believe certain things and act in certain ways. Such an emphasis brings the issue of ‘ideology’ to the fore, with the concomitant notion of ‘false consciousness’ (fostered by ‘reification’ [Lukacs], or ‘the culture industry’ [Horkheimer and Adorno], ‘repressive desublimation’ [Marcuse], or ‘hegemony’ [Gramsci], or other non-economic means of obscuring class conflict)” (McGowan, 1989, 242–43).

(Enlightenment rationalism). The significant, if rather paradoxical, result is that the Western Marxists—heirs to a writer who considers culture, when at all, in the narrow sense of works by the ancient Greeks and Goethe—have produced one of the richest and most influential discourses about culture in this century, spurred on by the deficiencies of the great Karl himself. This fact becomes especially significant at a time when our received twentieth-century notions of left and right need to be revised. If we attend to Western Marxism's notions of culture—and consider those notions' relation to Romanticism—Tory Radical positions will not seem so incomprehensible, so incoherent, to us. We are in a period during which we have to reassess our political commitments, and a first step might be to consider such commitments without reference to whether they are left or right. I don't know quite how to accomplish such a jettisoning of what are by now second-nature categories, just as I don't quite know how we could jettison the organizing narrative of a transition into modernity, but I suspect the results of getting rid of one, the other, or both of these inheritances would be beneficial. The current sorry state of the Democratic (in the US) and Labour (in the UK) parties is not just (although it is partly) the left's loss of political courage. It is also that the terms "left" and "right" are increasingly irrelevant to our current situation—a fact that is simultaneously a crucial opportunity and a significant danger for academic practitioners of cultural studies.

In any case, the current academic prestige enjoyed by the word "culture" stems, in large part, from the many Marxist meditations on the word in this century. This is not to deny the importance of the anthropological and sociological discourses about culture. But much of the work in those disciplines, just like the work of many social historians, has been motivated by leftist aspirations and influenced by Marxist theorists. Thus, culture, along with its Romantic associations as those things which reason cannot recognize, has been consistently associated with the popular and hence with resistance to rule by experts from the "top down."

This link of culture to the popular is, needless to say, tricky. Here's an abbreviated argument that accounts for the connection of culture in someone like Matthew Arnold with what we now call "high" culture, and with the authoritative power of a state that inculcates that high culture through compulsory education (a subject I worried at length in chapters 2 and 4). Culture in Herder and the Brothers Grimm is part of the pathos-laden attempt by a variety of Romantic artists—Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Literary Ballads* offer an example—to gain a contact with the "folk" they

deem has been lost. Culture's power, then, is not just its embodiment of motivations and loyalties deeper than reason, but also its connection to the "people." If only the energies of the "people," the demos, could be tapped and brought to bear on modern society. Once such a power is identified, it is no surprise that competition over its appropriation should commence. Arnold makes it very plain that it is the hearts and minds of the "populace," the people, that is at stake in his plan for hegemony of high culture.<sup>6</sup> Hence, I take it that high culture is produced as a response to the invention of "popular culture" as a category by the Romantics.<sup>7</sup>

In the populist culturalism promulgated by the Romantics, culture is the unofficial, the unorganized, and the residual (those practices which evade, one way or another, the onslaught of modernity).<sup>8</sup> Culture is precisely that which is killed by administration, institutionalization, rationalization. Thus, as has often been noted, there is a poignant paradox to the efforts of Romantic folklorists, as there is to the efforts of anthropologists a little later on. The very writing down of oral traditions, the very studying of folkways, participates in the processes that overwhelm the

6. The most relevant text is, of course, *Culture and Anarchy* (1965a). But see also Arnold's fascinating essay, "Democracy" (1993).

7. Although no one ever remembers it, since they are so busy accusing Horkheimer and Adorno of mandarinitism, the claim that "serious art" is a secondary creation which marks the bourgeoisie's retreat from the populace, is made in the "culture industry" essay. Unlike Arnold, Horkheimer and Adorno do not think that "high" culture can serve to elevate the populace; instead, they see the split in art between "serious" and "light" as indicative of the split between the classes in bourgeois society. They write: "'Light' art as such, distraction, is not a decadent form. Anyone who complains that it is a betrayal of pure expression is under an illusion about society. The purity of bourgeois art, which hypostasized itself as a world of freedom in contrast to what was happening in the material world, was from the beginning bought by the exclusion of the lower classes—with whose cause, the real universality, art keeps faith precisely by its freedom from the ends of false universality . . . . Light art has been the shadow of autonomous art. It is the social bad conscience of serious art. The truth which the latter necessarily lacked because of its social premises gives the other the semblance of legitimacy. The division itself is the truth: it does at least express the negativity of the culture which the different spheres constitute. Least of all can the antithesis be reconciled by absorbing light into serious art, or vice versa" (1972, 135). This analysis should throw a damper on more naïve, unproblematized celebrations of a collapse of the distinction between popular and high art as actually accomplished or as obviously politically valuable.

8. For the term "residual," see Williams (1977, 121–27). Williams talks of cultural forms as "dominant," "emergent," or "residual" and exploits this time lag (or lack of exact alignment) between cultural forms/practices and the forms/practices of other social realms (particularly the economic) to locate potential sites of popular resistance to capitalism—a work carried on by various practitioners of cultural studies, perhaps most notably John Fiske (1989).

culture being recorded. Folklore and anthropology are species of elegy that contribute to the killing of the object they eulogize.

Yet the new ideology of culture also installs culture as the foundation of identity and of motivation. Emotional investment in what one does and is stems from the ground of culture. Thus, preservation of a vital culture is seen as crucially in the state's interest. So much is at stake that the state can hardly forego efforts to control, direct, and foster cultural activities, even as all such efforts are also seen as the surest means for killing culture off. It's like telling someone to be happy. States create a number of mausoleums (museums, universities, staged festivals and holidays) in which the corpses of culture are displayed—under conditions in which a simulated life is enacted. Radical intellectuals (along with other intellectuals) have often played the court jesters, the desperate MCs, at such displays. No wonder they have dreamed of biting the hand that feeds them and of escaping these haunts of the living dead to find the "real" and "authentic" culture of the folk in those corners hidden out of modernity's sight. Yet the ever-present bad faith of this gesture has never been shaken off. Radical intellectuals are always pilgrims from modernity and, thus, the harbinger of its appropriation of the authentic culture they discover. (This fate is only hastened by the occupational inability of intellectuals to keep their mouths shut; their discoveries are always a prelude to publication.) Even more telling, radical intellectuals rarely return to their own roots. Instead, resistance to the powers that be is always presented as occurring at an other cultural site; they see the cultural heritage from which they come as already completely co-opted. They try to take up a place in another's culture, even while knowing that just such occupation by outsiders who desire to go native is the harbinger of the very co-optation they are fleeing.

All this said, I can now articulate my skepticism about the usefulness of culture as a tool in political contestations. Culture seems to me linked to despair for three reasons. First, culture is used to designate tangled, intractable complexes of messy irrational stuff unamenable to direct human action. While it is crucial in any democratic polity to stress that there is not any unmediated or automatic connection between individual actions and their results, such an insistence is not the same thing as saying that the gremlins of factors that lie beyond our control (either our own unconscious, the complexity—even the perversity—of the universe, or the intricacies of culture) make efforts at direct, purposive action at best futile and at worst harmful. Culture all too often serves as a way to throw

up our hands and say that no potentially successful means of human intervention can be identified. Admittedly, this is the extreme, the conservative, view.

But, to turn to my second point, this view has a more radical variant. Here is the first of my complaints about the indirection of a cultural politics. Under the cover of theories of ideology and/or of representation, cultural politics often despairs of the capabilities of reasoned political argument. The other side, this line goes, have done a much better job of winning the people's consent through a series of manipulative cultural representations that play on their fears and desires. Direct contestation of this sneaky other side will be unavailing; what we need to do is beat them at their own game, create our own representations that will connect up to emotionally charged material. The problem with this view is not just its glaring condescension, but also its equally glaring inconsistency. It posits that people are generally swayed by emotional, non-discursive, and highly complex cultural images, yet would deny that one's own position was formulated out of the same materials. The would-be cultural politician will offer you good reasons for why he or she takes a certain position but at the same time has no faith that those reasons would prove persuasive to others. The hidden logic here, of course, is that anyone who believes something different from me couldn't possibly have good reasons to do so; they must have been tricked into it.<sup>9</sup> And the kicker is an unexpected addendum: that such trickery cannot be undone by proffered reasons, but only by a counter-magic, by trickery in the opposite direction.

I admit that I have entered here into the highly contested and highly complex issue of belief formation. I am not trying to say that belief formation is utterly rational—no matter how rational might be defined. But I am saying that most people, when challenged, can offer reasons for their beliefs—and that, crucially, a democratic politics is dependent on the public rendering of such beliefs in confrontations between people of differing beliefs. To utterly despair of the rational character of beliefs (in this minimal sense of articulable reasons) and to discount from the start the reasons

9. Smith (1997) describes "'epistemic self-privileging' or 'epistemic asymmetry': that is, our inclination to believe that we believe the true and sensible things we do because they are true and sensible, while other people believe the foolish and outrageous things they do because there is something the matter with those people" (xvi). Smith challenges herself and us to replace this asymmetry with a symmetry that begins from the assumptions that others have reasons for their beliefs as I do for mine. Theories of ideology and hegemony trouble me because they seem especially prone to asymmetry and because it seems to me that an assumption of symmetry is crucial to successful democratic interchange.

offered by those with whom one disagrees (as rationalizations or delusions) is to undermine democratic processes before they can even begin.<sup>10</sup> My argument is that the term “culture”—and the strategies of the cultural politics that follow from an emphasis on culture—often indicate a despair about reasoned forms of belief formation and of direct interchanges about commitments by those who disagree. I am suggesting that this despair comes from the Western Marxist attempt to explain why the proletariat, if they are rational, did not believe what Marxism says they should believe.

Finally, my third reason for thinking “culture” problematically useful for a democratic politics is that cultural politics, it seems to me, inevitably takes its stand on very shaky representational ground. There are various ways to say this, but perhaps the most convenient way will be to stress culture’s essentialism. Culture has become the favored term by which to designate all the factors that combine to make some person who he or she is or some group what it is. As Kenneth Burke constantly reminds us, representation in both its linguistic and its political usage relies on synecdoche, the taking of the part as standing in for the whole. But the legitimacy of such truncated presentation, the question of what gets left out by presenting this part, will always trouble synecdochic representation. Hence indirection appears built into the very concept of culture, since the all-encompassing wholeness of what the term is to designate means that culture can never be directly presented in itself, in all its fullness. We are always only put in touch with the effects of culture, not with the thing itself. And this generates endless disputes about who or what can “speak for” culture.

Now, I have already indicated that I am no enemy to endless disputes. But disputes about accurate representation appear to me to point in the

10. Let me try to make my position clear at this crucial point in my argument. I do not think that we can establish some hard and fast distinction between rational and irrational arguments and persuasion. Thus I do not think that we can invoke such a distinction to police what speech is allowed in public and what is not. But the lack of firm distinctions, of a continuum, does not mean a dearth of possible rhetorical strategies. Theories of hegemony and ideology often greatly reduce the number of possible rhetorical strategies deemed possibly effective. Yet these very theories are usually presented in a language the very theory claims to be ineffective. Intellectuals, I am suggesting, should have the courage of their own way of forming convictions—which means thinking of their own forms of contestation, argumentation, and persuasion as continuous (and often overlapping) with forms they would use in non-academic public arenas. Among the things contested in a democratic public sphere are the rhetorical modes that will be deemed appropriate and found convincing. It is conceding far too much if we delimit from the outset certain modes, just as it is assuming way too much if we think any given mode can be deemed legitimate and effective by definition or fiat (as sometimes seems to be the case in Habermas’s work).

wrong direction—backward toward origins instead of forward toward the world our actions are trying to create. A view of culture that gets obsessed with questions of accurate representation is not sufficiently open to transformation. Yet the risk and potential of democratic interaction is that the participants will be transformed. (It is in order to pursue the dynamics of transformation that I will turn to Kenneth Burke in the second half of this chapter.) The focus on the indirection of synecdochic representation, with its constant reference back to the absent whole that cannot be brought on stage, seems to me a way of insisting that identity is something to be honored even as it is withheld, as opposed to bringing identity fully into play, where it might be worked upon, even transformed, not just recognized. What I am suggesting is that culture, even as figured and appealed to by the most “radical” of the new social movements, is a safe refuge, a thing held apart from the processes of democratic contestation—and that the indirect representation of culture and identity are the means for maintaining its separation. I hardly intend a simple condemnation of the new social movements here.<sup>11</sup> As has often been noted, they are better at preserving rights that are threatened than at expanding the capabilities afforded citizens in contemporary societies. But we should hardly belittle the need for—and any success in—combating encroaching state power. Appeals to identity and to cultural preservation have proved efficacious in various ways—and it is more an indictment of our diminished democracies than of the new social movements to say that contemporary politics has found it hard to move beyond such defenses of what is already possessed. But what I dislike about the indirection of cultural politics is that it does not envision identity itself as something to be worked upon in the processes of politics, as something that will be forged and transformed in the very activity of politics. The self—and culture, such as it is—is created in and through politics, not exclusively (there are other types of human interaction that are not political), but crucially.<sup>12</sup> Only if the self and culture are directly brought into the political can such creative work be done.

11. I am guilty here (as elsewhere) of oversimplification. The women’s health clinics or community shelters created by feminists, like the various health education efforts of gay organizations, are examples of creative, pro-active public action undertaken by the “new social movements.” See Bickford (1996, 175–87) for a good overview of the various types of citizen action now occurring in the United States.

12. There are, I am afraid, a number of Arendtian assumptions in this sentence that I cannot fully unpack here. My basic intuition is that “culture” as a marker of differences and of values and identities to which individuals are loyal needs to be understood as a *public*

So much for my political skepticism. Now, more briefly, my epistemological doubts. At issue here is the explanatory power of the term “culture”—and, then, of the very existence of the thing the term names. To be schematic about it, culture seems to me a prime example of the kind of “effect” that is then designated as a “cause” in Nietzsche’s analysis of the persistent reversal of cause-and-effect relationships.<sup>13</sup> Culture is used to name a causal power that is not reason (either in its diminished form as economic rationality or in any more expansive form, say Kant’s triumvirate of pure reason, practical reason, and judgment). Culture serves as the site of difference since reason, if we grant its universal presence in all humans (not something always granted), dictates the same answer to each problem. Culture offers an explanation for, marks, the distinctive preferences and choices which appear neither universal nor eccentrically individual. Culture designates an aggregate of humans who share values, tastes, habits, patterns of work, kinship and family organization, and various other features of a “thick” life-world, features that post-Enlightenment thought no longer views as having any claim to being universally binding. I want to emphasize this last point: that culture as a concept only becomes thinkable in the aftermath of the Enlightenment de-universalization of large parts of human life. Contemporary (i.e., postmodern) reappraisals of the Enlightenment have focused so persistently on critiquing and dismantling what is left of Enlightenment universalism that we have forgotten that this whole genre of critique was begun by the Enlightenment itself. The ur-case is religion. The Enlightenment strove to make Europeans indifferent to religious differences, to see the choice of religious belief as particular to specific social groups or to particular individuals and as requiring no response from the state which imposes uniformity in other matters (say, in forbidding murder or requiring the payment of taxes)

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marker. That is, culture is connected to forms of identity production that take place in public and are valued both for the ways that they render a public sphere vital and the ways that each citizen can be “recognized” within that public sphere. What happens between family members or between friends need not (although at times it can) be public this way. The political, then, refers to the processes that produce a public sphere and the activities that are enabled by the existence of that public space. I want to think of “culture” as politically, and as publicly, created, which motivates (in part) my move toward the performative in the second half of this chapter.

13. See Nietzsche (1968, sec. 479) which reads (in part): “The fragment of outer world of which we are conscious is born after an effect from outside has impressed itself upon us, and is subsequently projected as its ‘cause’—In the phenomenalism of the ‘inner world’ we invert the chronological order of cause and effect. The fundamental fact of ‘inner experience’ is that the cause is imagined after the effect has taken place.”

where universality is appropriate. Religious preference, of course, becomes just one of the many choices given over the "private" sphere, while an attempt is made to foster a corresponding ethos of tolerance. We are used to linking the private with individualism, but for writers like Burke and Coleridge "culture" carries many of the features of the private, most crucially as designating an area in which state interference is both wrong (since it violates certain inalienable freedoms) and disastrous (since it always makes people's lives worse).

Of course, culturalism is not the same as individualism even if it occupies some of the same territory vis-à-vis the state and vis-à-vis universalist reason. Culturalism drastically mitigates the claims to autonomy inherent in individualism, claims which are certainly implausible as soon as one begins to think about how individuals make choices or reach self-understanding or acquire an individual identity. What gives culture its surface plausibility is that few things are universally uniform among humans, yet the absolutely unique is also rare. Differences tend to congregate, to be found in clumps. So the observed reality is less than universal gatherings of similar behavior and beliefs, and culture is the posited power that causes the clumping. In other words, following Nietzsche, the cause (the observation that some people act similarly) comes first. That observation causes the effect, which is our invention of the term culture to explain that observation. We then take our invented (ex post facto) explanation and retrospectively claim that it existed prior to our observation; it (culture), we now say, actually caused the observed behavior. Cause and effect are inverted.

Anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, and linguistics are the most prominent of the social or human sciences which have arisen in the attempt to specify more concretely just how culture works its magic. How are individuals initiated into a culture (socialization or acculturation or interpellation)? How do cultures enforce conformity? How is deviance produced, regulated, possible at all? How do cultures respond to encounters with other cultures (what kinds of boundary maintenance are required; what kinds of borrowings occur)? How do cultures manage to persist over time (social reproduction)? How do cultures change without collapsing entirely? How is a culture differentiated within itself? What is the relation of culture to non-cultural elements in a human community; or are all elements cultural? These are some of the recurring questions the social sciences address.

Some of the answers to these questions are more persuasive than others, but it seems to me that one rather overwhelming difficulty faces every

attempt to use “culture” to explain groupings of similar behavior and beliefs. It may make sense to speak of the culture of a small, isolated group if two rather stringent conditions apply: uniformity of beliefs and behaviors among its members, and the almost complete absence of the kinds of specialization and differentiation that follows from the division of labor, the division of classes or sexes, or any other kinds of separations that would give some individuals markedly different experiences, knowledges, purposes, or beliefs than other individuals. In other words, in highly differentiated societies, the use of the term culture to designate the society as a whole seems untenable. There is just too much variation in attitudes and behavior for cultural generalizations about Americans or the French to work very well. Culture appears to rest on an essentialism that cannot stand up to scrutiny very long. And if we try to soften that essentialism by way of something like Wittgensteinian family resemblances, the problems still seem close to insuperable. Furthermore, I am inclined to believe someone like Eric Wolf (1982), who suggests that the “tribes” anthropologists study are not much, if any, more culturally uniform than any modern society. The attribution of such uniformity to “primitive” societies says more about our own longings for harmonious uniformity—the myth of the Golden Age—than it does about the groups studied. Margaret Mead’s vision of New Guinea is akin to Ruskin’s vision of the Gothic age of faith and Arnold’s vision of Greek sweetness and light. It just warn’t so.

Faced with the difficulty of mapping culture onto society (where society is understood as the geographically bounded aggregation of a people under one government, though this usage hardly exhausts the term, since we say European society as well as English society), the fall-back position for those who wish to retain a large-scale notion of culture is to map culture onto a shared language and/or shared ethnicity. The difficulties of both strategies are notorious. Are English, Australian, Scottish and Irish cultures all the same because their members all speak English? And how strong a claim do we want to make about the extent to which language determines thought, perception, and belief? Recent reports indicate that the old stand-by of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the Inuit’s twenty-five words for snow, is a myth, as is the report of those South American Indians (or is it Australian aborigines?) who don’t see the figures on the screen when shown a Western movie. Appeals to ethnic determinants are even more dubious, largely because nothing any one can do manages to keep ethnic divisions intact. How much Celtic blood must one have to be a

Celt? And what test could ever ascertain whether one had the requisite percentage or not? To prove the identity by way of the behavior one displayed would be the ultimate in circular reasoning.

From those who decide to abandon the possibility of locating culture at the level of society, we get a proliferation of cultures or sub-cultures. The culture of drag racing, the culture of drag queens, the sub-culture of teenage gangs, the sub-culture of the Kiwanis clubs. (It would be interesting to see if a detailed look at the actual usage of the term “sub-culture” instead of “culture” revealed a consistent pattern; my sense is that the terms are used willy-nilly, one for the other once the scale is small enough. Thus, drag racers can form a culture or a sub-culture, but we wouldn’t say English sub-culture. But there may be discernible connotative differences in the way the two terms are used.) This proliferation appears to follow one law: where ever any two are joined together in a practice, there a culture shall be. The result is that culture appears at every level of analysis, from the trans-historical and trans-social (Judeo-Christian culture) to the socially specific (American culture) to the socially and historically specific (nineteenth-century American culture) to the local (youth culture, grunge culture, Southern culture, country club culture). Am I the only one who begins at this point to suspect that culture has little explanatory power, that it is a ghost in the machine, pulled out of the hat after a pattern of shared behaviors is observed in order—supposedly—to explain how that pattern was formed?

Of course not. Christopher Herbert’s superb *Culture and Anomie* (1991) expresses the skeptical point of view succinctly: “[T]he entity that Tylor names ‘culture’ takes on a distinctly hypothetical or conjectural character and reveals itself to be a thing the existence of which in space and time can never be demonstrated, only posited ahead of time as a device for organizing one’s data. It is, this line of reflection suggests, a fiction that exists to gratify a passion or an institutional demand for certain kinds of interpretive work” (10–11). Clifford Geertz (1973) admits that this problem has dogged anthropology even as he offers his own notion of “ordered clusters of significant symbols” as the solution: “If the scientific study of culture has lagged, bogged down often in mere descriptivism, it has been in large part because its very subject matter is elusive. The initial problem of any science—defining its object of study in such a manner as to render it susceptible to analysis—has here turned out to be unusually hard to solve” (362–62). Might we be better off without the concept of culture? At the very least, we need to be wary of its uses, attuned to the work

it is given to do, and the claims it is consigned to bear whenever it appears. I am going to shift gears now and begin to rehabilitate "culture," but I do so extremely tentatively. Skepticism of the term still has seventy percent of my allegiance.

## II. TARRYING WITH THE PERFORMATIVE

Even while culture itself is invisible, its palpable effects appear more real than ever. Who would deny in the 1990s that culture is tremendously powerful? Loyalty to and identification with a culture, of which nationalism is one variant, ethnic pride and prejudice another, appears to be the dominant passion of our time, the supreme motive of the most vigorous actors on the public stage. Here's where the abbreviated history of the term "culture" that I have offered might help. Culture, from the start, was a performative term, one that called into existence a force to be posed against Enlightenment rationality, a motive to be posed against economic self-interest, a loyalty to certain received ways of life to be posed against both rationalist reformers (like the Jacobins or Bentham) and capitalist innovation. It has often been noted—and just as often held against it—that loyalty to culture is almost always reactionary in every sense of that term. Such loyalty tends to be negative, to exist as a defensive resistance to change, without any positive plan of action itself beyond a desire to return to the status quo ante—which is vastly complicated as a political platform, insofar as that remembered past often never existed. If the dream of revolution, with its corollary attempt to imagine radically transformative action, was the left's mainstay for two hundred years (from 1789 to 1989), the performative projection of a grounded past has been the right's mainstay. And it is an indication of the crisis of the left today that it has lost the dream of revolution and now relies on its own versions of culturalism—either the politics of identity or an oxymoronic "multiculturalism"—to counter a right that is stronger than ever. With dreams of revolution lost, local resistance to capitalism (which respects neither persons nor noneconomic social groupings) often seems the best hope available, and there is no denying that defenders of a culture have proved just about the most resolute and most successful resisters. What cannot fail to impress any observer—left or right—is the sheer persistence of certain symbols and issues. Think of the school prayer issue or the fight against Darwinian evolution. Machiavelli (1975, 97) said men will even-

tually forget—or at least stop fighting against—anything so long as you don't confiscate their property or their women, but the late twentieth century proves him wrong. What people seem to never forget is what they see as outside attempts to shape their way of life.

If “culture” refers to nothing at all, then why such passion? An answer may rest in focusing on the performative words that speak culture. I use performative here in the very broad sense of a verbal utterance that creates the thing it enunciates instead of referring to the thing it enunciates. (The term, of course, comes from Austin [1975 and 1979].) The contrast is between the utterance: “The book is on my desk” and the utterance “I promise to bring the book to you.” The first sentence describes a state of affairs in the world that pre-exists the statement. Before I said a word, the book was on the desk. The second sentence creates a state of affairs. The promise did not exist until I said “I promise.” A performative, then, is a use of speech that alters the world, that changes or adds to reality.

How does the performative effect this change? It is true that human beings change the world by physical work upon it. The action of cutting down a forest alters reality. Speech acts, however, do not perform physical changes, although they may be vital initiatory moments in a sequence that does lead to physical changes. My promise can certainly lead to my taking the book off my desk and bringing it to you. But human speech acts do not work like the creative fiat, “Let there be light.” The physical world usually does not jump to do our bidding—with the crucial possible exception of other human beings (and certain animals). I say “Close the window” and my son walks over and closes the window (one out of ten times anyway). Pretty neat. How come that works? Primarily because the pre-existing relationship of father to son (which involves authority, affection, ambivalence . . . ) gives my command/request a “perlocutionary force.”<sup>14</sup> Austin recognizes that his introduction of the category of performatives also requires “a new doctrine about all the possible forces of utterances” (1979, 251), and is explicit about the ways that performatives are often dependent on authority-establishing institutions for their force. Only the judge can say “I sentence you to life imprisonment,” and it be a sentence, while the perlocutionary force of that utterance will rest on various contingent facts about that court, its jurisdiction, the government, the sentenced, etc.

14. Austin (1975, 101) introduces the notion of the “perlocutionary” to designate the “consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons” of an utterance.

Other performatives, like promises or insults, while relying on conventions, do not necessarily rely on formal institutional conditions nor on pre-existing relations (authoritative or otherwise) between speaker and auditor. There is the possibility that performatives *establish* a new relationship between the parties. My insulting you does not presuppose any determinative prior relationship between us, and may in fact be radically discontinuous with any prior relationship we might have had. And my insult may lead to all kinds of future actions that alter my life and yours. Expanding somewhat on Austin's definition of the performative, we reach Burke's notion of "symbolic action" as the "dancing of an attitude," the enunciation of an orientation toward the person or thing spoken of or to. With Burke, I want to think of how speech acts establish, reinforce, or transform the *relations* between human beings or between human beings and things. To alter those relations is often to alter the world, sometimes immediately, sometimes less immediately.

How might we characterize uses of the word "culture" as performative? I want to offer two models here (hardly meant to be exhaustive of the possibilities). The first pertains to the discourses by which we order our world. Culture is a projected, imagined, or fictional category, which gathers together and organizes empirical entities. Since our categories, however, serve as heuristics that guide perception, adherence to the semantic term "culture" actually guarantees the perception of what the researcher sets out to find. The semantic category thus creates, rather than reflects or refers to, the entity it names. Such a process is hardly unsequential, but a meta-theoretical description of a process (like this one) has no impact on the process's consequences. Fictional categorizations have real effects precisely because they alter the relations between people and the world, as well as between people and other people. It makes a difference whether I understand the difference between me and you as cultural, genetic, temperamental, or racial.

It seems to me that this first model is basically what Stuart Hall assumes when he uses "hegemony" and "articulation" as key terms for cultural studies. For Hall, there is a social struggle over the terms that will serve as the primary organizing categories of reality.<sup>15</sup> Such terms articulate the

15. "This approach replaces the notion of fixed ideological meanings and class-inscribed ideologies with the concepts of ideological terrains of struggle and the task of ideological transformation. It is the general movement in this direction, away from an abstract general theory of ideology, and towards the more concrete analysis of how, in particular historical situations, ideas 'organize human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.,' which makes . . . Gramsci (from whom that quotation is taken) a figure of seminal importance" (Hall, 1996, 41).

world and hence serve to delineate what it is possible to do. The most fundamental site of political action, then, becomes this discursive site of contestation, where social actors struggle both to replace their categories with ours (or mine) and to “resignify” existing categories in ways more amenable to our (my) purposes.

I have three worries about Hall’s project. First, as my parentheses in the previous paragraph indicate, I think that the hypothesis of constant struggle puts a huge pressure on collective agency. Hall, quite consistently, believes that collectivities must be created through the discursive categorization that is social struggle. But, it seems to me, that more attention to both the historical aggregates in a particular society and the institutional matrix which (at least to some extent) frames how and where struggle occurs is needed to temper the tendency to declare that discourse bears all before it. I like the way that Hall’s work puts everything into motion, and I suspect that what I am trying to do in this essay is close in spirit to his project. But I think that he tends to short-change the institutional structuring of contestation and the varied investments which agents bring to interactions. Secondly, as the first section of this essay indicates, I am not sure that battling hard over the significations of the word “culture” is the most productive course to follow right now. Finally, what meaning can the word “productive” in the previous sentence have? Discourse-centered theories flirt with seeing us as determined by the categories we utilize. If purposes, if judgments of what is productive or useful to do, follow from the discourse within which we operate, then what any agent brings to the struggle is unclear and how the struggle might actually transform the parties to it—and the social order they inhabit—is also unclear. Obviously, terms like “resignification,” “hybridity,” and “subculture” are utilized to do the work of designating discursive regimes that are not hermetic monads. The theoretical and ethical dilemma, it seems to me, is to avoid swinging wildly between the poles of a monolithic “dominant discourse” and an anarchistic proclamation of total difference, utter and incommensurate singularities. The problem here is describing relative stabilities in a world of change and thinking about what kinds of stabilities are enabling. And this work would have to be connected to considering how purposes are formed and judgments made, both ethical (is this right? and should this be done?) and practical (can this be done? and should it be done now in lieu of other possible actions?).

The second model of the performative I want to suggest is more social, less discursive, and seems to me more promising. Here the focus would be on action taken in public. In terms of culture, such action produces the

very identities to which it seemingly refers. It may be the case that no collective identity can be created without appealing to something that ostensibly holds the group together. But the call for the group to gather as a group in public can always fail. It is, in other words, the group's staging of itself that makes it a group. No matter what the appeal to a past, the group no longer exists on the day when it can no longer manage to appear. So, in a very practical way, the group's existence is predicated on its ability to function as a group in the future, on the next occasion that it is called to form. Identities of any sort (of which cultural identities are one variant) are rhetorical constructs; that is, identities exist only in the in-between space traversed by speakers and audiences. In ritual, we might say, speaker and audience are merged in one. Rituals tend to be affirmations to the participants that they still exist, hence the almost inevitable linking of ritual with doubt and insecurity, with a response to endangerment. But the larger point is that identities require to be performed in a space that has both an actor and a witness.

Although the actor and the witness can be the same person, the performance still needs to be visible (think of a diary or rituals of meals for a person who lives alone). The performance occupies a space that is public (because visible), interactional, and intersubjective. To fully pursue its public dimension would require a discussion of Hannah Arendt on politics and the public/private distinction as well as a discussion of Ludwig Wittgenstein's private language argument. To fully explore its interactional component leads to an encounter with William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead. The rest of this essay offers the beginnings of such an encounter, but through the work of Kenneth Burke. I just assume Burke's pragmatism here; certainly, I read and use him in ways fully consonant with pragmatism's interactional account of the relation of individual agents to others and to the world. My focus is on how an interactionist emphasis shifts our understanding of the performative. Ultimately, I argue that this model of the performative gives us another way to think about "culture," one that designates a more modest range for the term's applicability than the one history has given us, but a usage I think helpful for various purposes.

My Burkean model of the performative is contrasted (alas, only implicitly because of space limitations) to the Derridean performative (and its development in Judith Butler's work)<sup>16</sup> and the dramatic performative.

16. The key texts are Derrida (1988) and Butler (1990).

tive that can be culled from a certain way of reading Burke's own work. Stand warned, then, that mine is a very pointed use of Burke, pursued because Burke offers me a convenient way to present certain pragmatist themes I want to take up against prevailing Derridean models of the performative. What Burke offers an intersubjectivity richer than the face-off between subject and Law in Butler, in whose solipsistic-tending work actual others—except the abjected—rarely appear; temporality that is not just the repetition with a difference of Derrida; and a transformative agonistics which points toward a public space less bounded and orderly than the space of interaction imagined in more dramatic models of the performative. Only half-jokingly, I would suggest that Burke's own work is such a mess because he finds disorderly chaos not only congenial but generative.

### III. AT LONG LAST, BURKE

I need to start by telling you something about Burke's understanding of "symbolic action"—which I take as his version of the performative. Burkean speech acts "are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are *strategic* answers, *stylized* answers. . . . So I should propose an initial working distinction between 'strategies' and 'situations,' whereby we think of poetry (I here use the term to include any work of critical or imaginative cast) as the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations. These strategies size up situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude toward them" (1973, 1).<sup>17</sup> These acts of naming can be seen as narrative because they are oriented toward action, toward the future state of affairs that will be produced by the relationship established to the situation by the speaker's words. We cannot stand still in Burke's version of pragmatism (nor in Dewey's). The flow of time continually presents new situations to which we must react, within which and toward which we must "orient" ourselves. And such orientation always aims at amelioration at worst, improvement at best. Our specific purposes arise out of situations and the opportunities they afford us, but our general purpose is the best accom-

17. Note here Burke's peculiar use of the word "poetry." I will use "poetry" and the "poetic" in Burke's sense throughout the rest of this essay, although it is the "temporality" or "narrative" dimension of the poetic (in his sense) that I want to stress.

modation possible with the ever-changing circumstances in which we find ourselves. Action aims to alter the world in the direction of improvement. This hardly means progress is inevitable. Action can lead to unintended disasters. But it does mean that Burke thinks we must intend progress, must act to make things better. Even the traditionalist, the one who wants to preserve the way things are, must actively work at such preservation, because time is continually moving us into new situations. The traditionalist is always having to re-create a "lost" present and is thus oriented (as much as the progressive) toward making things better than they currently are.

Two further Burkean distinctions must be introduced before we can return to the issue at hand: "culture" as a performative. Both distinctions point toward Burke's complicated and ambivalent stance toward realism.<sup>18</sup> To be absolutely clear: by realism here I mean "naive realism," the unproblematic acceptance that the things we encounter in experience—through our senses—are real. Burke mixes this use of the term "realism" with another usage, which refers to the holistic vision that manages most successfully to "encompass" all that a situation entails. I hope my discussion will show how this mixed usage is plausible even though I neither justify it nor explore some of the problems it causes. First, Burke differentiates "*practical acts*" from "*symbolic acts*," adding that this "distinction, clear enough in its extremes, [is not] to be dropped simply because there is a borderline area wherein many practical acts take on a symbolic ingredient" (1973, 9). The "*symbolic act*," Burke tells us, "is the dancing of an attitude," but taking an attitude toward something is distinct from (albeit often related to) acting physically upon something. There is an "empirical nature . . . grounded in the realm of non-symbolic, or extra-symbolic motion" (1973, xvi), and while symbolic acts may set a chain of events into motion, they also may not. Poetry sometimes makes something happen. It is less clear if Burke believes that practical action can occur without a prior (symbolic) act of naming. Can we act without some orientation, some "sizing up" of the situation?

Burke's second distinction follows his understanding of three terms: magic, poetry, and science. Burke's use of these three terms—and his account of their relation to one another as different species of speech acts—is hardly consistent. He is most steady in his depictions of science as pursuing the misguided hope of a "pure" naming that designates the

18. My understanding of Burke's realism accords, I am happy to report, with Wess's (1996) account of Burke's "rhetorical realism" in his excellent book.

thing-in-itself in a neutral language purged of all human purposes and desires and of all contingent, contextual factors. Since linguistic utterance places the speaker in relation to the thing named, all utterances are situational and purposive for Burke. We only speak of things for a reason, so neutral or disinterested speech simply does not occur. And Burke offers his own version of the standard arguments that logical positivism's own desires for a neutral language violate—and cannot be validated by—its own standards of “objectivity.” (See 1973, 138–67.)

Poised against “science” are “magic” and “poetry.” “The choice here,” according to Burke, “is not a choice between magic and no magic, but a choice between magics that vary in their degree of approximation to the truth” (1973, 6). The issue, we might say, is just how powerful words can be—and Burke doesn't quite know where to come down on this one. At times, Burke says that words are almost all. He is fascinated with Freud's “talking cure” as a kind of magic. The “accuracy” or “truth” of the patient's retelling of the past is irrelevant to the cure's efficacy. Misnaming of that past, Burke implies, may even be more effective—although, strictly speaking, once in the realm of memories, it is hard to see how we could distinguish a true naming from a misnaming, especially since Freud deliberately rules out going outside of the analytic situation to consult other witnesses to that past. In any case, the renaming of a situation can be powerful indeed, irrespective of the accuracy of the naming. For example: Paul tells Jenny that he is upset because Tom was brusque with him. Jenny replies that Tom has been troubled by family problems lately. This renaming of the cause for Tom's brusqueness assuages Paul's fears that he has offended Tom. The magic works even if Jenny has utterly misread Tom's action. Burke offers similar examples of transformation through renaming throughout his work.

But Burke has two reasons for not succumbing entirely to the wholesale belief that “nothing 'tis but talking makes it so.” He holds to the common-sense view that word magic reaches its limits (in some cases at least) by running up against the facts. He writes in the 1966 preface to *The Philosophy of Literary Form* that “I have found it necessary to emphasize this point because, over the years, my constant concern with ‘symbolicity’ has often been *interpreted* in the spirit *exactly* contrary to my notions of ‘reality’” (1973, xvi). He does not believe “that our world is ‘nothing but’ the things we say about it. On the contrary, alas. There's many a time when what we call a ‘food’ should have been called a ‘poison.’ And if our ancestors had but hit upon too many of such misnomers, we'd not be here

now" (xvi). The utterly "subjective"—or, to be trans-individual, the utterly "human"—has a wider range of play, of possibility, than the utterly "objective" in Burke, but the human, too, meets its limits, is not alone in the world. Situations and the strategies devised in response to them are interactional, are the place where subject and object are co-related, and both are shaped through their determination by and of the other.

More interesting for my purposes in this essay is Burke's second reason for resisting magic in the name of poetry. We can capture the spirit of Burke's aims if we say he critiques magic as too partial. Its partiality stems from its production out of fears, desires, wishes, and the like; but its partiality also reflects its taking only the speaker into account and acting as if the speaker's vision could be imposed upon the world and others. Again, Burke is fully aware that such impositions are, in certain cases, possible. He hardly undersells the word's power. In fact, he wants to secure that power for poetry. But he also wants to explore—and insist upon—the word's limits. And one way to describe those limits is to say that any particular word, any particular utterance, any particular sizing up of a situation, is partial. To take such parts for the whole is to fall prey to what Burke calls "the synecdochic fallacy" (1973, 148). Poetry, in Burke's lexicon, stands in for that (ideal) form of speech that is "complete," that "encompasses " a situation entirely, that "would attempt to attain a full moral act by attaining a perspective atop all the conflicts of attitude" (1973, 148). The poetic ideal is a "progressive encompassment that does not admit of mutual exclusion" (1973, 145).

To say that Burke consistently rejects the partial in favor of the complete is to acknowledge—as he himself openly does—his fundamental Hegelianism. Current uses of the word "culture," we might say, embody our postmodern ambivalent Hegelianism. Insofar as it names a totality (however small), culture is a Hegelian term. Insofar as culture is used to designate separated entities deemed incommensurate, it is fiercely anti-Hegelian. The wind is mostly blowing in anti-Hegelian directions these days.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, I want to explore in the rest of this essay the resources Burke's pragmatic Hegelianism (or Hegelian pragmatism) has to offer for the recuperation (a good Hegelian term) of the term culture from my skeptical account of it—and for offering a useful complication of our current notions (derived from Derrida and Butler or Hall) of the performative. We can begin with Burke's characterization of his "realistic" po-

19. See McGowan (1991, 43–61) for a discussion of recent thought's fascination with and fear of Hegel.

sition against what he calls the “naturalistic” position, which adopts the kind of nominalistic skepticism found in my discussion of culture. Not surprisingly, he finds nominalism too partial, too individualistic. We can, he writes, “sum up the distinction between realism and nominalism . . . by saying that *realism considered individuals as members of a group* and that *nominalism considered groups as aggregates of individuals*. . . . [T]he naturalist-nominalist perspective finally leads to the assumption that the devices employed in a *group* act are mere ‘illusions,’ and that the ‘scientific truth’ about human relations is discovered from an individualistic point of view, from outside the requirements of group action” (1973, 126). Culture re-enters here as the name for the pressure that the presence of others places on any agent’s sizing up of a situation. The circumstances in which agents find themselves include and involve others. Any “scientific” accounting of the factors that come into play in the interaction of agent and situation must include the agent’s relation to others if it is to be complete.

Culture need not be taken as some occult, mysterious repository of values and inclinations. Rather, it can refer to the ways in which agents monitor, are sensitive and responsive to, and are influenced by the expected (ahead of time) and actual (after the act) reactions of others. I am on territory related to Derrida’s and Butler’s thinking on “repetition” and “citationality” here, but with a much greater emphasis on the context-specific and conscious bringing-to-bear upon that context of “cultural” knowledge and capacities. In sizing up situations, in forming attitudes toward them, and in making decisions about appropriate courses of action, agents rely on a fund of knowledge that includes their past experience in situations judged as similar, but also knowledge about actions performed by others in similar situations, and general guidelines and ethical principles learned from others (in either formal or informal ways). Because one of the things agents usually desire in any situation is to achieve and maintain a satisfactory relation to others, “the requirements of group action,” of action in a setting that is social, are among the factors a realistic assessment (i.e., one that aims to be encompassing, not partial) takes into account.

Culture, in this view, is not some deep structure, but a readily apparent consequence of the fact that agents live amidst others and care about the quality of their relations to those others, and that work upon those relations constitutes a large proportion of human actions. (Or, alternatively, that there are very few actions that do not have some consequence on our relation to others, even when those actions also have other consequences.)

The extent to which culture exists "inside" selves, its migration from something that exists between selves in their relation to one another to something that exists as knowledge and values that the self brings to bear (seemingly without external prompting) when sizing up situations, only indicates the self's temporal nature, its accretion of experiences and its calling on those experiences to guide it in new situations. Since pragmatism posits that agents seek comfortable and ameliorative solutions to the questions posed by situations, it is no surprise that the pressure of others' presence in the world tends to work in centripetal, not centrifugal, fashion. Behavior clumps together because clumping furthers the ability of numerous selves living in close proximity to one another to get along reasonably well.

This description probably makes culture as a factor within the scene of action look too "presentist." An overly dramatic reading of Burke might tend toward relying too heavily on what is present in the moment of interaction. My emphasis on narrative is designed precisely to acknowledge that everything relevant to an interaction is not physically on stage. Not only does the agent carry into the scene the "baggage" from his past, but also, as we will see in a moment, "culture" is a term that can indicate an awareness that the situation itself has a past. Furthermore, actions are not always witnessed immediately. Often, others know of my actions only through subsequent consequences which impact upon them. Interactions have a temporal dimension both because they do not occur *ex nihilo* and because they do not occur in a vacuum. One of the reasons to prefer the term "interaction" to "action" is this attempt to indicate the full range of connections, of interrelationships, in which any singular action is enmeshed. The emphasis in this account (which contrasts starkly with the account of action implied by the Derridean performative) is on the relationships established, altered, and maintained by actions understood as interactions.

Note that such a pragmatist account of culture neither makes culture the sole determining factor in any action nor claims that culture will supplant other considerations. Culture is not the cause of last appeal here, but only one of the elements agents consider when confronting a situation. And culture is not something that lies "behind" or "beneath" situations; it is just one of the components at the interactional site that is a situation. Both the continual novelty of and the absolute particularity of situations means that the cultural baggage the experienced self carries into a situation is never determinative. Selves must judge how this new

situation is similar or dissimilar to others encountered in the past—a judgment that includes considering which others in my world are likely to be impacted by and thus responsive to my actions in this case. Such judgments mean that “culture” (like “facts” themselves) is situational, that its manifestations in any particular instance of human action is the product of an interaction among the judgments made by an experienced self in relation to the circumstances facing her at this moment. Hence, culture can only designate one set of factors influencing action (the set of factors, roughly speaking, that pertain to the “meaning” of my action for myself and for others) and, moreover, a set of factors continually transformed by the processes of experience. Culture only exists as it is performed, enacted, in its repetitions (habitual and ritual acts), and its transformations.

Culture is a moving target, and we can only give the word a useful specificity if we reference such uses to the pressures an agent took into account when making a decision.<sup>20</sup> Vagaries about cultural predilections apart from how they came into play in specific situations deserve our epistemological skepticism, while even cultural explanations tied to specifics are shaped by an *ex post facto* plausibility which always deserves suspicion prior to credence. Culture, we might say, is the articulation, after the fact, of the calculations I made about others’ possible responses to the courses of action I was considering. But surely we often act without much consideration at all, especially without much consideration of what others might think. If “culture” names the cluster of factors that represent an acknowledgment of the people to whom we feel “answerable” when we act (and that group of people will shift according to the action we are performing), then anxiety about the possibility that agents will not feel answerable to anyone begins to explain the huge social investment in pedagogic institutions geared to inculcate “cultural values.”

In other words, since the behavior of others is one of the factors we try to control when facing the world (through situations), it should come as no surprise that various efforts are made to influence others. Such efforts are made in the name of numerous considerations, one of which, after 1800, is “culture.” Once the concept “culture” exists, agents try to actively shape culture and also appeal to others to adhere to, preserve, create, and

20. Since I have only just encountered his work, I haven’t determined the extent to which the position I am taking here accords with the “modest materialism” proposed by Dan Sperber (1996). But I recommend Sperber’s lucid book, if only for its presentation of a position almost completely at odds with everything taken for granted by literary theory.

honor various behaviors, beliefs, and values which are articulated under the umbrella of the concept. Thus, the term is performative in another sense apart from its naming the intersubjective factors any agent considers when facing any situation. "Culture" is one rubric under which the performative strives to create collective identities by articulating a unity of experiences, beliefs, and behavior that various agents are called to "recognize" as their own—and as what they "share" with a designated set of other agents. Thus, "culture" becomes a way to create the very entity to which it claims to refer.

Burke's work is an important resource because it helps us to think about the temporality of this performative work. Burke recognizes that our transformative relation to situations, oriented toward the future of a reformed relation of self to the elements comprising that situation, is poised against the weight of the past. Situations come to us already named, and at stake is who does that naming, and what kind of power those prior namings possess. My attitudinal naming of this present situation is oriented toward the projected results of my interaction with it. But my naming also responds to the past, which is carried by my experienced self and by the significances already attached to this current situation through previous namings. "Real" entities are named and re-named by numerous speakers and, hence, meaning is not conferred by the individual speaker, but is the product of the sometimes competing (even conflictual), sometimes consonant, speech acts of many. Likewise, situations may be novel in this particular moment, but that hardly means situations are utterly new-born in each successive moment. Their novelty here and now is overlaid with the accounts of them which constitute (at least in part) their past and influence their reality for the agent in the present. Confronted with a person, we immediately (automatically, as it were) judge whether the person is an "American" or not, a judgment usually aided by that person's carrying the outward signs (appropriate clothing, certain pronunciations and usages of English, etc.) that accord with previous ascriptions of nationality to it.

The word "culture," then, besides referring to the pressures exerted by the fact that agents live in intersubjective settings and the performative attempt to forge certain collective identifications, can also indicate that significance (produced by acts of naming) is not solely the provenance of selves but the product of a multitude of signifying acts. That these acts do not reinforce one another, that no single, nonproblematic, or uncontested significance emerges in many cases, should neither surprise nor disturb

us. In fact, if the pressure of others' responses exerts a centripetal force, the novelty of situations and the multiplicity of acts of naming provide the centrifugal forces that make change common. Culture, in the sense this paragraph is stressing, refers to the process of meaning's formation, not to its product.

Culture is no single product, which is why this understanding of the term stands in tension to its use to designate an unproblematically posited set of shared values or orientations. Or, to put it another way, the denial of culture as a single product suggests that we interpret as performative, as an attempt to create what it designates, any utterance that declares that cultural unity exists. Such a declaration can only be seen as an attempt to forge such a unity out of a prior multiplicity. Emphasizing process over product highlights the nonsubjective creation of meaning, which thus does return "culture" to the time-worn place of designating a certain kind of individual impotence. But pragmatism sees the emphasis on process as a way of freeing us from the dead hand of the past. Because meaning is always in process, our primary concern should not be in delineating *the* meaning of this situation or the causes that bring us to this moment, but instead on the possible ways to go on from here. Process means that acts of naming are always transformative, always supplements to the already named. There is no absolute transformation. We don't begin from nowhere, since just as situations come to us already label-laden, so each agent begins from a set of commitments, loyalties, other agents to whom he or she feels answerable, and habitual strategies of relation to various realities. But selves and situations are transformed through their interaction in the on-going process of meaning-creation.

Burke offers three different paradigms of the narrative of culture. The first is the "magical" Burke (found most "purely" in *Permanence and Change* [1965]), who offers a performative word magic through which the world is utterly transformed. The power of naming overwhelms the forces of nature. "One casts out demons by a vocabulary of *conversion*, by an *incongruous* naming, by calling them *the very thing in all the world they are not*" (1965, 133). Burke here is close to a kind of heroic (meaning purely, wildly optimistic) Nietzscheanism, akin to that found in William James's "The Will to Believe." Human energy and belief can transform the world. This naive, can-do attitude not only hooks up with American pragmatism (precisely the aspect of pragmatism recently lambasted by John Patrick Diggins [1994]), but also to the recurrent complaints that Whitman and Emerson lack a sense of evil. We have seen already that Burke later re-

pudiates readings of his work that link him to a belief in the word's absolute power to remake the world.

Instead, we get two more complicated narratives in Burke's later works. It is not clear how the two fit together; they may in fact be utterly inconsistent with each other. For reasons of space, I will not consider their interconnection here, but simply treat each in turn. The first couples magical re-naming with scapegoating. Burke's notion of the performative becomes fully narrative at the point when he realizes that transformation always involves movement—the change from the situation as it exists prior to the intervention of the word and/or the action to the situation after it has been acted upon (whether symbolically or physically). Any transformation, Burke insists, has two elements: the incorporation or adoption of that element of the situation which is embraced and carried forward into the future, and the rejection of that element of the situation which is to be left behind. Action changes, transforms situations, and that means working with, "taking up," some of the possibilities afforded by the situation, and neglecting others. A "complete" account of any action must acknowledge what has been left behind, and Burke finds such acknowledgment in the various forms of scapegoating that can be detected in any "poetic" narrative.

I do not want to linger on Burke's account of scapegoating here, but do want to mention four features of his account that both fit with and stand in salutary tension with poststructuralist ethics' obsession with the exclusion of the other. First, Burke's interest in figures of speech, in tropes, derives from this sensitivity to the fact that every act of re-naming is selective. When we "judge" a new situation and then name it, we are assessing not only those elements in the situation we wish to emphasize and pursue, but also the situation's relation (relations of similarity/dissimilarity, proximity/distance, cause/effect, container/contained etc.) to other situations. Any naming, then, is tropic because it involves applying a name that was used in past situations to a new situation that is not utterly the same. Thus, the name must inevitably highlight some potentials in the situation and obscure others. Second, scapegoating in Burke is part of a narrative and so must be "thought" in relation to what it enables, to how it allows us (in Wittgenstein's phrase) to "go on." As in other versions of pragmatist thought, the justification of scapegoating lies in what it makes possible to do. We cannot do everything in any given situation; the choice of what to do is predicated on the basis of priorities and purposes articulated to the others to whom one is answer-

able. There is no blanket condemnation of scapegoating; rather there is the situational need to explain the choices one has made. Third, Burke designates a variety of strategies by which scapegoating can be acknowledged, even while recognizing that its necessity is not always understood, that it can be and is denied at times. In other words, scapegoating comes in a variety of different forms and we need to evaluate, to articulate, an "attitude" toward those various forms. This hardly means that self-conscious scapegoating *tout court* will be preferable to unconscious scapegoating. But it is to reiterate that scapegoating cannot be condemned or praised apart from particular situations and that there are options (the choice amidst which makes significant differences) in the ways that scapegoating is enacted. Finally, Burke seeks to ameliorate the potential harms of scapegoating by way of a resolute holism rather than by a celebration of particularity.<sup>21</sup> His interest in "the socialization of losses" (1973, 50–51) and in the correction of synecdoche's partiality by the "humility" (1969, 514) of an irony that aims for "total form (this 'perspective of perspectives')" (1969, 512) indicates Burke's belief that scapegoating is least harmful when its burden is borne by all.

The final narrative of culture offered by Burke can be called his "realistic" paradigm. This is the Burke I have primarily relied on in commenting on what the concept of "culture" might mean, the Burke who seems to me most fully pragmatist (as opposed to the caricature of pragmatism that the "magical" Burke offers, the caricature seized upon by Diggins). By denying the fact/value distinction, the realist Burke does not so much deny magic as incorporate it. Our "stylized answers" to the questions posed by situations combine the hortatory with a "sizing up" of the facts. Thus our namings and the actions predicated upon them unite a realistic appraisal of circumstances with the desires we bring to the interactions, the ways in which we hope to transform the world to better suit our needs. Because the agent's "magic" is not all-powerful, because one cannot simply impose one's will on the world, Burke's "realism" aims to overcome partiality and its inevitable failures by opening the agent up to a more holistic, more collective, relationship to situations. Locked into partiality, infuriated by the resistances offered by reality and others to the will, the agent will resort to self-righteous scapegoating, the designation of obstructive enemies. For Burke, such conflicts are fixed and

21. Without much exaggeration, we can call Burke's holistic approach the diametrical opposite to Lyotard's approach in *The Differend* (1988).

non-transformative. They do not allow us to “go on.” They stop the movement of time, the processes of meaning creation and transformative action. The narrative of culture can be arrested if the other elements of a situation are simply resisted by the self.

In the Appendix on “The Four Master Tropes” in *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke appeals to “irony” as the solvent which will dissolve the fixity of a confrontational relationship of self to world, self with other. “Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a *development* which uses all the terms. Hence, from the standpoint of this total form (this ‘perspective of perspectives’), none of the participating ‘sub-perspectives’ can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another. When the dialectic is correctly formed, they are the number of characteristics needed to produce the total development” (1969, 512). Burke’s surprising use of “irony” as the trope of dialectical development indicates the disinvestment from any particular (partial) position required to keep the dialectic moving. If our namings are always accompanied with the understanding that they are (to use Peirce’s phrase) “fallibilistic,” then we are unlikely to claim any one position as a resting-place. Irony, in other words, acknowledges that the “truth” or “reality” of one’s namings is not up to the agent alone, but to the location of those namings amidst the circumstances in which the agent speaks and the others she addresses. And even a temporarily adequate naming will, because it generates responses from others and because circumstances change as time moves on and the world is acted upon, push time forward in ways that render that naming inadequate tomorrow.

The narrative of culture, then, is a succession of namings in a perpetual call and response that establishes the on-going relations among self, world, and others, relations that individual performatives strive to shape, to change for the better, but which no action can permanently arrest, despite the continual temptation to do just that. If we cannot stop time, however, it is just as crucial to stress that we cannot unilaterally create the situations in which we find ourselves. The poststructuralist stress (in Derrida and Judith Butler) on the repetitive, citational component of performatives focuses our attention on culture as it figures as the dead hand of the past, of authority (or Law) that positions us as subjects capable of speech. What those poststructuralist accounts shy away from (a reluctance indicated by their ignoring what Arendt finds the most political

speech act, the promise<sup>22</sup>) is the way that performatives (the dancing of an enunciated attitude or the doing of something with words) establish a relationship between speaker and circumstance, speaker and other, a relationship that carries into the future as commitment and as a map of possible and impossible actions with, toward, or against those circumstances and those others. If the performative is shaped by the past, it is equally a projection of a future in its commitment to a way of being in the world with these situations and with these others. All of which is another way of saying that the past which inhabits my present performatives is not just the past of the Law, but also the past of my own prior performances, my own promises.

#### IV. TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Let me just suggest, all too briefly and partially, the project for which this chapter serves as a starting place, a clearing of the ground.. Basically, I see three things as being at stake here, all three of them absolutely central to what I take to be the pragmatist effort to foster a democratic polity. First, an attempt is being made to articulate a theory of action. (I take another stab at this theory in chapter eight.) That theory is trying to locate the self's capabilities amidst the enabling/constraining (always both at the same time) influence of circumstances and others. Selves are situated—and so are their capabilities to act. And that theory of action also insists that selves are temporal and that the temporality of action—shaped by a past, oriented toward a future—is a vital constituent of an adequate account. Second, the identification of the self's capabilities reinstates the task of considering ethical judgments among different courses of action. Irony, as Burke describes it, is primarily an ethical term. Even if one were to argue (as ethicists often are tempted to do) that the world would “objectively” be a better place if we were all more “fallibilistic” about our namings, more oriented to process and less to fixity, still the call for such attitudes is made to agents who are presumed to have some options open to them in these matters. Once we reach this realm of appeal to agents

22. “The grammar of action: that action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men; and the syntax of power: that power is the only attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and keeping of promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty” (Arendt, 1980, 175).

who make choices, I take it that we have reached the realm of ethics. Finally, pragmatism becomes political when it projects images of human collectivity. Issues of culture (what it means and how it can be produced and used) become significant when enlisted in the political program of forming the kind of sociality the writer desires. That form of sociality is democracy for Burke—and it depends crucially on the on-going transformative interaction of self with others. As for Dewey, the problem for Burke is fostering a “culture of democracy.” Among the elements of such a culture would be a public space for the performance of transformative interactions between self and others, an openness to change, and a “humility” that recognizes one’s own partiality and, hence, one’s need for others, even those most different others whom one is tempted to scapegoat. “True irony, . . . irony that really does justify the attribute of ‘humility,’ is not superior to the enemy. . . . True irony, humble irony, is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer, but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him” (1969, 514).