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# CONTEMPORARY MODERNITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Among American social theorists, and to some extent in Europe as well, a strand of culture criticism has become influential, which rightly insists on the distinctiveness of contemporary modernity but tries to capture this distinctiveness in terms of an apocalyptic pessimism. Authors of diverse inspiration and interested in different aspects of today's culture such as Daniel Bell, David Riesman, Richard Sennett, Philip Rieff and Christopher Lasch, all converge on the main lines of a neoconservative *Zeitdiagnose*. The suggestive expressions often used by them—"the triumph of the therapeutic," "the fall of public man," "the culture of narcissism," "post-ascetic culture"—point to a more or less integrated complex of symptoms. The "postmodern"

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syndrome can at bottom be characterized as an endemic uneasiness with the rationalistic bent of Western culture. According to this perspective, normative ideas such as the ideas of duty, reason or morality have become, along with all universalistic claims, inherently suspicious. Both in the products of high culture and in the popular consciousness, the emphasis is rapidly shifting from the rational, the planned, the instrumental, the universal and the normative to the spontaneous, the playful, the emotional, the immediate and the unique. More specifically, in the moral life an ethos is taking a firm hold, which again can be best characterized by its stress on feeling and immediacy, its disavowal of responsibility, its cynicism, its exceedingly tolerant relativism and, above all, by its tendency to distort ethical categories into the metaphors of sickness and health. A major shift is also affecting that area, a sensitive one for all modern morality, which consists of our intuitive image of the good life. In this area the transformations under way are gradually undermining, according to this view, the traditional Puritan equation of self-realization and success in the sphere of work. This Puritan view is in the process of being rapidly replaced by the equation of self-realization and consumption in the fifties and early sixties, and of self-realization and personal growth in the seventies and eighties—where personal growth means the acquisition of a deeper and deeper awareness of the self and capacity for entering genuinely intimate relationships. The syndrome includes also the devaluation of public life and an increasing disaffection with routine politics. In the words of Richard Sennett, to which all of the above mentioned authors would subscribe,

> the reigning belief today is that closeness between persons is a moral good. The reigning aspiration today is that the evils of society can all be understood as the evils of impersonality, alienation and coldness. The sum of these three is an ideology of intimacy: Social relations of all kind are real, believable and authentic the closer they approach the inner psychological concerns of each person.[1]

As regards the sphere of personality, all these authors express alarm at the alleged decline of autonomy. Their terminologies may differ, but again "the other-directed character,"

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"the narcissistic personality," "psychological man" and other expressions of the kind point to a common core of psychological features. Among these features we find: a quality of self-absorption and egocentrism, unbridled cravings for recognition and possession disguised by a superficial show of 'togetherness', a dependence on external approval for a sense of self-worth, and a weakening of internalized moral controls. Alongside the weakness of the superego the single element on which the widest convergence can be noticed is the transition from *guilt* to *anxiety* as the prevailing modality of self-control. Contemporary man is growing more and more impervious to the pangs of conscience but more and more frightened to lose the reassuring smile of others. Finally, the "postmodern" syndrome is evaluated in extremely negative terms. The neoconservatives view our time as marked by a "loss of rationality," i.e. by a sudden and radical departure from that rationalist emphasis of Western culture which less than a hundred years ago was proclaimed by Max Weber to lie on a line of development of "universal significance and value."[2] Furthermore, today's trends are believed to prelude to the disappearance of the Western form of individuality and to a return to frightful forms of barbarism and incivility.[3]

Let me briefly examine the way in which such themes are developed by each of these authors. D. Bell ascribes the rise of the postmodern syndrome to the diverging principles underlying the economic order and contemporary culture. According to him, today's culture is no longer capable of inducing and stabilizing the motivations functional to the maintenance of the social system. The economic and productive structure of society continues to be pervaded by the value of *efficiency*, whereas the culture has ceased to stress restraint and industriousness and has started to emphasize the immediate gratification of desire and self-realization. Instead of setting a norm against which to assess the new and, if necessary, reject it, contemporary culture for Bell puts an absolute value on the new and the search for novel forms of experience.[4] Behind the products of our culture Bell sees a "megalomania of self-infinitization" which consists in the refusal to accept limits, in the idea that nothing is forbidden and all is to be explored, and in the search for a destiny that is always beyond—beyond good and evil, beyond tragedy, beyond culture itself.[5]

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How did such predicament come about? Since the mid-nineteenth century, argues Bell, a new notion of the self has arisen and has produced important changes in our world-view. What is unique to each individual is now considered the highest good and the enhancement of this uniqueness has become the ultimate value. Writes Bell,

> In Western consciousness there has always been tension between the rational and the non-rational, between reason and will, between reason and instinct, as the driving forces of man. Whatever the specific distinctions, rational judgment was traditionally thought to be superior in the hierarchy, and this order dominated Western culture for almost two millennia. Modernism dirempts this hierarchy. It is the triumph of the spirited, of the will.[6]

As a result of the rise of this ideology, rooted in *aesthetic modernism,* morality and all that is normative have come under attack. What matters now, in our judgment of conduct, is the impact of the action on the self and not the moral consequences to society.[7] The origin of such contemporary myths as the ideal of the "untrammeled self" or of living one's life as a work of art is to be found, according to Bell, in the ideal of the total autonomy of artistic activity from both sponsors and conventions. According to this ideal, which had its foremost spokesman in Baudelaire, artistic creation is the conscious and willful transgression—on the part of an imprisoned subjectivity—of the constraints set by society and by tradition. The innovative results of these acts of transgression subsequently crystallize into new models and standards which again must be broken through. The current climate would then be the product of the trickling down of the "idolatry of the self" from the exclusive milieus of the avant-garde to popular culture. According to Bell, this process of diffusion, under way for a century, was favored by two factors. On one hand, the formerly "functional" orientations embedded in the Protestant ethic gradually lost their functionality.[8] On the other hand, the opportunities for the "adversary culture" to gain influence have multiplied. The expansion of the culture industry, with its publishing houses, art galleries, newspapers, weeklies and monthlies, museums, theaters, movie studios, radio and television stations, etc. has

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quantitatively increased the size of the cultural elite. The modernistic elite has grown from a bohemian enclave to a powerful group bound by a consciousness of kind, and to the extent that this class increases its influence upon society so do its ideas.[9] Consequently, the motivations necessary for the functioning of the market, for the division of labor and for the political process are chronically in short supply. The problem then becomes, for Bell, how to find a functional equivalent of the declining work ethic, i.e. some cultural code capable of relegitimating attitudes of restraint and industriousness. Only a religious revival, concludes Bell, can return the contemporary individual "to the existential predicaments which are the ground of humility and care for others."[10]

The destabilizing effect attributed by Bell to aesthetic modernism is imputed by other authors—especially by Rieff and by Lasch—primarily to what they call "the therapeutic mentality." This mentality, which they see as originating in the ethical nihilism of Freud's psychoanalysis, is supposed to have gained an increasing influence on the whole society through the diffusion of therapeutic practices. According to this second version of the neoconservative *Zeitdiagnose*, exposure to psychotherapy rather than to aesthetic ideologies of self-realization is the variable which can explain the increasing diffusion of antirationalist outlooks. David Riesman's work, which precedes Lasch's and Sennett's endeavors by about twenty-five years, belongs in this second variety of neoconservatism. Character-change is at the center of his famous work of the fifties, *The Lonely Crowd*.[11] For Riesman, modernization has meant, at the level of the personality, a general transition from a type of character oriented to tradition to an inner-directed individual, capable of positing autonomous goals and standards and of taking, if needed, a critical stance vis-à-vis the orientations of the community. Today, Riesman denounces a new shift from the greater autonomy of the inner-directed character to a renewed form of heteronomy, which he calls "other-directedness." The other-directed individual is as little capable of distancing himself from external models as was the tradition-directed type. The difference is that instead of orienting themselves toward the immutable patterns of the past, present-day individuals set their "inner gyroscope" by the ever-changing moods of their contemporaries, either

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those personally known to them or those with whom they come in contact through friends or the mass media.[12] Riesman explains the shift on the basis of the changing patterns of child-rearing which, in turn, are largely determined by the state of flux of certain basic value-orientations. He contends that the loss of old certainties in the sphere of work and social relationships causes parents to become uncertain about the proper way to raise children. Uncertainty, in turn, leads parents to seek expert advice and to become very receptive to the influence of the mass media. Today's parents "cannot help but show their children, by their own anxiety, how little they depend on themselves and how much on others."[13] Regardless of the content of their teachings, anxious parents continuously convey the message that the approval of others, be they school-mates or teachers, peers or the boss, is the only unequivocal good to which one can orient one's conduct: "One makes good when one is approved of." Consequently, the child "learns from his parents' reactions to him that nothing in his character, no possession he owns, no inheritance of name or talent, no work he has done is valued for itself but only for its effects on others."[14] Riesman stresses, as subsequent work on narcissism and socialization confirmed, that anxious parents cannot but breed anxious children.[15] The effects of the parents' uncertainties are compounded by the influence of teachers who find themselves in an analogous predicament. Although they are assigned a greater responsibility than their predecessors (for example, they are told that "bad behavior" on the part of the children ultimately implies "bad management" on their part), they have less means available for controlling the child than in the past when stern discipline was the norm. As a result, teachers also tend to become anxious, to feel dependent on the children's approval and to convey to them the implicit request that they "be nice," thus indirectly reconfirming the notion that "to be uncooperative is about the worst thing one can be."[16] The portrait of the other-directed individual drawn by Riesman is quite in line with all the elements of the postmodern syndrome. Controlled through manipulation during his or her childhood, the other-directed individual also controls others through manipulation, while craving intimacy and warmth nonetheless. He or she devalues public life and professes a cynical tolerance which only masks a lack of genuine

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interest in anything beyond the self. To the extent that he or she does take an interest in the public sphere, the other-oriented individual is less concerned with evaluating policies and decisions than with appraising leaders in terms of their personality and "sincerity." Socialized into feeling self-cohesion only as a reflection of the approval of others, the other-directed person vitally needs friends, whereas the tradition-oriented individual relied on the extended family and the inner directed character was more of a lone wolf. The more the other-directed person is denied fulfilment in work, the more self-realization in intimacy will appear crucial to him or her.[17] According to Riesman, these transformations are quite deleterious to the sphere of morality. The title of one of the chapters of *The Lonely Crowd* —"From Morality to Morale"—already suggests Riesman's conclusion. A socialization process which induces anxiety and reinforces self-doubt leaves few chances for the development of a genuine concern for the right. In fact, it undermines the character structures that enable individuals to stand against their group in defense of what they deem right. The concern for acting "rightly" gives way to a concern for group morale. In one of his most recent works, Riesman brings his analysis closer to the ideas of Bell, Sennett and Lasch. He describes the "truly dramatic change" of our times as a process that directly threatens the sphere of morality. Hypocrisy has now become, in his view, a worse vice than egocentricity.[18]

Philip Rieff's account of the culture of contemporary modernity shares with Riesman's an emphasis on personality change. The diremptive role played for Bell by the modernist consciousness is played for Rieff by the "therapeutic mentality." In Rieff's analysis the fortunes of psychotherapy are at the same time the fortunes of a newly emerging character type, "shrewd," "antiheroic," self-centered and who considers "unprofitable commitments as the sins most to be avoided."[19] This new character is *psychological man*. Although more proudly Nietzschean than Riesman's other-directed individual or Lasch's narcissistic personality, psychological man shares with these other fellow travelers of "postmodernity" a number of important traits, namely privatism, the retreat from politics, the aversion to commitments, a hedonistic longing for the satisfaction of each desire as well as a sour impatience with morality,

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which he assimilates to sheer repression. The only commitment, continues Rieff, to which we now thoroughly subscribe is the "gospel of self-fulfilment."[20] The prospect for morality is bleak. For the ultimate aim of today's "antipolitical revolution" is "the permanent disestablishment of any deeply internalized moral demands."[21] As Rieff puts it

> Our cultural revolution does not aim, like its predecessors, at victory for some rival commitment, but rather at a way of using all commitments, which amounts to loyalty towards none.... The wisdom of the next social order...would not reside in right doctrine, administered by the right men, who must be found, but rather in doctrines amounting to permission for each man to live an experimental life.[22]

The consequences of this predicament for politics are equally devastating. According to Rieff, when the transition to the therapeutic mentality will be completed,

> All governments will be just, so long as they secure that consoling plenitude of option in which modern satisfaction really consists.... Problems of democracy need no longer prove so difficult as they have been. Psychological man is likely to be indifferent to the ancient question of legitimate authority, of sharing in government, so long as the powers that be preserve social order and manage an economy of abundance.[23]

In the current triumph of the therapeutic mentality Rieff sees the coming true of the gloomiest among the alternatives outlined by Weber at the end of *The Protestant Ethic*. No way out of the iron cage is in sight and the advent of "new prophets," if possible at all, seems more remote by the day. Thus the problem which Rieff, as Bell, considers the most urgent—i.e., how to rehabilitate restraint—is destined in his view to remain unsolved for quite some time. In fact, Rieff shares neither Bell's hope for an imminent reawakening of religious feelings nor Weber's belief in its mere possibility.

In *The Fall of Public Man* Richard Sennett concerns himself with the erosion of public life and the growth of an ideology of intimacy which he considers typical of contemporary modernity.[24] In his analysis Sennett combines Tocqueville's theory of

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"soft despotism" with Weber's image of the "iron cage." Tocqueville saw the reason for the increasing privatization of society mainly in the growth of equality. Equality inclines the citizens to concentrate on their private fortunes and enterprises. Alongside their love for liberty, the citizens of an egalitarian democracy come then to share a desire to hand the burden of administrative decisions over to bodies of appointed specialists, i.e. politicians and bureaucrats. Soon they are reduced to an "innumerable multitude of men" indifferent to anything beyond their private pleasures. Each citizen becomes "almost unaware of the fate of the rest": "Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends." Consequently, the citizens of an egalitarian democracy become increasingly dependent on a political power to which they themselves have given the mandate to secure their enjoyment and watch over their fate. This power for Tocqueville will be "absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident and gentle." In the end the citizens of an egalitarian democracy do not lose their liberty, as in a tyranny, but do not retain it in its entirety either. Rather, they are trapped in a cycle in which they "quit their state of dependence just long enough to choose their masters and then fall back into it."[25] Sennett tries to merge this view of the tendencies of democracy with Weber's themes of the increasing rationalization of society and of the disenchantment of the modern world. Large bureaucracies promote a "protean" kind of skill, argues Sennett, i.e. the capacity to quickly reconvert one's abilities and to adapt to a new human environment. In this way, bureaucratization indirectly promotes a concern with the self and with personal relations over a concern with "things" or with objective performance. On the other hand, the decline of the idea of a realm of transcendent meanings also contributes to the subjectivization of society. These factors converge in producing the "fall of public man" and the rise of a culture of intimacy.

The clash between the two cultures—i.e. the culture of restraint and achievement of early modernity and the culture of selfexpression and gratification of contemporary society—is thus reformulated by Sennett as the clash between a culture of "civility" and the present-day culture of "self-absorption." The culture of civility was a culture of social distance and of politeness which flourished in the large cities of the eighteenth centu-

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ry—especially in Paris and London—and allowed people to interact sociably in the streets, in the pubs and in the clubs without ever bringing their private concerns into play.[26] In the context of that culture nothing negative was thought of the impersonality of public and, more specifically, of political roles. Citizens formed an attentive audience and were ready to take part in the political process. Our contemporary culture, instead, views impersonality as evil and considers intimacy "a moral good." According to this ideology of intimacy, continues Sennett, social relations are valued only to the extent that they reflect our private concerns and assuage our psychological needs. For Sennett the diffusion of these views erodes the basis, motivational and cultural, of any concern with political and communal interests. Two of the main phenomena which accompany the transition from the culture of civility to that of self-absorption are the resurgence of charismatic styles of leadership and what Sennett calls "destructive Gemeinschaft." Because of the shrinking of the public sphere, today people approach public matters not in terms of impersonal criteria but of their personal feelings. Typically, political leaders are considered "credible" in terms of what kind of a person they are, rather than in terms of the actions or programs that they espouse.[27] The term "destructive Gemeinschaft" designates an interest in the affairs of one's community which is based primarily on questions of identity. Instead of being concerned with substantial issues and with concrete results—by which Sennett means success in the arena of special interests politics—today people understand their involvement in collective action as directed at drawing a line between those who truly belong to the community and those who do not. In this way the delimitation and definition of collective identity—a sort of public analogue of the narcissistic preoccupation with self-image—becomes the all-encompassing issue, over and beyond the concrete needs and conflicts which motivate a community to collective action in the first place. The Dreyfus affair, the dispute over the Forest Hill community in New York and Nixon's Checkers Speech are for Sennett the best examples of the new incivility in our political life.

Four factors, according to Sennett, have played a special role in the occurrence of this major cultural transformation. One is the separation of the workplace from the household, which con-

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tributed to create the ideology of the family as an island of warmth in the cold impersonality of modern society. Urbanization, bureaucratization and secularization constitute the other three.[28] More specifically, among the effects of secularization Sennett considers the rise of a fear of the involuntary disclosure of self in public, which he takes to have motivated people to seek refuge in intimacy.[29] Of all the neoconservative critics of contemporary culture, Sennett is certainly the most outspoken in defending the old culture. He wishes to see the gap between public and private conduct restored in full force, he has a nostalgia (shared with Riesman and Rieff) for the "masks of sociability" of the urban culture of two centuries ago, he tends to understand politics as a competitive struggle for power, and he seems to suggest that a return to the ruthlessness and rapacity of the old possessive individualism is the only alternative to narcissism and the soft despotism.[30] In his interpretation contemporary modernity appears characterized once again as a *loss*. More precisely, it is described as a loss of distance in social relations which in turn affects one's relation to the self and to the things upon which judgment is passed. Without distance everything can only be appraised in terms of its suiting the self, not in its own merit. Underlying this vision is the idea that "because every self is in some measure a cabinet of horrors, civilized relations between selves can only proceed to the extent that nasty little secrets of desire, greed or envy are kept locked up."[31] As the old ones did, also the new conservatives such as Sennett remain silent as to why the "nasty little secrets" have become second nature to people.

Christopher Lasch's interpretation of contemporary culture is perhaps the most penetrating among those examined here, but also the most ambiguous. If one keeps close to his stated intentions it would be unfair to label him a neoconservative. Yet, even though Lasch is the social critic who most sees through the narrowness of the thesis of the decline of rationality, in the end he remains caught in it. Some of his statements in *The Culture of Narcissism* echo Rieff's theme of the "triumph of the therapeutic" and Bell's critique of the "adversary culture" without adding much. Lasch takes for granted that "selfabsorption defines the moral climate of contemporary society,"[32] and that the therapeutic mentality is bound to undermine morality.

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> Therapy labels as sickness what might otherwise be judged as weak or willful action; it thus equips the patient to fight (or resign himself to) the disease, instead of irrationally finding fault with himself. Inappropriately extended beyond the consulting room, however, therapeutic morality encourages a permanent suspension of the moral sense.[33]

Again, this predicament is linked with the perverse effects of a Freudianism which, "having displaced religion as the organizing framework of American culture," now threatens "to displace politics as well."[34] Narcissism, however, is not to be seen as a cultural pattern only. Lasch claims that the *prevailing character type* has already shifted towards a narcissistic direction. However, I will leave this argument aside. Even though Lasch goes at great lengths to show that his analysis is grounded on the recent psychoanalytic literature, especially on the work of Kohut and Kernberg,[35] he translates clinical claims into sociological ones in a rather mechanical way. Consequently, his account of the new emerging character differs very little from Riesman's except for the terminology. All the key variables are the same: the shrinking of the family in size and function, the absent father, the moral insecurity of the parents, their anxiety, their seeking advice from experts and the media, the indirect reinforcement of anxiety which accompanies the obtaining of expert advice, and the role of the peer-group as a socializing agency. The discrepancy between Lasch on one side and Bell, Sennett and Rieff on the other has to do with the angle from which Lasch criticizes the phenomena at hand. Yet this is also the point where the gap between his intentions and what he really does begins to open up. In his book he conducts a polemic against the facile criticism, halfway between journalism and self-confession, which described the seventies as the "Me" decade and neglected the *social* roots of cultural change. For the image of two cultures that tear society apart Lasch wants to substitute an image of continuity, albeit a continuity in decadence. The therapeutic mentality only presents itself as emancipation, self-infinitization and transgression. In fact, in opposition to Bell, for Lasch the therapeutic mentality is highly *functional* in a social life dominated by the large bureaucracies. To the extent that the individual becomes more dependent on impersonal organiza-

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tions, argues Lasch, we should not be surprised to see the tendency toward self-absorption gain ground. For narcissism represents nothing but the psychological result of this social dependency.[36] In contrast to the demonization of cultural forces which characterizes much of the neoconservative critique of the contemporary ethos, Lasch must be credited for directing our attention, as Adorno and the tradition of Critical Theory have long insisted, on the fact that the glorification of privatism, self-fulfilment and intimacy is reaching its peak precisely when the possibility of true individuation seems to have receded most. According to Lasch, "it is the devastation of personal life, not the retreat into privatism, that needs to be criticized."[37] Unfortunately, this statement of intention is never fully carried out by Lasch. Most of *The Culture of Narcissism* and of the more recent study *The Minimal Self* contains culture criticism that can hardly be distinguished from the kind that Lasch wants to polemically attack, whereas only cursory comments are dedicated to the "social causes" of the devastation of personal life.[38] Finally, Lasch is unable to point to, from his own perspective, any element of today's culture which might count as a *progressive* distancing of the present moral climate from the culture of early modernity. For these two reasons Lasch's work can be assimilated to the neoconservative strand of cultural criticism.

This whole view of contemporary modernity has many more nuances that cannot be discussed in this brief review.[39] But why group these authors together under the common heading of neoconservatism? I believe that there are at least five distinct reasons for considering Bell and the others part of the same strand of social thought, the last two of which justify the neoconservative label. First, all these authors describe the cultural tendencies in question as recent or fairly recent developments. The beginnings of the new transformation go back from a maximum of a century (Sennett) to a minimum of three or four decades (Lasch, Rieff, Riesman). None of these authors ever considers the possibility that these developments could represent the belated unfolding of cultural tensions linked with the rise of modernity and, more specifically, of a modern morality.

Second, the cultural trends of industrial societies are described as a sudden and complete inversion of, or as a radical departure from, the direction of evolution so far followed by

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Western culture—a thesis which the neoconservatives share with the enthusiastic supporters of "postmodernity" as a Dionysian liberation from modern rationalism. The positive emphasis on the break from Western modern rationalism as a distinctive achievement of contemporary modernity comes from many quarters. For example, we can find a similar emphasis in Feyerabend's methodological anarchism, in Derrida's critique of logocentrism, in Lyotard's critique of the modern "grand narratives" of progress and emancipation, in Rorty's denunciation of the search for "ultimate frameworks" and in his project for an ironic philosophy, in Foucault's defense of the material resilience and autonomy of the body againts the compulsion to self-control and self-discipline which forms the backcloth of the relation of the Western subject to its body, in Lacan's denunciation of the deceptive quality of any notion of a unitarian psychic subjectivity, and in Deleuze and Guattari's extolment of the irreducible primacy and plurality of desire.[40] Ironically, the neoconservative critics of the postmodern syndrome fall prey to the same cliché that they accuse the adversary culture of perpetuating. In fact, both the aesthetic modernists, the anti-modernist, antirationalist "postmodernists" and the conservative critics from opposite vantage points remain prisoners of the Nietzschean view of the "aesthetic" as inherently Dionysian and thus opposed to repressive individuation, to self-abnegation, to the rationalist quest for selfmastery, in sum as the Other or the antagonist of Reason. Both fail to realize that the aesthetic sphere, understood not only in the narrow sense of what pertains to art but also in the broader sense of what belongs to inner nature, constitutes not so much the realm of the irrational, as one of the moments of rationality along with the instrumental sphere and the ethical sphere and indeed contains, in the moment of the judgment of taste, the core of a nonrationalistic rationality or of a nongeneralizing universalism.

Third, for the authors reviewed above the cultural processes under way in contemporary society negatively affect the sphere of morality, but originate in other areas of culture or society, such as aesthetic ideologies or the economy or the family. None of them seriously examines the possibility that some of the elements in the postmodern syndrome—for example, the

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importance attributed to intimacy, self-realization and personal growth, or the impatience toward all ethical universalism disjoined from empathy and from a genuine appreciation for the uniqueness of each context of choice—may in fact derive from the autonomous evolution of the moral sphere. Through their approach the process of ethical rationalization which Weber reconstructed up to the rise of Protestantism appears to have come to a halt after the consolidation of a modern form of morality. The subsequent transformations of the Western ethos appear to have been caused exclusively by *external* factors, be they the fortunes of aesthetic outlooks or the vicissitudes of the family.

Fourth, none of these authors is capable of indicating any positive aspect in the cultural tendencies at issue. Bell, Rieff, Riesman, Lasch and Sennett approach the cultural climate of our time from an angle that blinds them to anything other than "decadence," because they look at the present in terms of its lacking some feature of the past, be it the culture of civility or the ethos of restraint, rather than as a constellation of meanings with positive features of its own. It is impossible to find in their writings the indication of any positive or progressive social change which has occurred after the 1930s. This inability is striking if compared with the epoch-marking grandiosity attributed to the transformations under way. Allusions to the slow rottening of the Roman Empire or to the rise of Christianity are not infrequent.[41] If one believes oneself to be faced with processes of this magnitude, is it not unreasonable to write off the tendencies under scrutiny as mere "decadence"? This one-sided moralistic analysis of our contemporary ethos as a deviation from the rationalistic bent of the Protestant ethic is just as simpleminded as it was, three centuries ago, to describe the Puritan ethos as a mere deviation from the old Catholic ethic of brotherliness—which in fact was the Counter Reformation's approach to the matter.

Fifth, each of the authors mentioned above is unable to propose any remedy for the ills of the postmodern syndrome other than the sheer restoration of the early-modern segment of social life which is at the center of his analysis. Sennett wishes to go back to the codes of social distance of the eighteenth century, to revive the masks of sociability and to rehabilitate the

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instrumental moment of politics. Rieff and Bell wish that some equivalent of the old ethic of sacrifice and self-abnegation be found. Lasch and Riesman wish to rescue the bourgeois family of the last century, which they assume to be the only agency capable of insuring an individuating form of socialization.

This last common trait provides in my opinion the strongest reason for grouping these authors together under the heading of neoconservatism. The prefix "neo," on the other hand, is justified by the novel attitude of this brand of conservatism towards modernity. Unlike the other indictments of the modern world voiced throughout the last two centuries, the indictment of today's culture expressed by the authors mentioned above does not amount to a monolithic rejection. None of these authors advocates a complete return to the past. Instead, they all presuppose a distinction between modernity as a political and economic phenomenon, i.e. democracy and the market economy, of which they approve, and modernity as cultural modernism, which to various degrees they all condemn because it endangers our chances to reap the fruits of the former.[42]

The more general reason why the perspective adopted by Bell, Rieff, Riesman, Lasch and Sennett leads them into a theoretical dead-end has to do with the unfortunate choice of Weber's pessimistic *Zeitdiagnose* as their starting point. The neoconservatives register the final divorce—anticipated in the Weberian metaphor of the "iron cage"—between the rational organization of production, politics and personal life typical of capitalism on the one hand, and the religious meanings that once legitimated such rationalization on the other. They observe the inability of our culture to produce any equivalent of an ethic orienting people toward restraint and self-abnegation. No "great rebirth of old ideas and ideals" seems imminent, no "new prophets" can be encountered, only individuals in search of self-fulfilment. Thus the neoconservatives end up merely repeating Weber's forecast. That is, the society which once found its ultimate frame of reference in the religious ideal of an orderly life devoted to the carrying out of one's calling is now split into the two opposing camps of the "specialists without spirit," devoted to work only as a means for securing consumption, and the "sensualists without heart," who dedicate their lives to aesthetic cultivation but remain insensitive to all sense of duty or commu-

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nal purpose. The choice of this vantage point reveals its infecundity when the theorists of postmodernity combine it with Weber's dichotomy of *asceticism* and *mysticism*. When these two notions are superimposed over the distinction of specialists and sensualists we obtain, as a result, the gist of the neoconservative interpretation of contemporary modernity. Asceticism, which in a broader sense stands for *vita activa*, for a sense of moral purpose, for taking interest in the external world, for the desire to mold it, for self-transcendence, for believing in progress, for the desire to grow more in control of our collective destiny, and for the desire to free ourselves from all man-made yet unintentional constraints, is seen as losing ground. Mysticism, which is associated with *vita contemplativa*, with intellectualism without ethical commitment, with immobility and self-inspired stagnation, with withdrawal from the world and therefore with losing control over it, is seen as gaining the favor of the "sensualists without heart" and as threatening to become the dominant outlook. Because they mechanically transpose categories that once were useful for making sense of the early-modern world into their analysis of present-day culture, the neoconservatives miss what is perhaps most typical of our current climate. To the extent that the cultural processes under way in our societies can be captured with one formula, their sense appears linked not so much with inverting the early-modern way of ranking the instrumental and the aesthetic moments of rationality, or the ascetic and the mystical elements of our culture, as with *exploding* these dichotomies. The unsolved problem with which our culture is faced seems to be that of finding some way of compensating for the effects of the spirit of differentiation typical of early modernity and of healing the split between the cognitive and the aesthetic aspects, the intellectual and the emotional elements, the scientific and the religious moments of the Western form of life.[43]

The neoconservative interpretation of the cultural tendencies of the advanced industrial societies, however, contains an important insight. Some of the phenomena which have attracted the attention of Bell, Rieff, Sennett and the others do belong in the same picture. In spite of their diversity, phenomena as the diffusion of therapies, the decline of the ethic of work, the rise of a new equation of selfrealization and personal growth, the increasing disaffection with politics as a strategic confrontation

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between equally particularistic interests, the redistribution of character configurations from authoritarian to narcissistic modalities, the increasing emphasis on self-knowledge and autonomy from unrecognized inner urges, as well as the growing concern for the damages caused by the pressure of our social roles, add up to a complex of meanings in which we do recognize the stamp of our culture. More doubtful, however, is the idea that the common thread running through all these elements is an *aesthetic* ideology. It is more accurate to identify the underlying theme as the *moral* idea of the *authenticity of the person*—an idea which has slowly emerged during the last two hundred and fifty years but only recently has broken out of the boundaries of high culture. From the standpoint of cultural history, whereas early modernity can be characterized through the *idée-force* of *autonomy* from authority and from received opinion—an idea reasserted in science as in politics, in ethics as in aesthetics—contemporary modernity begins, at whichever point in history we locate the watershed, with the rise of the notion of *authenticity* to an equivalent role.

In philosophy the theme of authenticity has unfolded within a tradition of thought which has its origin precisely with Rousseau and which through Schiller and the early Romantics, through Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger has come to influence contemporary culture. It is impossible for social theory to make full sense of the cultural trends of the advanced industrial societies without coming to terms with the way in which the work of these authors has contributed to shape our present ideas of a person, society, interaction, roles or identity. However, it would be misleading to regard the idea of authenticity as a legacy to be found exclusively in the teachings of these philosophers. In one form or another, sometimes intertwined with other themes, the notion of authenticity can be traced in almost all the important theorists of ethics and society of the last two centuries. Today a paradoxical development is under way. On one hand, the spokesmen of poststructuralism, deconstructionism and philosophical postmodernism who most explicitly refer to the teachings of Nietzsche and Heidegger—Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty—avoid using the term authenticity because to their sensibilities it conveys the illusory myth of a totalizing, harmonious, unitary self, which they seek

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to replace with the image of a fragmented, plural, centerless and irreconcilably split subjectivity. Yet this image of the post-modern, centerless self is propounded in terms that imply that it carries a greater potential for authenticity than the early-modern image of the self-reflecting subject who is the master of its destiny. An authenticity *against* or *despite* the self or, in other words, a theme of authenticity played on the register of the *sublime* is here contrasted with the inauthenticity of the all-round notion of a *harmonious* authenticity. On the other hand, in certain developments of ethical and political theory we can see the rise of views of justice—such as those put forward by Walzer and Dworkin[44]—or of ethics centered on the notion of "progress for a tradition"—such as that developed by MacIntyre[45]—which arguably establish a systematic link between the notion of justice and the authenticity of a collective identity. It is impossible, however, to reconstruct the tradition of authenticity in its entirety or to trace out its transformations within the scope of this work. Instead, I will limit my focus to Rousseau, in that he is the initiator of the contemporary-modern reflection on the effects of the modern social order and the modern morality of autonomy upon the identity of the individual.

If we bring together the various aspects and themes of Rousseau's life-work—a life-work so fragmentary and antisystematic as to give rise to the partial and distorted images of "Rousseau the nostalgic of nature," "Rousseau the enemy of civilization," "Rousseau the totalitarian," "Rousseau the paranoid" and what not—it becomes apparent that a coherent idea underlies them. What gives unity to Rousseau's reflections on social reproduction, the just polity, education and ethics is, again, the notion of authenticity. Not only his way of posing these problems, but also the directions in which he looks for solutions as well as some of his substantive answers, anticipate to a surprising degree concerns and aspirations which only now have become the common stock of Western sensibility. Nowhere does Rousseau clarify the relation of his major works to one another, yet they form an organic whole in which the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* poses a problem and *The Social Contract*, *Emile* and *The New Heloise* represent three aspects of its solution. The problem which concerns Rousseau is the effect of social inequality and of competition upon the

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individual and social life. In the other three works Rousseau examines various aspects of an alternative form of social life, in which such effects are eliminated or at least mitigated. In *The Social Contract* he outlines a just political order, in *Emile* he investigates the conditions under which the growth of individual autonomy can be furthered, and in *Julie, or the New Heloise* we can find his implicit notion of a morality of authenticity. I will deal with these aspects of Rousseau's vision of an emancipated social life because they are the most prominent in his thought and are those on which his thought is most explicit.

In the next chapter I will be concerned with Rousseau's argument on society and the self. What remains most 'alive' in Rousseau's social criticism is not so much his attempt to have society emerge "naturally from nature," without man's disposition playing any role, but rather his twofold accusation against a social order based on competition. I will reconstruct the main steps of his account of the rise of a social order inimical to self-transparency and authenticity and will point to some internal difficulties.

In the third chapter I will be concerned with the alternative institutional order designed by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*. I will dwell on the social and motivational prerequisites for the formation of the general will, on Rousseau's procedural grounding of the legitimacy of the just polity and on his concept of freedom. At the same time, I will try to fit *The Social Contract* into the broader context of Rousseau's entire *oeuvre*. The public virtue on which the good functioning of the "social contract" depends cannot be generated "from above," by means of modifying the institutions only. Rather, a "private" virtue must be possessed to a certain extent by all the citizens in order for a society to move from a state of inequality to a just political order. This private virtue is linked with the acquisition of a moral conscience capable of judging on the basis of self-chosen principles and independent of the expectations of the community.

In the fourth chapter I will discuss Rousseau's ideas on how this quality of moral autonomy can be developed in the child, as they are expressed in *Emile*. I will try to specify Rousseau's notion of autonomy, to reconstruct the stages through which autonomy develops and to bring out the implicit psychological

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