

*Modernity and the Rise of the
Public Sphere*

CHARLES TAYLOR

THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at

Stanford University
February 25, 1992

CHARLES TAYLOR, currently a Professor in the Department of Political Science and the Department of Philosophy at McGill University and Professeur Titulaire at the Université de Montréal, was educated at McGill and at Oxford University, where he received a Ph.D. degree in 1961. He has been a visiting professor or lecturer at Princeton, Queen's, and Hebrew universities, the University of California at Berkeley, and the New School for Social Research, among others, and was a member of the School of Social Science at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies. From 1976 to 1981 he was Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford and a Fellow of All Souls College. Professor Taylor's publications include *The Explanation of Behavior* (1964), *Hegel and Modern Society* (1979), *Social Theory as Practice* (1983), and *Source of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and the British Academy.

I

I want to distinguish —and start a debate —between two kinds of theories of modernity, I shall call them “cultural” and “acultural” respectively. I’m leaning on a use of the word “culture” here which is analogous to the sense it often has in anthropology. I am evoking the picture of a plurality of human cultures, each of which has a language and a set of practices which define specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind/soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices, and the like. These languages are often mutually untranslatable.

With this model in mind, a “cultural” theory of modernity is one that characterizes the transformations which have issued in the modern West mainly in terms of the rise of a new culture. The contemporary Atlantic world is seen as a culture (or group of closely related cultures) among others, with its own specific understandings (e.g., of person, nature, the good), to be contrasted to all others, including its own predecessor civilization (with which it obviously also has a lot in common).

By contrast, an “acultural” theory is one that describes these transformations in terms of some culture-neutral operation. By this I mean an operation which is not defined in terms of the specific cultures it carries us from and to, but is rather seen as of a type which any traditional culture could undergo.

An example of an acultural type of theory, indeed a paradigm case, would be one which conceives of modernity as the growth of reason, defined in various ways (e.g., as the growth of scientific consciousness, or the development of a secular outlook, or the rise of instrumental rationality, or an ever-clearer distinction between fact-finding and evaluation). Or else modernity might be accounted for in terms of social as well as intellectual changes: the trans-

formations, including the intellectual ones, are seen as coming about as a result of increased mobility, concentration of populations, industrialization, or the like. In all these cases, modernity is conceived as a set of transformations which any and every culture can go through—and which all will probably be forced to undergo.

These changes are not defined by their end-point in a specific constellation of understandings of, say, person, society, good; they are rather described as a type of transformation to which any culture could in principle serve as “input.” For instance, any culture could suffer the impact of growing scientific consciousness; any religion could undergo “secularization”; any set of ultimate ends could be challenged by a growth of instrumental thinking; any metaphysic could be dislocated by the split between fact and value.

So modernity in this kind of theory is understood as issuing from a rational or social operation which is culture-neutral. This is not to say that the theory cannot acknowledge good historical reasons why this transformation first arose in one civilization rather than another, or why some may undergo it more easily than others. The point rather is that the operation is defined not in terms of its specific point of arrival, but as a general function which can take any specific culture as its input.

To grasp the difference from another angle, the operation is not seen as supposing or reflecting an option for one specific set of human values or understandings among others. In the case of “social” explanations, causal weight is given to historical developments, like industrialization, which have an impact on values but are often not seen as reflecting specific options in this domain. When it comes to explanations in terms of “rationality,” this is seen as the exercise of a general capacity, which was only awaiting its proper conditions to unfold. Under certain conditions, human beings will just come to see that scientific thinking is valid, that instrumental rationality pays off, that religious beliefs involve unwarranted leaps, that facts and values are separate. These transformations may be facilitated by our having certain values and

understandings, just as they are hampered by the dominance of others; but they aren't *defined* as the espousal of some such constellation. They are defined rather by something we come to see concerning the whole context in which values and understandings are espoused.

It should be evident that the dominant theories of modernity over the last two centuries have been of the acultural sort. Many have explained its development at least partly by our "coming to see" something like the range of supposed "truths" mentioned above. Or else the changes have been explained partly by culture-neutral social developments, such as Durkheim's move from "mechanical" to differentiated, "organic" forms of social cohesion; or Tocqueville's assumption of creeping "democracy" (by which he meant a push toward equality). On one interpretation, "rationalization" was for Weber a steady process, occurring within all cultures over time.

But above all, explanations of modernity in terms of "reason" seem to be the most popular. And even the "social" explanations tend to invoke reason as well, since the social transformations, like mobility and industrialization, are thought to bring about intellectual and spiritual changes because they shake people loose from old habits and beliefs (in, e.g., religion or traditional morality) which then become unsustainable because they have no independent rational grounding, in the way the beliefs of modernity (in, e.g., individualism or instrumental reason) are assumed to have.

But, one might object, how about the widespread and popular *negative* theories of modernity, those that see it not as gain but as loss or decline? Curiously enough, they too have been acultural in their own way. To see this, we have to enlarge somewhat the description above. Instead of seeing the transformations as the unfolding of capacities, negative theories have often interpreted them as falling prey to dangers. But these have often been just as aculturally conceived. Modernity is characterized by the loss of the horizon; by a loss of roots; by the hubris which denies human

limits, our dependence on history or God, which places unlimited confidence in the powers of frail human reason; by a trivializing self-indulgence which has no stomach for the heroic dimension of life; and so on.

The overwhelming weight of interpretation in our culture, positive and negative, tends to the acultural. On the other side, 'the voices are fewer if powerful. Nietzsche, for instance, offers a reading of modern scientific culture which paints it as actuated by a specific constellation of values. And Max Weber, besides offering a theory of rationalization which can at any rate be taken as a steady, culture-independent force, also gave a reading of the Protestant ethic, as defined by a particular set of religio-moral concerns, which in turn helped to bring about modern capitalism.

So acultural theories predominate. Is this bad? I think it is. In order to see why, we have to bring out a bit more clearly what these theories foreground, and what they tend to screen out.

Acultural theories tend to describe the transition in terms of a loss of traditional beliefs and allegiances. This may be seen as coming about as a result of institutional changes: for example, mobility and urbanization erode the beliefs and reference points of static rural society. Or the loss may be supposed to arise from the increasing operation of modern scientific reason. The change may be positively valued —or it may be judged a disaster by those for whom the traditional reference points were valuable, and scientific reason too narrow. But all these theories concur in describing the process: old views and loyalties are eroded. Old horizons are washed away, in Nietzsche's image. The sea of faith recedes, following Arnold. This stanza from his "Dover Beach" captures this perspective:

The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.¹

The tone here is one of regret and nostalgia. But the underlying image of eroded faith could serve just as well for an upbeat story of the progress of triumphant scientific reason. From one point of view, humanity has shed a lot of false and harmful myths. From another, it has lost touch with crucial spiritual realities. But in either case, the change is seen as a loss of belief.

What emerges comes about through this loss. The upbeat story cherishes the dominance of an empirical-scientific approach to knowledge claims, of individualism, negative freedom, instrumental rationality. But these come to the fore because they are what we humans “normally” value, once we are no longer impeded or blinded by false or superstitious beliefs and the stultifying modes of life which accompany them. Once myth and error are dissipated, these are the only games in town. The empirical approach is the only valid way of acquiring knowledge, and this becomes evident as soon as we free ourselves from the thrall of a false metaphysics. Increasing recourse to instrumental rationality allows us to get more and more of what we want, and we were only ever deterred from this by unfounded injunctions to limit ourselves. Individualism is the normal fruit of human self-regard absent the illusory claims of God, the Chain of Being, or the sacred order of society.

In other words, we moderns behave as we do because we have “come to see” that certain claims were false —or on the negative reading, because we have lost from view certain perennial truths. What this view reads out of the picture is the possibility that Western modernity might be powered by its own positive visions of the good, that is, by one constellation of such visions among available others, rather than by the only viable set left after the

¹ Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach,” 21–28.

old myths and legends have been exploded. It screens out whatever there might be of a specific moral direction to Western modernity, beyond what is dictated by the general form of human life itself, once old error is shown up (or old truth forgotten). For example, people behave as individuals, because that's what they "naturally" do when no longer held in by the old religions, metaphysics, and customs, though this may be seen as a glorious liberation or a purblind miring in egoism, depending on our perspective. What it cannot be seen as is a novel form of moral self-understanding, not definable simply by the negation of what preceded it.

Otherwise put, what gets screened out is the possibility that Western modernity might be sustained by its own original spiritual vision, that is, not one generated simply and inescapably out of the transition.

Before trying to say how bad or good this is, I want to speculate about the motives for this predominance of the acultural. In one way, it is quite understandable when we reflect that we Westerners have been living the transition to modernity for some centuries out of the civilization we used to call Christendom. It is hard to live through a change of this moment without being partisan, and in this spirit we quite naturally reach for explanations which are immediately evaluative, on one side or the other. Now nothing stamps the change as more unproblematically right than the account that we have "come to see" through certain falsehoods, just as the explanation that we have come to forget important truths brands it as unquestionably wrong. To make such confident judgments on the basis of a cultural account would presuppose our having carried through a complex comparative assessment of modernity's original vision, over against that of the Christendom which preceded it, to a clear unambiguous conclusion —hardly an easy task, if realizable at all.

Indeed, since a cultural theory supposes the point of view in which we see our own culture as one among others, and this at

best is a recent acquisition in our civilization, it is not surprising that the first accounts of revolutionary change were acultural. For the most part our ancestors looked on other civilizations as made up of barbarians, or infidels, or savages. It would have been absurd to expect the contemporaries of the French Revolution, on either side of the political divide, to have seen the cultural shift within this political upheaval, when the very idea of cultural pluralism was just dawning in the writings of, say, Herder.

But even when this standpoint becomes more easily available, we are drawn by our partisan attachments to neglect it. This is partly because an immediately evaluative explanation (on the right side) is more satisfying —we tend to want to glorify modernity or vilify it. And it is partly because we fear that a cultural theory might make value judgments impossible. The latter notion is, I believe, a mistake; but mistake or not, it plays a role here.

But another thing which has been going for acultural theories has been the vogue for “materialistic” explanations in social science and history. By this I mean, in this context, explanations which shy away from invoking moral or spiritual factors in favour of (what are thought to be) harder and more down-to-earth causes. And so the developments I adverted to above —the growth of science, individualism, negative freedom, instrumental reason, and the other striking features of the culture of modernity —have often been accounted for as by-products of social change: for instance, as spin-offs from industrialization, or greater mobility, or urbanization. There are certainly important causal relations to be traced here, but the accounts which invoke them frequently skirt altogether the issue whether these changes in culture and outlook owe anything to their own inherent power as moral ideals. The implicit answer is often in the negative.²

² Of course, for a certain vulgar Marxism, the negative answer is quite explicit. Ideas are the product of economic changes. But much non-Marxist social science operates implicitly on similar premises. And this in spite of the orientation of some of the great founders of social science, like Weber, who recognized the crucial role of moral and religious ideas in history.

Of course, the social changes which are supposed to spawn the new outlook must themselves be explained, and this will involve some recourse to human motivations, unless we suppose that industrialization or the growth of cities occurred entirely in a fit of absence of mind. We need some notion of what moved people to push steadily in one direction —for example, toward the greater application of technology to production, or toward greater concentrations of population. But what is invoked here are often motivations which are nonmoral. By that I mean motivations which can actuate people quite without connection to any moral ideal, as I defined this earlier. So we very often find these social changes explained in terms of the desire for greater wealth, or power, or the means of survival, or control over others. Of course, all these things can be woven into moral ideals, but they need not be. And so explanation in terms of them is considered sufficiently “hard” and “scientific.”

And even where individual freedom and the enlargement of instrumental reason are seen as ideas whose intrinsic attractions can help explain their rise, this attraction is frequently understood in nonmoral terms. That is, the power of these ideas is often understood not in terms of their moral force, but just because of the advantages they seem to bestow on people regardless of their moral outlook, or even whether they have a moral outlook. Freedom allows you to do what you want; and the greater application of instrumental reason gets you more of what you want, whatever that is.³

³ Individualism has in fact been used in two quite different senses. In one it is a moral ideal, one facet of which I have been discussing. In another, it is an amoral phenomenon, something like what we mean by egoism. The rise of individualism in this sense is usually a phenomenon of breakdown, where the loss of a traditional horizon leaves mere anomie in its wake, and individuals fend for themselves —for example, in some demoralized, crime-ridden slums formed by newly urbanized peasants in the Third World (or in nineteenth-century Manchester). It is, of course, catastrophic to confuse these two kinds of individualism, which have utterly different causes and consequences. Which is why Tocqueville carefully distinguishes “individualism” from “egoism” in his well-known discussion in the second volume of *Democracy in America* (part II, chapter 2).

It is obvious that wherever this kind of explanation becomes culturally dominant, the motivation to explore the original spiritual vision of modernity is very weak; indeed, the capacity even to recognize some such thing nears zero. And this effectively takes cultural theories off the agenda.

So what, if anything, is bad about this? Two things.

1. First, I think Western modernity *is* in part based on an original moral outlook. This is not to say that our account of it in terms of our “coming to see” certain things is wholly wrong. On the contrary: post-seventeenth-century natural science has a validity, and the accompanying technology an efficacy, that we have established. And all societies are sooner or later forced to acquire this efficacy or be dominated by others (and hence have it imposed on them anyway).

But it would be quite wrong to think that we can make do with an acultural theory alone. It is not just that other facets of what we identify as modern, such as the tendency to try to split fact from value, or the decline of religious practice, are far from reposing on incontestable truths which have finally been discovered — as one can claim for modern physics, for example. It is also that science itself has grown in the West in close symbiosis with a certain culture in the sense I’m using that term here, as a constellation of understandings of person, nature, society, and the good.

To rely on an acultural theory is to miss all this. One gets a distorted understanding of Western modernity in one of two ways: on one side, we misclassify certain changes, which ultimately reflect the culture peculiar to the modern West, as the product of unproblematic discovery or the ineluctable consequence of some social change, like the introduction of technology. The decline in religious practice has frequently been seen in this light. This is the error of seeing everything modern as belonging to one Enlightenment package.

On the other side, we fail altogether to examine certain facets of the modern constellation, closely interwoven with our under-

standings of science and religion, which don't strike us as being part of the transformation to modernity. We don't identify them as among the spectacular changes which have produced contemporary civilization, and we often fail to see even that there have been changes, reading these facets falsely as perennial. Such is the usual fate of those, largely implicit, understandings of human agency which I have grouped under the portmanteau term "modern identity,"⁴ such as the various forms of modern inwardness or the affirmation of ordinary life. We all too easily imagine that people have always seen themselves as we do, for example, in respect to dichotomies like inward/outward. And we thus utterly miss the role these new understandings have played in the rise of Western modernity. I want to make a claim of this kind below in relation to the rise of the modern public sphere.

And so a purely acultural theory distorts and impoverishes our understanding of ourselves, both through misclassification (the Enlightenment package error) and through too narrow a focus. But its effects on our understanding of other cultures is even more devastating. The belief that modernity comes from one single universally applicable operation imposes a falsely uniform pattern on the multiple encounters of non-western cultures with the exigencies of science, technology, and industrialization. As long as we are bemused by the Enlightenment package, we shall believe that they all *have* to undergo a range of cultural changes, drawn from our experience —such as "secularization" or the growth of atomistic forms of self-identification. As long as we leave our own notions of identity unexamined, so long shall we fail to see how theirs differ, and how this difference crucially conditions the way in which they integrate the truly universal features of "modernity."

Moreover, the view that modernity arises through the dissipation of certain unsupported religious and metaphysical beliefs seems to imply that the paths of different civilizations are bound

⁴ See *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

to converge. As they lose their traditional illusions, they will come together on the “rationally grounded” outlook which has resisted the challenge. The march of modernity will end up making all cultures look the same. This means, of course, that we expect they will end up looking like us.

In short, exclusive reliance on an acultural theory unfits us for what is perhaps the most important task of social sciences in our day: understanding the full gamut of alternative modernities which are in the making in different parts of the world. It locks us into an ethnocentric prison, condemned to project our own forms onto everyone else, and blissfully unaware of what we are doing.

2. So the view from *Dover Beach* foreshortens our understanding of Western modernity. But it also gives us a false and distorted perspective on the transition. It makes us read the rise of modernity in terms of the dissipation of certain beliefs, either as its major cause (“rational” explanations) or as inevitable concomitant (“social” expectations). What is beyond the horizon on *Dover Beach* is the possibility that what mainly differentiates us from our forebears is not so much our explicit beliefs as what I want to call the background understanding against which our beliefs are formulated.

Here I am picking up on an idea which has been treated in the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Michael Polanyi, and been further elaborated recently by John Searle and Hubert Dreyfus.⁵ The notion is that our explicit beliefs about our world and ourselves are held against a background of unformulated (and perhaps in part unformulable) understandings, in relation to which these beliefs make the sense they do. These understandings take a variety of forms and range over a number of matters. In one dimension, the background incorporates matters

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1926); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1958); John Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do* (New York: Harper, 1979).

which *could* be formulated as beliefs, but aren't functioning as such in our world (and couldn't *all* function as such because of their unlimited extent). To take Wittgenstein's example from *On Certainty*, I don't normally have a *belief* that the world didn't start only five minutes ago, but the whole way I enquire into things treats the world as being there since time out of mind.⁶ Similarly, I don't usually have the belief that a huge pit hasn't been dug in front of my door, but I treat the world that way as I emerge in the morning to go to work. In my ways of dealing with things is incorporated the background understanding that the world is stable and has been there a long time.

In other dimensions, I have this kind of understanding of myself as an agent with certain powers, of myself as an agent among other agents, on certain, only partly explicit footings with them. And I want to add: an agent moving in certain kinds of social spaces, with a sense of how both I and these spaces inhabit time, a sense of how both I and they relate to the cosmos, and to God or whatever I recognize as the source(s) of good.

In my addition here, I have entered controversial territory. While perhaps everyone can easily agree on the kinds of background understandings I cited from Wittgenstein, and it is arguably obvious that I have some sense of myself as agent, the notion that different modes of social belonging, different understandings of time —and even more, of God, the good, or the cosmos — should be part of the background may arouse resistance. That is because we easily can believe that we have background understanding in the inescapable dimensions of our lives as agents, functioning in a physical and social world. But when we come to our supposed relations to God, the good, or the cosmos, surely these things only enter our world through our being inducted into our society's culture, and they must enter in the form of beliefs which have been handed down to us.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), paragraphs 260ff.

But this is in fact not how it works. Of course, in any theistic culture there will be *some* beliefs about God, but our sense of him and our relation to him will also be formed by modes of ritual, by the kinds of prayer we have been taught, by what we pick up from the attitudes of pious and impious people, and the like. A similar point can be made about the different kinds of social space. There may be some doctrines formulated about the nature of society and the hierarchical rankings that constitute it which are explicitly proffered for our adherence, but we also come to understand whole “volumes” in the ways we are taught (e.g., to show deference to certain people or at certain times and places). A social understanding is built into what Pierre Bourdieu calls our “habitus,” the ways we are taught to behave, which become unreflecting, “second nature” to us.⁷

We know our way around society somewhat the way we know our way around our physical environment, not primarily and principally because we have some map of either in our heads, but because we know how to treat different people and situations appropriately. In this know-how there is, for example, a stance toward the elders which treats them as having a certain dignity. What it is about them which is felt to command this stance may not yet be spelt out: there may be no word for “dignity” in the vocabulary of the tribe. But whatever it is which we shall later want to articulate with this word is already in the world of the youngsters who bow in that particular way, address their elders in low tones and with the proper language, and so forth. “Dignity” is in their world

⁷ See *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980). “On pourrait, déformant le mot de Proust, dire que les jambes, les bras sont pleins d’impératifs engourdis. Et l’on n’en finirait pas d’énumérer les valeurs faites corps, par la transsubstantiation qu’opère la persuasion clandestine d’une pédagogie implicite, capable d’inculquer toute une cosmologie, une éthique, une métaphysique, une politique, à travers des injonctions aussi insignifiantes que ‘tiens-toi droit’ ou ‘ne tiens pas ton couteau de la main gauche’ et d’inscrire dans les détails en apparence les plus insignifiants de la tenue, du maintien ou des manières corporelles et verbales les principes fondamentaux de l’arbitraire culturel, ainsi placés hors des prises de la conscience et de l’explicitation” (*Le sens pratique*, p. 117).

in the sense that they deal with it, respond to it, perhaps revere it or resent it. It is just not formulated in a description, and hence does not figure in an explicit belief. Its being in their world is part of their background understanding.

It is in similar ways that God or the good can figure in our world. Surrounding express doctrines will be a richer penumbra of embodied understanding. We can imaginatively extend the example of the previous paragraph. Suppose that one of the things which makes the elders worthy of respect is just that they are closer to the gods. Then the divine too, which we revere through these old people, will be in our world in part through our knowing how to treat them. It will be in our world through the appropriate habitus.

We might in fact distinguish three levels of understanding which have been invoked in the above discussion. There is the level of explicit doctrine, about society, the divine, the cosmos; and there is the level of what I called, following Bourdieu, the habitus or embodied understanding. Somewhat between the two is a level which we might call (with some trepidation, because this is a semantically overloaded term) the symbolic. I mean by this whatever understanding is expressed in ritual, in symbols (in the everyday sense), in works of art. What exists on this level is more explicit than mere gesture or appropriate action, because ritual and work can have a mimetic or an evocative dimension, and hence point to something which they imitate or call forth. But it is not explicit in the self-conscious way of doctrinal formulations, which can be submitted to the demands of logic, permit of a metadiscourse in which they are examined in turn, and the like.

We can see why it might be a big mistake to think that what distinguishes us from our premodern forebears is mainly a lot of beliefs of theirs which we have shed. Even if we want, following "Dover Beach," to see their age as one of a faith which we have lost, it might be very misleading to think of this difference in terms simply of *doctrines* to which they subscribe and we do not. Because

below the doctrinal level are at least two others: that of embodied background understanding and that which while nourished in embodied habitus is given expression on the symbolic level. As well as the doctrinal understanding of society, there is the one incorporated in habitus, and a level of images as yet unformulated in doctrine, for which we might borrow a term frequently used by contemporary French writers: “l’imaginaire social” —let’s call it the “social imaginary.”

Why does it matter to see the changeover as more than doctrinal? Because otherwise we may have a very distorted picture of it. When people undergo a change in belief, they shift their views between already formulated possibilities. Formerly, they thought that God exists. But in formulating this belief they were quite aware that there was another option; indeed, usually they were aware that others had already taken the atheist option, that there were arguments for and against it, and so forth. Now when they switch to atheism, they move within positions already in their repertory, between points already within their horizons.

But some of the major changes in embodied understanding and social imaginary alter the very repertory and introduce new possibilities which were not before on the horizon. I hope to show this in a minute in connection with the rise of the public sphere. Modernity involves the coming to be of new kinds of public space, which cannot be accounted for in terms of changes in explicit views, either of factual belief or of normative principle. Rather the transition involves to some extent the definition of new possible spaces hitherto outside the repertory of our forebears, and beyond the limits of their social imaginary.

The consequence of seeing these changes as alterations of (factual or normative) belief is that we unwittingly make our ancestors too much like us. To the extent that we see ourselves as just differing from them in *belief*, we see them as having the same doctrinal repertory as ours, but just opting differently within it. But in order to give them the same repertory we have to align

their embodied understanding and social imaginary with ours. We falsely make them in this sense our contemporaries and grievously underestimate the nature and scope of the change that brought our world about.

So an acultural theory tends to make us both miss the original vision of the good implicit in Western modernity and underestimate the nature of the transformation which brought this modernity about. These two drawbacks appear to be linked. Some of the important shifts in culture, in our understandings of personhood, the good, and the like, which have brought about the original vision of Western modernity, can only be seen if we bring into focus the major changes in embodied understanding and social imaginary which the last centuries have brought about. They tend to disappear if we flatten these changes out, read our own background and imaginary into our forebears, and just concentrate on their beliefs which we no longer share. I hope these connections will come clearer in the sequel, as we come closer to grasping just how our understanding of our relations to society, time, the cosmos, the good, and God have been transformed with the coming of our era.

II

I want now to try to trace some of these transformations by looking at the rise of one facet of modern society, what is often called the “public sphere.” What do we mean by a public sphere? It’s not easy to say, because, as I shall argue later, we lack a clear, agreed social ontology which would allow us to describe it uncontroversially. I am going to step into the breach and offer my own terminology: I want to describe the public sphere as a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these. I say “*a* common space” because although the media are multiple, as well as the exchanges

which take place in them, these are deemed to be in principle intercommunicating. The discussion we're having on television now takes account of what was said in the newspaper this morning, which in turn reports on the radio debate yesterday, and so on. That's why we usually speak of the public sphere, in the singular.

The public sphere is a central feature of modern society. So much so that even where it is in fact suppressed or manipulated it has to be faked. Modern despotic societies have generally felt compelled to go through the motions. Editorials appear in the party newspapers, purporting to express the opinions of the writers, offered for the consideration of their fellow citizens; mass demonstrations are organized, purporting to give vent to the felt indignation of large numbers of people. All this takes place as though a genuine process were in train of forming a common mind through exchange, even though the result is carefully controlled from the beginning.

Why this semblance? Because the public sphere is not only a ubiquitous feature of any modern society; it also plays a crucial role in its self-justification as a free self-governing society, that is, as a society in which (a) people form their opinions freely, both as individuals and in coming to a common mind, and (b) these common opinions matter: they in some way take effect on or control government. Just because it has this central role, the public sphere is the object of concern and criticism in liberal societies as well. One question is whether the debate is not being controlled and manipulated here as well, in a fashion less obvious than within despotic regimes, but all the more insidiously, by money, or government, or some collusive combination of the two. Another is whether the nature of certain modern media permits the truly open, multilateral exchange which is supposed to issue in a truly common opinion on public matters.

There is a tendency to consider something which is so important and central to our lives almost as a fact of nature, as though something of the sort had always been there. Modern liberal so-

ciety would then have innovated in allowing the public sphere its freedom, and in making government in a sense responsible to it instead of the other way around. But something like public opinion would always have existed. This, however, would be an anachronistic error, which obscures what is new, and as yet not fully understood, in this kind of common space. I want to try to cast a little more light on this, and in the process get clearer on the transformations in background understanding and social imaginary which produced modern civilization.

In this discussion, I want to draw in particular on two very interesting books: one by Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (published almost thirty years ago but recently translated into English),⁸ which deals with the development of public opinion in eighteenth-century Western Europe; the other a very recent publication by Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*,⁹ which describes the analogous phenomenon in the British-American colonies.

A central theme of the Habermas book is the emergence in Western Europe in the eighteenth century of a new concept of public opinion. Getting clear what was new in this will help to define what is special about the modern public sphere. Following the anachronistic reading, we might think that what was new in the eighteenth-century appeals to public opinion was the demand that government be responsive to it, but that which government was called on to heed could be deemed to have already been in existence for an indefinite period. But this would be a mistake.

People had, of course, always recognized something like a general opinion, which held in a particular society, or perhaps among humankind as a whole. This might be looked down on, as a source of error, following Plato's low estimation of "doxa." Or it might be seen in other contexts as setting standards for right conduct.¹⁰

⁸ Translated by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); German original: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1962).

⁹ Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990.

¹⁰ Habermas (*Structural Transformation*, p. 91) refers to Locke in this connection.

But in either case, it is different from the new public opinion in three important respects: “the opinion of humankind” is seen as (i) unreflected, (ii) unmediated by discussion and critique, and (iii) passively inculcated in each successive generation. Public opinion, by contrast, is meant (i) to be the product of reflection, (ii) to emerge from discussion, and (iii) to reflect an actively produced consensus.

The difference lies in more than the evaluation, there passive acceptance, here critical thinking. It was not just that the eighteenth century decided to pin Cartesian medals onto the opinion of humankind. The crucial change is that the underlying process is different. Where the opinion of humankind was supposed to have passed down in each case from parents and elders, in a myriad of unlinked, local acts of transmission, public opinion was deemed to have been elaborated by a discussion among those who held it, wherein their different views were somehow confronted, and they were able to come to a common mind. The opinion of humankind is probably held in identical form by you and me, because we are formed by the same socializing process. We share in a common public opinion, if we do, because we have worked it out together. We don’t just happen to have identical views; we have elaborated our common convictions in a common act of definition.

But now in each case, whether as opinion of humankind or public opinion, the same views will be held by people who have never met. That’s why the two can be confused. But in the later case, something else is supposed: it is understood that the two widely separated people sharing the same view have been linked in a kind of space of discussion, wherein they have been able to exchange ideas together with others and reach this common end-point.

What is this common space? It’s a rather strange thing, when one comes to think of it. The two people I’m invoking here have by hypothesis never met. But they are seen as linked in a common space of discussion through media—in the eighteenth century, print media. Book, pamphlets, newspapers circulated among the

educated public, as vehicles for theses, analyses, arguments, counterarguments, referring to and refuting each other. These were widely read and often discussed in face-to-face gatherings, in drawing rooms, coffee houses, saloons, and/or in more (authoritatively) “public” places, like Parliament. The sensed general view which resulted from all this, if any, counted as public opinion in this new sense.

I say “counted as” public opinion. And here we get to the heart of the strangeness. Because an essential part of the difference is made by what the process is deemed to amount to. The opinion of humankind spreads through myriad unlinked acts of transmission, as I said above, while public opinion is formed by the participants together. But if one made an exhaustive list of all the face-to-face encounters that occur in each case, the two processes wouldn’t look all that different. In both cases, masses of people sharing the same views never meet, but everyone is linked with everyone through some chain of personal or written transmission. Crucial to the difference is that in the formation of public opinion each of these linked physical or print-mediated encounters is understood by the participants as forming part of a single discussion proceeding toward a common resolution. This can’t be *all*, of course; that is, the encounters couldn’t be the same in all other respects and just differ in how they were understood by the participants. For instance, it is crucial to these linked encounters that they are constantly inter-referring: I attempt to refute in my conversation with you today the *Times* editorial of last week, which took some public figure to task for a speech she made the week before, and so forth. It is also crucial that they be carried on as arguments. If in each case someone just passively accepted what another said —as in the ideal-typical case, of authoritative transmission of tradition from parents to children— these events couldn’t be plausibly construed as forming part of a society-wide *discussion*. But without this common understanding of their linkage on the part of the participants, no one even from the outside could take

them as constituting a common discussion with a potentially single outcome. A general understanding of what things *count as* is constitutive of the reality here which we call the public sphere.

In a similar fashion, there are clearly infrastructural conditions for the rise of the public sphere. There had to be printed materials, circulating from a plurality of independent sources, for there to be the bases of what could be seen as a common discussion. As is often said, the modern public sphere relied on “print capitalism” to get going. But, as Warner shows, printing itself, and even print capitalism, didn’t provide a sufficient condition. They had to be taken up in the right cultural context, where the essential common understandings could arise.¹¹

This comes to light if we compare, as Warner does, the uses of circulating print materials to sustain a public sphere with other earlier uses —for instance, to diffuse religious doctrines or modes of piety. Improving devotional books were meant to be read and their contents internalized by each person. Warner quotes Cotton Mather’s description of his own practice: “In visits to credible Families, I will bespeak little Studies and Book-shelves for the little Sons that are capable of conversing with such things; and begin to furnish their Libraries and perswade them to the Religion of the Closet.”¹² The utility of printing was that it could make possible the wide diffusion of these practices of interioriaation. But the “Religion of the Closet” didn’t depend for its practice in each individual case on the fact that it was probably being followed simultaneously in hundreds, even thousands of other homes.

By contrast, a pamphlet or editorial, as an intervention in an ongoing public debate, demanded to be read as a speech act addressed to a whole public. It takes on a different meaning for the reader, who “now also incorporates into the meaning of the printed object an awareness of potentially limitless others who may also

¹¹ Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), chapter 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

be reading. For that reason, it becomes possible to imagine oneself, in the act of reading, becoming part of an arena of the national people that cannot be realized except through such mediated imagining.”¹³

Warner’s last sentence touches on a crucial point. To see its relevance, let me try to pull together the argument so far. “Public opinion” is different from “the opinion of humankind” because it is supposedly arrived at by critical common discussion. This supposes some kind of common space of discussion, which must be seen as linking people who may never meet. This is what we are calling the public sphere. This public sphere is made possible by the circulation of print materials; but these are not its sufficient condition. It is also partly constituted by common understandings, whose tenour is that these materials count as addressed to a large public, and the various contested readings of them in face-to-face encounters count as parts of a larger, nationwide debate.

But in what form do these common understandings arise? Are they a matter of explicit, generally held beliefs? The example just cited shows that this is not necessarily so and seems not to have been so in the case of the early public sphere. For our understanding of how and to whom a given speech act or text is addressed is usually quite implicit. It is a matter of background understanding and is carried in such things as the mode of address and the tone and language used, which we pick up on without needing to formulate what is going on, as our focal attention is captured by the “content” which is being asserted.

A reader who picked up one of the early broadsheets or newspaper editorials in the mid-eighteenth-century American colonies attacking the corrupt practices of colonial or imperial government could pick up on the common space this speech act supposed in the style and mode of writing. The piece might be signed “Cato,” or some other Roman paragon of austere virtue, and was fashioned as an appeal to fellow citizens. It evoked a speech that might have

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

been made before the people assembled in some virtuous republic. The use of print to evoke a speech before an assembly projects the audience of this bit of writing as a quasi-assembly. In other words, it projects the kind of common space of discussion we call the public sphere, where people who may never meet are nevertheless brought together as discussion partners. It only requires that the social and cultural conditions be right for this move to be taken seriously as against being seen as a bizarre joke, and the public sphere begins to exist.

But a piece of writing does this not by articulating a theoretical description of this sphere or of the nation as a quasi-assembly. It brings it off rather by projecting the sphere as the implicit background of its style, signature, and mode of address. The public sphere has to be supposed as unmentioned context to make sense of this bit of writing. It is projected, as it were, in the background understanding of the text, rather than in its doctrinal content. At the same time, this projection makes use of familiar images, here the highly prestigious reference point of the Roman Republic and its public space, which is projected onto the dispersed colonial population to form the new picture of the people as the subject of a potential common act of decision.¹⁴

In other words, the understanding which constitutes the public sphere can arise, as in this example, not in the realm of explicit beliefs, but through shifts in background understanding and the social imaginary. This is why we have trouble finding the right concepts to understand it. A social ontology has been widespread which recognizes the acts of individuals, the social structures in which they act (often understood in terms of the rules which define them), and the “ideas” these individuals may have, some of

¹⁴Habermas (*Structural Transformation*, p. 36) also notes how the atmosphere in ancien régime salons was set by the modes of tact which permitted the participants to disregard the great differences of social status among them. Implicitly, the understanding was that, in this company, reason and not social rank should carry the day in discussion, which was to be carried on within the parity of the “simply human” (des bloss Menschlichen).

which concern the nature of society and are formulated by great thinkers from time to time in the masterworks of political theory.

But with the rise of the public sphere we seem to have something which cannot fit into these categories. It doesn't fit into these three pigeonholes, but radically cuts across them. The public sphere is not quite like a social structure, constituted by the rules governing action within it. There are no such definite rules. But more gravely, it is not just a structure, but is also constituted by our understanding of it, and thus seems to fall also into the realm of "ideas." But this understanding is largely not made of "ideas" but of background and the imaginary. Moreover, the action which takes place in this sphere is common action, and not simply that of individuals.

We have a reality here which our "commonsense" social ontology, deeply impregnated by methodological individualism and the bias toward the explicit, cannot cope with. I propose to call this kind of reality a "social" or (in the relevant case) "political form."

We are now in a slightly better position to understand what kind of thing a public sphere is, and why it was new in the eighteenth century. It's a kind of common space, I have been saying, in which people who never meet understand themselves to be engaged in discussion and capable of reaching a common mind. Let me introduce some new terminology. We can speak of "common space" when people come together in a common act of focus for whatever purpose, be it ritual, the enjoyment of a play, conversation, the celebration of a major event, or whatever. Their focus is common, as against merely convergent, because it is part of what is commonly understood that they are attending to the common object, or purpose, together, as against each person just happening, on his or her own, to be concerned with the same thing. In this sense, the "opinion of humankind" offers a merely convergent unity, while public opinion is supposedly generated out of a series of common actions.

Now an intuitively understandable kind of common space is set up when people are assembled for some purpose, be it on an

intimate level for conversation or on a larger, more “public” scale for a deliberative assembly, or a ritual, or a celebration, or the enjoyment of a football match or an opera, and the like. Common space arising from assembly in some locale I want to call “topical common space.”

But the public sphere, as we have been defining it, is something different. It transcends such topical spaces. We might say that it knits together a plurality of such spaces into one larger space of nonassembly. The same public discussion is deemed to pass through our debate today, and someone else’s earnest conversation tomorrow, and the newspaper interview Thursday, and so on. I want to call this larger kind of nonlocal common space “metatopical.” The public sphere which emerges in the eighteenth century is a metatopical common space.

What we have been discovering about such spaces is that they are partly constituted by common understandings; that is, they are not reducible to, but cannot exist without such understandings. New, unprecedented kinds of spaces require new and unprecedented understandings. Such is the case for the public sphere.

What is new is not metatopicality. The church and the state were already existing metatopical spaces. But getting clear about the novelty brings us to the essential features of modernity. We can articulate the new on two levels: what the public sphere *does* and what it *is*.

First, what it does; or rather, what is done in it. The public sphere is the locus of a discussion potentially engaging everyone (although in the eighteenth century the claim was only to involve the educated or “enlightened” minority) in which the society can come to a common mind about important matters. This common mind is a reflective view, emerging from critical debate, and not just a summation of whatever views happen to be held in the population.¹⁵ As a consequence it has a normative status: government

¹⁵This indicates how far the late-eighteenth-century notion of public opinion is from what is the object of poll research today. The phenomenon that “public

ought to listen to it. There were two reasons for this, of which one tended to gain ground and ultimately swallow up the other. The first is that this opinion is likely to be enlightened, and hence government would be well-advised to follow it. This statement by Louis Sébastien Mercier, quoted by Habermas,¹⁶ gives clear expression to this idea:

Les bons livres dépendent des lumières dans toutes les classes du peuple; ils ornent la vérité. Ce sont eux qui déjà gouvernent l'Europe; ils éclairent le gouvernement sur ses devoirs, sur sa faute, sur son véritable intérêt, sur l'opinion publique qu'il doit écouter et suivre: ces bons livres sont des maîtres patients qui attendent le réveil des administrateurs des États et le calme de leurs passions.

Kant famously had a similar view.

The second reason emerges with the view that the people is sovereign. Government is then not only wise to follow opinion; it is morally bound to do so. Governments ought to legislate and rule in the midst of a reasoning public. Parliament, or the court, in taking its decisions ought to be concentrating together and enacting what has already been emerging out of enlightened debate among the people. From this arises what Warner, following Habermas, calls the “principle of supervision,” which insists that

opinion research” aims to measure is, in terms of my above distinction, a convergent unity and doesn't need to emerge from discussion. It is analogous to the opinion of humankind. The ideal underlying the eighteenth-century version emerges in this passage from Burke, quoted by Habermas (*Structural Transformation*, pp. 117–18) : “In a free country, every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters; that he has a right to form and deliver an opinion on them. They sift, examine and discuss them. They are curious, eager, attentive and jealous; and by making such matters the daily subjects of their thoughts and discoveries, vast numbers contract a very tolerable knowledge of them, and some a very considerable one. . . . Whereas in other countries none but men whose office calls them to it having much care or thought about public affairs, and not daring to try the force of their opinions with one another, ability of this sort is extremely rare in any station of life. In free countries, there is often found more real public wisdom and sagacity in shops and manufactories than in cabinets of princes in countries where none dares to have an opinion until he comes to them.”

¹⁶ *Structural Transformation*, p. 119.

the proceedings of governing bodies be public, open to the scrutiny of the discerning public.¹⁷ By going public, legislative deliberation informs public opinion and allows it to be maximally rational, while at the same time exposing itself to its pressure, and thus acknowledging that legislation should ultimately bow to the clear mandates of this opinion.¹⁸

The public sphere is, then, a locus in which rational views are elaborated which should guide government. This comes to be seen as an essential feature of a free society. As Burke put it, “in a free country, every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters.”¹⁹ There is, of course, something very new about this in the eighteenth century, compared to the immediate past of Europe. But one might ask: is this new in history? Isn’t this a feature of all free societies?

No; there is a subtle but important difference. Let’s compare the modern society with a public sphere with an ancient republic or polis. In this latter, we can imagine that debate on public affairs may be carried on in a host of settings: among friends at a symposium, between those who meet in the agora, and then of course in the ekklesia where the thing is finally decided. The debate swirls around and ultimately reaches its conclusion in the competent decision-making body. Now the difference is that the discussions outside this body prepare for the action ultimately taken by the same people within it. The “unofficial” discussions are not separated off, given a status of their own, and seen to constitute a kind of metatopical space.

¹⁷ *Letters*, p. 41.

¹⁸ See Fox’s speech, quoted in *Structural Transformation*, pp. 65–66: “It is certainly right and prudent to consult the public opinion. . . . If the public opinion did not happen to square with mine; if, after pointing out to them the danger, they did not see it in the same light with me, or if they conceived that another remedy was preferable to mine, I should consider it as my due to my king, due to my Country, due to my honour to retire, that they might pursue the plan which they thought better, by a fit instrument, that is by a man who thought with them. . . . but one thing is most clear, that I ought to give the public the means of forming an opinion.”

¹⁹ Cited in *Structural Transformation*, p. 117.

But that is what happens with the modern public sphere. It is a space of discussion which is self-consciously seen as being outside power. It is supposed to be listened to by power, but it is not itself an exercise of power. It's in this sense extrapolitical status is crucial. As we shall see below, it links the public sphere with other facets of modern society which also are seen as essentially extrapolitical. The extrapolitical status is not just defined negatively, as a lack of power. It is also seen positively: just because public opinion is not an exercise of power, it can be ideally disengaged from partisan spirit and rational.

In other words, with the modern public sphere comes the idea that political power must be supervised and checked by something outside. What was new, of course, was not that there was an outside check, but rather the nature of this instance. It is not defined as the will of God, or the Law of Nature (although it could be thought to articulate these), but as a kind of discourse, emanating from reason and not from power or traditional authority. As Habermas puts it, power was to be tamed by reason. The notion was that “*veritas non auctoritas facit legem.*”²⁰

In this way, the public sphere was different from everything preceding it. An “unofficial” discussion, which nevertheless can come to a verdict of great importance, it is defined outside the sphere of power. It borrows some of the images from ancient assemblies, as we saw above from the American case, to project the whole public as one space of discussion. But, as Warner shows, it innovates in relation to this model. Those who intervene are, as it were, like speakers before an assembly. But unlike their models in real ancient assemblies, they strive for a certain impersonality, a certain impartiality, an eschewing of party spirit. They strive to negate their own particularity, and thus to rise above “any private or partial view.” This is what Warner calls “the principle of negativity.” And we can see it not only as suiting the print, as against spoken, medium, but also as giving expression to this crucial fea-

²⁰ *Structural Transformation*, p. 82.

ture of the new public sphere as extrapolitical, as a discourse of reason *on* and *to* power, rather than *by* power.²¹

As Warner points out, the rise of the public sphere involves a breach in the old ideal of a social order undivided by conflict and difference. On the contrary, it means that debate breaks out and continues, involving in principle everybody, and this is perfectly legitimate. The old unity will be gone forever. But a new unity is to be substituted. For the ever-continuing controversy is not meant to be an exercise in power, a quasi-civil war carried on by dialectical means. Its potentially divisive and destructive consequences are offset by the fact that it is a debate outside of power, a rational debate, striving without *parti pris* to define the common good. “The language of resistance to controversy articulates a norm for controversy. It silently transforms the ideal of a social order free from conflictual debate into an ideal of debate free from social conflict.”²²

So what the public sphere does is enable the society to come to a common mind, without the mediation of the political sphere, in a discourse of reason outside power, which nevertheless is normative for power. Now let’s try to see what, in order to do this, it has to *be*.

We can perhaps best do this by trying to define what is new and unprecedented in it. And I want to get to this in two steps, as it were. First, there is the aspect of its novelty, which has already been touched on. When we compare the public sphere with one of the important sources of its constitutive images (*viz.*, the ancient republic), what springs to our notice is its extrapolitical locus. The “Republic of Letters” was a common term which the members of the international society of savants in interchange

²¹ See *Letters*, pp. 40–42. Warner also points to the relationship with the impersonal agency of modern capitalism (pp. 62–63), as well as the closeness of fit between the impersonal stance and the battle against impersonal corruption which was so central a theme in the colonies (pp. 65–66), in the framing of this highly overdetermined mode.

²² *Letters*, p. 46.

gave themselves toward the end of the seventeenth century. This was a precursor phenomenon to the public sphere; indeed, it contributed to shaping it. Here was a “republic” constituted outside of the political. Both the analogy and the difference gave force and point to this image: it was a republic as a unified association, grouping all enlightened participants, across political boundaries; but it was also a republic in being free from subjection; its “citizens” owed no allegiance but to it, as long as they went about the business of Letters.

Something of this is inherited by the eighteenth-century public sphere. Within it, the members of society come together and pursue a common end; they form and understand themselves to form an association, which is nevertheless not constituted by its political structure. This was not true of the ancient polis or republic. Athens was a society (*koinônia*) only as constituted politically. And the same was true of Rome. The ancient society was given its identity by its laws. On the banners of the legions, “SPQR” stood for “Senatus populusque romanus,” but the “populus” here was the ensemble of Roman citizens, that is, those defined as such by the laws. The people didn’t have an identity, didn’t constitute a unity prior to and outside of these laws.

By contrast, in projecting a public sphere, our eighteenth-century forebears were placing themselves in an association, this common space of discussion, which owed nothing to political structures, but was seen as existing independently of them.

This extrapolitical status is one aspect of the newness: that all the members of a political society (or at least all the competent and “enlightened” members) should be seen as also forming a society outside the state. Indeed, this society was wider than any one state; it extended for some purposes to all of civilized Europe. This is an extremely important aspect and corresponds to a crucial feature of our contemporary civilization, which emerges at this time, and which is visible in more than the public sphere. I want to take this up in a minute, but first we have to take the second step.

For it is obvious that an extrapolitical, international society is by itself not new. It is preceded by the Stoic cosmopolis and, more immediately, by the Christian church. Europeans were used to living in a dual society, one organized by two mutually irreducible principles. So the second facet of the newness of the public sphere has to be defined as its radical secularity.

This is not easy to define, and I am taking a risk in using a term which already is thrown around very loosely in attempts to describe modern civilization. If I nevertheless adopt it, it's because I think an awareness of its etymology may help us to understand what is at stake here, which has something to do with the way human society inhabits time. But this way of describing the difference can only be brought in later, after some preliminary exploration.

The notion of secularity I'm using here is radical, because it stands not only in contrast with a divine foundation for society, but with any idea of society as constituted in something which transcends contemporary common action. For instance, some hierarchical societies conceive themselves as bodying forth some part of the Chain of Being. Behind the empirical fillers of the slots of kingship, aristocracy, and so on, lie the Ideas, or the persisting metaphysical Realities that these people are momentarily embodying. The king has two bodies, only one being the particular, perishable one, which is now being fed and clothed and will later be buried.²³ Within this outlook, what constitutes a society as such is the metaphysical order it embodies.²⁴ People act within a framework which is there prior to and independent of their action.

But secularity contrasts not only with divinely established churches or Great Chains. It is also different from an understanding of our society as constituted by a law which has been ours since

²³ See E. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

²⁴ For an extra-European example of this kind of thing, see Clifford Geertz, *Negara* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), where the prequest Balinese state is described.

time out of mind. Because this too places our action within a framework, one which binds us together and makes us a society, and which transcends our common action.

In contradistinction to all this, the public sphere is an association which is constituted by nothing outside of the common action we carry out in it: coming to a common mind, where possible, through the exchange of ideas. Its existence as an association is just our acting together in this way. This common action is not made possible by a framework which needs to be established in some action-transcendent dimension: either by an act of God, or in a Great Chain, or by a law which comes down to us since time out of mind. This is what makes it radically secular. And this, I want to claim, gets us to the heart of what is new and unprecedented in it.

This is baldly stated. Obviously, this notion of secularity still needs to be made clearer. Perhaps the contrast is obvious enough with Mystical Bodies and Great Chains. But I am claiming a difference from traditional tribal society as well, the kind of thing the German peoples had who founded our modern North Atlantic polities, or in another form what constituted the ancient republics and poleis. And this might be challenged.

These societies were defined by a law. But is that so different from the public sphere? After all, whenever we want to act in this sphere, we meet a number of structures already in place: there are certain newspapers, television networks, publishing houses, and the rest. We act within the channels that these provide. Is this not rather analogous to any member of a tribe, who also has to act within established structures, of chieftainships, councils, annual meetings, and the rest? Of course, the institutions of the public sphere change; newspapers go broke, television networks merge, and the like. But no tribe remains absolutely fixed in its forms; these too evolve over time. If one wanted to claim that this preexisting structure is valid for ongoing action, but not for the founding acts which set up the public sphere, the answer might be

that these are impossible to identify in the stream of time, any more than they are for the tribe. And if we want to insist that there must be such a moment, then we should remark that many tribes as well hand down legends of a founding act, when a Lycurgus, for instance, laid down their laws. Surely he acted outside of existing structures.

Talking of actions within structures brings out the similarities. But there is an important difference which resides in the respective common understandings. It is true that in a functioning public sphere action at any time is carried out within structures laid down earlier. There is a *de facto* arrangement of things. But this arrangement doesn't enjoy any privilege over the action carried out within it. The structures were set up during previous acts of communication in common space, on all fours with those we are carrying out now. Our present action may modify these structures, and that is perfectly legitimate, because these are seen as nothing more than precipitates and facilitators of such communicative action.

But the traditional law of a tribe usually enjoys a different status. We may, of course, alter it over time, following the prescription it itself provides. But it is not seen just as precipitate and facilitator of action. The abolition of the law would mean the abolition of the subject of common action, because the law defines the tribe as an entity. Whereas a public sphere could start up again, even where all media had been abolished, simply by founding new ones, a tribe can only resume its life on the understanding that the law, although perhaps interrupted in its efficacy by foreign conquest, is still in force.

That's what I mean when I say that what constitutes the society, what makes the common agency possible, transcends the common actions carried out within it. It is not just that the structures we need for today's common action arose as a consequence of yesterday's, which, however, was no different in nature from today's. Rather the traditional law is a precondition of any common action, at whatever time, because this common agency couldn't

exist without it. It is in this sense transcendent. By contrast, in a purely secular association (in my sense), common agency arises simply in and as a precipitate of common action.

The crucial distinction underlying the concept of secularity I'm trying to define here can thus be related to this issue: what constitutes the association? Otherwise put, what makes this group of people as they continue over time a common agent? Where this is something which transcends the realm of those common actions this agency engages in, the association is nonsecular. Where the constituting factor is nothing other than such common action—whether the founding acts have already occurred in the past or are now coming about is immaterial — we have secularity.

Now the claim I want to make is that this kind of secularity is modern; that it comes about very recently in human history. Of course, there have been all sorts of momentary and topical common agents which have arisen just from common action. A crowd gathers, people shout protests, and then the governor's house is stoned, or the chateau is burned down. But prior to the modern day, enduring, metatopical common agency was inconceivable on a purely secular basis. People could only see themselves as constituted into such by something action-transcendent, be it a foundation by God, or a Chain of Being which society bodied forth or some traditional law which defined our people. The eighteenth-century public sphere thus represents an instance of a new kind: a metatopical common space and common agency without an action-transcendent constitution, an agency grounded purely in its own common actions.

But how about the founding moments which traditional societies often "remembered"? What about Lycurgus giving Sparta its laws? Surely these show us examples of the constituting factor (here law) issuing from common action: Lycurgus proposes, the Spartans accept. But it is in the nature of such founding moments that they are not put on the same plane as contemporary common action. The foundation acts are displaced onto a higher plane,

into a heroic time, an *illud tempus* which is not seen as qualitatively on a level with what we do today. The founding action is not just like our action, not just an earlier similar act whose precipitate structures ours. It is not just earlier, but in another kind of time, an exemplary time.

And this is why I am tempted to use the term “secular,” in spite of all the misunderstandings which may arise. Because it’s clear that I don’t only mean “not tied to religion.”²⁵ The exclusion is much broader. But the original sense of “secular” was “of the age,” that is, pertaining to profane time. It was close to the sense of “temporal” in the opposition temporal/spiritual. The understanding was that this profane time existed in relation to (surrounded by, penetrated by: it is hard to find the right words here) another time, that of God. This could also be conceived as eternity, which was not just endless profane time, but a kind of gathering of time into a unity; hence the expression “hoi aiônes tôn aiônôn” or “saecula saeculorum.”

The crucial point is things and events had to be situated in relation to more than one kind of time. This is why events which were far apart in profane time could nevertheless be closely linked. Benedict Anderson, in a penetrating discussion of the same transition I am trying to describe here,²⁶ quotes Eric Auerbach on the relation prefiguring-fulfilling in which events of the Old Testament were held to stand to those in the New —for instance, the sacrifice of Isaac and the crucifixion of Christ. These two events were linked through their immediate contiguous places in the divine plan. They are drawn close to identity in eternity, even

²⁵ As a matter of fact, excluding the religious dimension is not even a necessary condition of my concept of secular here, let alone a sufficient one. A secular association is one grounded purely on common action, and this excludes any divine grounding *for this association*, but nothing prevents the people so associated from continuing a religious form of life; indeed, this form may even require that, for example, political associations be purely secular. There are for instance *religious* motives for espousing a separation of church and state.

²⁶ *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 28–31.

though they are centuries (that is, “eons” or “saecula”) apart. In God’s time there is a sort of simultaneity of sacrifice and crucifixion.

Modern “secularization” can be seen from one angle as the rejection of divine time and the positing of time as purely profane. Events now exist only in this one dimension, in which they stand at greater and lesser temporal distance, and in relations of causality with other events of the same kind. The modern notion of simultaneity comes to be, in which events utterly unrelated in cause or meaning are held together simply by their co-occurrence at the same point in this single profane time-line. Modern literature — as well as news media, seconded by social science — has accustomed us to think of society in terms of vertical time-slices, holding together myriad happenings, related and unrelated. I think Anderson is right that this is a typically modern mode of social imagination, which our mediaeval forebears would have found difficult to understand, for where events in profane time are very differently related to higher time, it seems unnatural just to group them side by side in the modern relation of simultaneity. This carries a presumption of homogeneity which is essentially negated by the dominant time-consciousness.²⁷

Now the move to what I am calling “secularity” is obviously related to this radically purged time-consciousness. Premodern understandings of time seem to have always been multidimen-

²⁷ Anderson borrows a term from Walter Benjamin to describe modern profane time. He sees it as a “homogeneous, empty time.” “Homogeneity” captures the aspect I am describing here, that all events now fall into the same kind of time; but the “emptiness” of time takes us into another issue: the way in which both space and time come to be seen as “containers” which things and events contingently fill, rather than as constituted by what fills them. This latter step is part of the metaphysical imagination of modern physics, as we can see with Newton. But it is the step to homogeneity which is crucial for secularization, as I am conceiving it.

The step to emptiness is part of the objectification of time which has been so important a part of the outlook of the modern subject of instrumental reason. Time has been in a sense “spatialized.” Heidegger has mounted a strong attack on this whole conception in his understanding of temporality; see especially *Sein und Zeit*, division 2. But distinguishing secularity from the objectification of time allows us to situate Heidegger on the modern side of the divide. Heideggerian temporality is also a mode of secular time.

sional. The Christian relating of time and eternity was not the only game in town, even in Christendom. There was also the much more widespread sense of a foundation time, a “time of origins” as Eliade used to call it,²⁸ which was complexly related to the present moment in ordinary time, in that it frequently could be ritually approached and its force partly reappropriated at certain privileged moments. That’s why it could not simply be unambiguously placed in the past (in ordinary time). The Christian liturgical year draws on this kind of time-consciousness, widely shared by other religious outlooks, in reenacting the “founding” events of Christ’s life.

It also seems to have been the universal norm to see the important metatopical spaces and agencies as constituted in some mode of higher time. States, churches, were seen to exist almost necessarily in more than one time-dimension, as though it were inconceivable that they have their being purely in the profane or ordinary time. A state which bodied forth the Great Chain was connected to the eternal realm of the Ideas; a people defined by its law communicated with the founding time where this was laid down; and so on.

The move to what I am calling secularity comes when associations are placed firmly and wholly in homogeneous, profane time, whether or not the higher time is negated altogether or other associations are still admitted to exist in it. Such I want to argue is the case with the public sphere, and therein lies its new and unprecedented nature.

I can now perhaps draw this discussion together and try to state what the public sphere *was*. It was a new metatopical space, in which members of society could exchange ideas and come to a common mind. As such it constituted a metatopical agency, but one which was understood to exist independent of the political constitution of society and completely in profane time.

²⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper, 1959), pp. 80ff.

An extrapolitical, secular, metatopical space: this is what the public sphere was and is. And the importance of understanding this lies partly in the fact that it was not the only such, that it was part of a development which transformed our whole understanding of time and society, so that we have trouble recalling what it was like before. I just want to mention here two other such extrapolitical, secular spaces which have played a crucial role in the development of society: first, society considered as extrapolitically organized in a (market) economy; and, second, society as a “people,” that is, as a metatopical agency which is thought to preexist and found the politically organized society. Both of these deserve much fuller exploration. But I shall not be able to do that here. I want only to draw some of the lessons for our understanding of the transition to modernity that emerge out of this discussion of the rise of the public sphere.

III

Earlier I was saying that metatopical spaces are partly constituted in common understandings and that these are often carried in the social imaginary and the background, rather than in explicit ideas about society. A new kind of metatopical space requires new kinds of common understandings. We have now seen a little more what this involves in the case of the public sphere. It required that people be able to conceive an extrapolitical and purely secular space and agency. What is involved in this coming about?

My hypothesis is that premodern metatopical spaces were constituted in higher time. But this was not the case because people had conceived the possibility of a solely profane time and opted for multidimensionality. Rather my suggestion is that multidimensional time was the englobing horizon of their world. It took a revolution to purge time-consciousness and allow only the profane and homogeneous. So in terms of the alternatives discussed in the first section, the transition shouldn't be seen as a change in ideas,

but as one which comes about through transformations in background understanding and the social imaginary. This kind of transition comes about, in the main, not through people conceiving new ideas and then acting on them, but through the coming to be of new social forms which are partly constituted by, and hence help to spread, new background understandings and a new social imaginary.

Of course, ideas play some role. And just because of this, it is easy to fall into the error of believing that the change is primarily one of ideas. For instance, in this rise of the extrapolitical and secular modes of metatopical space in the eighteenth century, the seventeenth-century theories of the state of nature and social contract probably had a part. These are images of the political as constituted out of the prepolitical, and by common action.

But the ideas are very different from the practices, and the second doesn't simply spring from the first. The social contract was, at the outset, something of a foundation myth invented for purposes of normative justification. It could ground certain norms of legitimacy, but it couldn't animate a new social practice or open a new kind of metatopical space. This happened with the rise of the public sphere, which was far from being the mere application of a preexisting theory.

In general, building a new metatopical space has to be something more than just the application of a theory, because people have to come to be able to act in concert with others, which means they have to develop common background understandings and cultivate a common imaginary around recognized symbols and rhetoric. Even where the theory is widely known, and realizing it seems to be aspired to, peoples can fail to enact it, because the modes of common action it requires are still too foreign to them to bring off. For instance, where democratic life has an important place for mass peaceful demonstrations, it is utterly disrupted by mob intimidation and violence. But mass nonviolent action is not easily in the repertory of every people at any time in their history. These forms of action have to be developed before the "theory"

can be “applied.”²⁹ The experience of Paris in 1792–94 is echoed in Bucharest 1989–91.

The social contract theory may have had a role in the rise of the public sphere. It may have helped feed the new social imaginary that this sphere required. But it ought to be clear that modern secular society didn’t arise primarily through the framing of ideas which were later “applied.” Indeed, if the considerations of the preceding paragraph are true, this *couldn’t* have been the case. In order to change the social world the ideas have to come to animate real metatopical spaces, and this can never be just a matter of “application,” the way one puts a blueprint into effect in constructing a building. Or rather, this can only happen when the ideas are so familiar to the common understandings and practices of a people that they can be unproblematically carried out. Only ideas which are not very novel can be effected in this way. For changes of the scale we are describing, it is virtually certain that they will have to be effected first in the semiblind process by which new spaces are constructed out of mutations in practice which transform the background understanding and imaginary in unplanned ways.

There has, of course, been an illusion of plan-application in modern revolutionary action, with what disastrous unintended consequences modern history is an eloquent witness. This has been powered by the modern model of agency as ideally animated by instrumental reason. This has risen along with secularization, for complex reasons which I can’t go into here, but it is not necessarily connected to it.

In any case, it seems characteristic of the kind of transition we’re dealing with here that, unlike a change powered by new ideas, its important innovations are nowhere clearly formulated. It is therefore hard to understand, even for those who make it, perhaps especially for them.

²⁹ I have discussed this in “Comprendre la culture politique,” in Raymond Hudon and Réjean Pelletier, *L’engagement intellectuel: Mélanges en l’honneur de Léon Dion* (Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1991).

This emerges clearly in the way our social imaginary can remain muddled and divided. The revolutionaries who planned to remake the world in secular fashion after destroying the sacral monarchy of France drew on an older notion of higher time in order to mark their age as a new dawn. They introduced a new calendar. The enterprise didn't, indeed couldn't, last very long. But it shows how much the new is still shot through with the old.

And generally, we still draw on the old images of higher time in our political life. We think of our founders as giants, living in a heroic age. This is especially clear in the rhetoric of the American republic, but lots of us go in for it in less spectacular ways. These incoherences are harmless; maybe they aren't even incoherent — any more than Christian artists in the Renaissance when they used the images of classical paganism, which had ceased to be objects of serious belief.

But there are moments when we want to have the solidity of living in political entities grounded in something more than ordinary common action. We can see this in particular in nationalist politics. The modern nation is a community which is conceived as ideally taking its own destiny in hand by common action, in the face of all the old structures of higher time, grounded as it is on a purely natural principle of unity (anyway, in theory). But nations cannot resist projecting their genesis backward in time and hiding the artifice involved in gathering them into one political entity. The unity of French or Ukrainians is projected back into a past where most presumed compatriots didn't speak French or what we now recognize as Ukrainian. It is placed there *an sich* as a seed just waiting to grow, a common will which somehow preceded its empirical manifestations. This is the fictitious, bogus side of modern nationalism, much talked about, and it forms one facet of the reality captured in Anderson's well-crafted title, *Imagined Communities*.³⁰

³⁰ The other side is, of course, that the communities have to repose to some degree on common understandings. These are constitutive and don't have to be fictitious.

But perhaps the most important cost of this half-understanding is that we tend to denature the process in our retrospective understanding. Because what has shifted is and has always been largely in the background, we tend to miss it. It's hard to get clear on the shifts in time-consciousness. We too easily tend to think that people always had our secular understandings of events in homogeneous, profane time and then just added some rather bizarre beliefs about God, eternity, and so on. That's why it seems just like dropping a number of rather tenuous illusions when they come to take on our contemporary view.

In the process, we gravely misidentify both where our ancestors were and where we are. We don't understand their beliefs, because we no longer grasp the background in which they were held. Eternity, for someone firmly in an understanding of time as exclusively secular, is just the damn thing going on without end. Sacral kingship is just a lot of ghostly stuff somehow trailing around power. It's hard for us to understand the shape of the good for them, why they valued what they valued.

But failing to see how they differed is also failing to get clear on what's peculiar to us. We only get a clear view on homogeneous, profane time when we've got the contrast formulated. So by projecting it on them we fail to get a very firm grip on our own background. And this hampers our understanding of ourselves.

That means we miss some of the connections or put them in the wrong places. So that we can easily think that secularity must be incompatible with religious belief (because it must have arisen through a change in belief), but it isn't at all. It is a change in time-consciousness, which massively reorders the relations of God (and not only God) to society, but it isn't by itself a denial of God. At the same time, some of the connections which do hold escape us, such as that between secularity and individualism. We have a wrong view of where our real choices lie. Commitment to certain goods, which seems to us optional, may be deeply embedded in our current manner of being. So that we not only

wrongly believe that we are in a position to repudiate them, but have a rather distorted view of them.

An undistorted understanding of the transition to modernity will show it to be not just a shift of belief, but a massive reordering of what is taken for granted, of the relations among society, agency, time, and thus also God and the cosmos. We have moved from one constellation to the other. Once we see how massive a change has come about here, we shall no longer be tempted to see it as a change in beliefs within a single culture. We shall be induced to adopt a cultural theory of modernity. And this, in turn, will enable us to get clearer on what our modern culture is really about. As always, identifying the other undistortively will allow us better to understand ourselves, as well as seeing better what distinguishes Western modernity from the alternative modes which are springing up in the extra-European world.

The necessity of a cultural theory has perhaps not yet been demonstrated, but I hope that the considerations above on the rise of the public sphere have helped to show that we have to enlarge our usual categories to understand the whole transition. An examination of some other modern social forms should complete the process and clinch the case for a cultural theory.

IV

How does something like the public sphere arise? I said earlier that it only needed the right cultural and social conditions for an editorial addressing the “public” as though they were together at a meeting to be treated not as an odd joke, but as a move in a new, seriously intended game. What are these conditions?

It would be great to be able to explain this. We would be at the very heart of the enterprise of explaining the rise of modernity. I have no such ambition here. But it is clear that an important preliminary to any explanation is getting clear on the scope of the phenomenon to be explained. A little reflection suggests that it is

not the public sphere alone, that this is part of a wider reality which emerges at this time.

The public sphere is an extrapolitical and secular metatopical space. The suggestion is not farfetched that it should be understood against the background of other developments which accentuated the significance of the extrapolitical secular.

One such development was the revolution in natural science. The “mechanization of the world picture” took the natural universe decisively out of the Great Chain of Being and placed it very firmly in homogeneous, profane time. This undoubtedly played a role. But it did so more as a conception of the world than as a new social space or practice —even though on this latter plane the exchange of the small fraternity of scientific thinkers anticipated the later development of the public sphere. But what we should also be attentive to is the emergence of new kinds of social spaces beyond the narrow purview of the scientific elite, which could have provided a context for the rise of the public sphere.

Habermas places its emergence in this kind of context, noting that the new public sphere brought together people who had already carved out a “private” space as economic agents and owners of property, as well as an “intimate” sphere which was the locus of their family life. The agents constituting this new public sphere were thus both “bourgeois” and “homme.”³¹

I think there is a very important link here. The importance of these new kinds of “private” space —that is, the heightened sense of their significance in human life —and the growing consensus in favour of entrenching their independence in the face of state and church bestowed in fact exceptional importance on an extrapolitical and secular domain of life. It is hard not to believe that this in some way facilitated the rise of the public sphere.

I would like to place these forms of privacy in a further historical context. This is what I have called the “affirmation of ordi-

³¹ *Structural Transformation*, chapter 2, sections 6 and 7.

nary life.”³² By this I mean the broad movement in European culture, which seems to have been carried first by the Protestant Reformation, which steadily enhances the significance of production and family life. Whereas the dominant ethics which descend from the ancient world tended to treat these as infrastructural to the “good life” (defined in terms of supposedly “higher” activities, like contemplation or citizen participation), and whereas mediaeval Catholicism leaned to a view which made the life of dedicated celibacy the highest form of Christian practice, the Reformers stressed that we follow God first of all in our callings and in our families. The ordinary is sanctified or, put in other terms, the claims to special sanctity of certain types of life (the monastic), or special places (churches), or special acts (the Mass) were rejected as part of false and impious belief that humans could in some way control the action of grace.

But to say that all claims to special sanctity were rejected is to say that the nodal points where profane time especially connected with divine time were repudiated. We live our ordinary lives, work in our callings, sustain our families, in profane time. In the new perspective, this is what God demands of us, and not any attempts on our part to connect with eternity. That connection is purely God’s affair. Thus the issue whether we live good or bad lives was henceforth situated firmly in ordinary life and within profane time.

Transposed out of a theological and into a purely human dimension, this gave rise to the constellation of modern beliefs and sensibility which makes the central questions of the good life turn on how we live our ordinary lives and turns its back on supposedly “higher” or more heroic modes of life. It underlies the “bourgeois” ethic of peaceful rational productivity in its polemic against the aristocratic ethic of honour and heroism. It can even appropriate its own forms of heroism, as in the Promethean picture of

³² See *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), chapter 13.

humans as producers, transforming the face of the earth, which we find with Marx. Or it can issue in the more recent ethic of self-fulfillment in relationships, which is very much part of our contemporary world.

This is the background against which we can understand the two developments Habermas picks out. First, the saliency given to the “private” economic agent reflects the significance of the life of production in the ethic of ordinary life. This agent is private, over against the “public” realm of state and other authority. The “private” world of production now has a new dignity and importance. The enhancing of the private in effect gives the charter to a certain kind of individualism. The agent of production acts on his or her own, operates in a sphere of exchange with others which doesn’t need to be constituted by authority. As these acts of production and exchange come to be seen as forming an ideally self-regulating system, the notion emerges of a new kind of extrapolitical and secular sphere, an “economy” in the modern sense. Where the word originally applied to the management of a household, and therefore to a domain which could never be seen as self-regulating, in the eighteenth century the notion arises of an economic system, with the Physiocrats and Adam Smith, and that is the way we understand it today.

The (market) economy comes to constitute a sphere, that is, a way in which people are linked together to form an interconnecting society, not only objectively but in their self-understanding. This sphere is extrapolitical and secularly constituted. But it is in an important sense not public. The time has come perhaps to distinguish some of the senses of this overworked term.

There seem to be two main semantic axes along which this term is used. The first connects “public” to what affects the whole community (“public affairs”) or the management of these affairs (“public authority”). The second makes publicity a matter of access (“this park is open to the public”) or appearance (“the news has been made public”). The new “private” sphere of eco-

conomic agents contrasts with “public” in the first sense. But these agents also came to constitute what we have been calling a public sphere in the second sense, because this sphere is precisely a metatopical common space, a space in which people come together and contact each other. It is a space, we might say, of mutual appearance and in that sense a “public” space.

But the economic sphere proper is not public even in that second sense. The whole set of economic transactions is linked in a series of causal relations, which can be traced, and by which we can understand how they influence each other, but this is neither a matter of common decision (by “public authority”), nor do these linked transactions lie in some public domain of common appearance. And yet I want to speak of a “sphere” because the agents in an economy are seen as being linked in a single society, in which their actions reciprocally affect each other in some systematic way.

The economy is the first mode of society of the new sort which I defined above, a society constituted purely extrapolitically and in profane time. It forms part of the background to the rise of the public sphere. It seems very plausible that the explanation of each is interlinked with that of the other.

The second background Habermas picks out is the intimate sphere. Here we see a development of the second main constituent of ordinary life, the world of the family and its affections. As the eighteenth century develops, this becomes the locus of another demand for “privacy,” this time defined in relation to the second kind of “publicness,” that concerned with access. Family life retreats more and more into an intimate sphere, shielded from the outside world, and even from the other members of a large household. Houses are more and more constructed to allow for the “privacy” of family members, in relation to servants as well as outsiders.

The enhanced value placed on family life, in the context of another long-term development, toward greater concentration on subjectivity and inwardness, has as one of its fruits the eighteenth-century cherishing of sentiment. Another shift occurs, as it were,

in the centre of gravity of the good life, within the broad development which affirms ordinary life, and a new importance comes to repose in our experiencing fine, noble, or exalted sentiments. This new ethic both defines and propagates itself through literature. Perhaps its central vehicle was the epistolary novel. Rousseau's *Julie* was a paradigm case.

This literature helped define a new understanding of an intimate sphere of close relations, the home at its finest of noble sentiments and exalted experience. This understanding of experience was further enriched by a new conception of art in the category of the "aesthetic." This is another fruit of subjectification, of course, because art understood in this category is being defined in terms of our reaction to it. It is in this century that music becomes more and more detached from public and liturgical function and comes to join the other arts as objects of aesthetic enjoyment, enriching the intimate sphere.

This intimate realm was also part of the background against which the public sphere emerged. And not only because it constituted part of the domain of the (extrapolitical and secular) "private," but also because the intimate domain had to be defined through public interchange, both of literary works and of criticism. This is only superficially a paradox, as we shall see below. A new definition of human identity, however "private," can only become generally accepted through being defined and affirmed in public space. And this critical exchange itself came to constitute a public sphere. We might say that it came to constitute an axis of the public sphere, along with, even slightly ahead of, the principal axis which concerned us above: exchange around matters of public (in the first sense) policy. People who never met came to a mutually recognized common mind about the moving power of Rousseau's *Julie*, even as they came to do in the early revolutionary period about the insights of his *Contrat social*.

It is against this whole economic and intimate-sentimental background that we have to understand the rise of the public

sphere in Europe. And this means that we should understand it as part of a family of extrapolitical and secular constitutions of "society." On one side, it relates to the economy, even further removed from the political realm in that it is not a domain of publicity in any sense. On the other side, it helped to nourish the new images of popular sovereignty, which gave rise to new and sometimes frightening forms of political action in this century. These three forms need to be treated together, if we are to understand them adequately, I cannot undertake this here.

V

In conclusion, I want to link this discussion with the issue I raised in the first section: cultural and acultural theories of modernity. I spoke there about the popularity of acultural accounts, that is, explanations of Western modernity which see it not as one culture among others, but rather as what emerges when any "traditional" culture is put through certain (rational or social) changes. On this view, modernity is not specifically Western, even though it may have started in the West. It is rather that form of life toward which all cultures converge, as they go through, one after another, substantially the same changes. These may be seen primarily in "intellectual" terms, as the growth of rationality and science; or primarily in "social" terms, as the development of certain institutions and practices: a market economy, or rationalized forms of administration. But in either case the changes are partly understood in terms of the loss of traditional beliefs, either because they are undermined by the growth of reason or because they are marginalized by institutional change.

Even the social explanations assume that these beliefs suffer from a lack of rational justification, since the solvent effect of social change is held to lie in the fact that it disturbs old patterns which made it possible to hold onto these earlier beliefs in spite of their lack of rational grounding. For instance, the continuance of a

static, agricultural way of life, largely at the mercy of the vagaries of climate, supposedly makes certain religious beliefs look plausible, which lose their hold once humans see what it is to take their fate in their own hands through industrial development. Or a largely immobile society leads individuals to see their fate as bound up closely with that of their neighbours and inhibits the growth of an individualism which naturally flourishes once these constricting limits are lifted.

The acultural theory tends to see the process of modernity as involving among other things the shucking off of beliefs and ways which don't have much rational justification, leaving us with an outlook many of whose elements can be seen more as hard, residual facts: that we are individuals (i.e., beings whose behaviour is ultimately to be explained as individuals), living in profane time, who have to extract what we need to live from nature, and whom it behooves therefore to be maximally instrumentally rational, without allowing ourselves to be diverted from this goal by the metaphysical and religious beliefs which held our forebears back.³³ Instrumental rationality commands a scientific attitude to nature and human life.

At the heart of the acultural approach is the view that modernity involves our "coming to see" certain kernel truths about the human condition, those I have just adverted to. There is some justification for talking of our "coming to see" the truth when we consider the revolution of natural science which begins in the

³³ This development of instrumental rationality is what is frequently described as "secularization." See, for instance, Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little Brown, 1966), pp. 24–25: "A village chief in a tribal society operates largely with a given set of goals and a given set of means of attaining these goals which have grown up and been hallowed by custom. The secularization of culture is the processes whereby traditional orientations and attitudes give way to more dynamic decision-making processes involving the gathering of information, the evaluation of information, the laying out of alternative courses of action, the selection of a given action from among those possible courses, and the means whereby one tests whether or not a given course of action is producing the consequences which were intended." And later: "The emergence of a pragmatic, empirical orientation is one component of the secularization process" (p. 58).

seventeenth century. But the mistake of the acultural approach is to lump all the supposed kernel truths about human life into the same package, as though they were all endorsed equally by “science,” on a par, say, with particle physics.³⁴

I have been arguing that this is a crucial mistake. It misrepresents our forebears, and it distorts the process of transition from them to us. In particular, seeing the change as the decline of certain *beliefs* covers up the great differences in background understanding and in the social imaginary of different ages. More, it involves a sort of ethnocentrism of the present. Since human beings always do hold their explicit beliefs against a background and in the context of an imaginary, failure to notice the difference amounts to the unwitting attribution to them of ours. This is the classic ethnocentric projection.

This projection gives support to the implicit Whiggism of the acultural theory, whereby moderns have “come to see” the kernel truths. If you think of premoderns as operating with the same background understanding of human beings as moderns (i.e., as instrumental individuals) and you code their understandings of God, cosmos, and multidimensional time as “beliefs” held against this background, then these beliefs do, indeed, appear to be arbitrary and lacking in justification, and it is not surprising that the social changes dislodged them.

But our examination of the rise of the social sphere suggests that this is not what happened. It is not that we sloughed off a whole lot of unjustified beliefs, leaving an implicit self-understanding which had always been there, to operate at last

³⁴ Even Ernest Gellner, who is light years of sophistication away from the crudities of Almond and Powell, puts himself in the acultural camp, for all his interesting insights into modernity as a new constellation. He does this by linking what I am calling the supposed “kernel truths” with what he calls “cognitive advance,” in a single package. The modern constellation unchained science, and that in his view seems to confer the same epistemic status on the whole package. “Specialization, atomization, instrumental rationality, independence of fact and value, growth and provisionality of knowledge are all linked with each other” (*Plough, Sword and Book* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988], p. 122).

untrammled. Rather, a constellation of implicit understandings of our relation to God, the cosmos, other humans, and time was replaced by another in a multifaceted mutation. Seeing things this way not only gives us a better handle on what happened. It also allows us to understand ourselves better. As long as we think that our implicit self-understanding is the universal human one, as long as we fail to note its contrast with others, so long shall we have an incomplete and distorted understanding of it. This is always a price of ethnocentrism.

From a standpoint immured within any culture other cultures look weird. No doubt we would look strange —as well as blasphemous and licentious —to our mediaeval ancestors. But there is a particularly high cost in self-misunderstanding which attaches to the ethnocentrism of the modern. The kernel truths of the acultural theory incorporate an —often unreflective —methodological individualism and a belief in the omnicompetence of natural science. Impelled by the latter, its protagonists are frequently tempted to cast our “coming to see” the kernel truths as sort of “discovery” in science. But the discoveries of natural science are of “neutral” facts, that is, truths which are “value-free,” on which value may be subsequently placed by human beings, but which themselves are devoid of moral significance. It belongs to the range of such “natural” facts that we are individuals, impelled to operate by instrumental reason, maximizing our advantage when we are not deterred from doing so by unfounded belief.³⁵

Now, this hides from view two important connections. First, the way in which our implicit understanding of ourselves as agents always places us in certain relations to others. Because of the very nature of the human condition —that we can only define ourselves in exchange with others, those who bring us up, and those whose society we come to see as constitutive of our identity —our self-understanding always places us among others. The place-

³⁵ Thus Gellner includes “independence of fact and value” in his package, along with “growth and provisionality of knowledge” (*Plough, Sword and Book*, p. 122).

ments differ greatly, and understanding these differences and their change is the stuff of history. We have already come across one very important such difference, admittedly in a conjectural mode, when I spoke earlier of our ancestors' sense that a metatopical agency required a constitution beyond profane time. We have broken with them because we have found a way of understanding our placement in relation to others, even metatopically, entirely in profane time. This was the shift which helped bring about modern individualism. But this mustn't be misunderstood as the birth of a human identity which only subsequently discovers a need for, or determines its relations to, others. The human of the "state of nature" was, indeed, an important constituent of the early modern imaginary, but we mustn't make the mistake of understanding the people who imagined it in its light. Modern "individualism" is co-terminous with —indeed, is defined by —a new understanding of our situation among others, one which gives an important place to common action in profane time, and hence to the idea of consensually founded unions, which receives influential formulation in the myth of an original state of nature and a social contract. Individualism is not just a withdrawal from society, but a reconception of what human society can be. To think of it as pure withdrawal is to confuse individualism, which is always a moral ideal, with the anomie of breakdown.

Similarly, our understanding of ourselves always incorporates some understanding of the good and our relation to it. Here too there are radical differences. The good may be conceived theistically, or as in the cosmos (as with Plato's Idea of the Good). But it may also be understood as residing in us, in the inherent dignity of the human person as a reasoning being, for instance, as we find with Immanuel Kant. However understood, the notion of a human identity without such a sense brings us close to the unimaginable limit of total breakdown.³⁶

³⁶ I have tried to argue this point at greater length in *Sources of the Self*, chapters 1–4.

All this is occluded, indeed doubly. Seeing the evolution of instrumental individualism as the discovery of a “natural” fact not only involves projecting our background onto our ancestors. In addition, the naturalist, scientific outlook which generates this error has been heavily intricately with the representational, foundationalist epistemology which descends from Descartes and Locke. This epistemology has suppressed all recognition of the background. It conceives our knowledge of the world as consisting of particulate, explicit representations. This means that we not only project our own background backward, but also render this error invisible by repressing all awareness of backgrounds as such.²⁷ The ethnocentric colonization of the past cannot be brought to light, because the very terms in which it might appear have been abolished.

The very idea of individuals who might become aware of themselves and then only subsequently, or at least independently, determine what importance others have for them and what they will accept as good belongs to post-Cartesian, foundationalist fantasy. Once we recognize that our explicit thoughts can only be entertained against a background sense of who and where we are in the world and among others and in moral space, we can see that we can never be without some relation to the crucial reference points I enumerated above: world, others, time, the good. This relation can, indeed, be transformed as we move from one culture or age to another, but it cannot just fall away. We cannot be without *some* sense of our moral situation, *some* sense of our connectedness to others.

The naturalistic account of the discovery of the kernel truths, implicit in the acultural theory, misses all these connections. When the old metaphysical and religious beliefs crumble, we find as a

²⁷ I have discussed the nature of this modern epistemology and its suppression of the background at greater length in “Overcoming Epistemology,” in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (eds.), *After Philosophy: End or Transformation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), and “Lichtung oder Lebensform,” in *Der Löwe spricht. . . und wir können ihn nicht verstehen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991).

matter of neutral fact that we are instrumental individuals, and we need to draw from elsewhere our values and acceptable grounds for association with others. In contrast, I want to describe the change as moving us from one dense constellation of background understanding and imaginary to another, both of which place us in relation to others and the good. There is never atomistic and neutral self-understanding; there is only a constellation (ours) which tends to throw up the myth of this self-understanding as part of its imaginary. This is of the essence of a cultural theory of modernity.

Our stand on two important issues rides on which line we adopt. (1) We understand the transition differently. If we take the acultural view, we shall tend to see modern culture emerging out of the discovery of the kernel truths as “natural” facts, either directly by the growth of reason or through the effect of social change in dislodging the old, unjustified beliefs. On the cultural view, this culture comes from a mutation in our understanding of how we are placed in relation to God, good, cosmos, time, and others. The change can’t be explained by the discovery of natural fact, for although some of the genuine discoveries of science are relevant here, they vastly underdetermine the changes which actually took place. Rather, we have to see the changes as in part powered by the moral and spiritual force of certain self-understandings. Less tersely, we have to see changes as coming about through the interlacing of such spiritual *idées-forces* and the evolution of institutions and practices which they enable and which enable them, without our being able to make either of them primary, “base” to the other’s “superstructure.”

So, on one view, individualism arises when the kernel truth of our being individuals is allowed to emerge from the rubble of crumbling metaphysical and religious belief and stand forth as a natural fact. On the other, individualism breaks through as a spiritual ideal, connected, among other things, to the new significance of the profane; and it triumphs through the development of those social forms whose timid beginnings initially may

have facilitated it, and to which it imparts in return great power: the market economy, the public sphere, “rationalized” bureaucracy (in Weber’s sense), consensual politics, among others.

(2) Our understanding of the moral issues, struggles, and tensions of modern society will also greatly differ. On one view, modernity means the receding of moral horizons, the ever-greater tendency of individuals to withdraw from modes of social solidarity. This is the view from *Dover Beach*, whether coded positively or negatively. On the other approach, the tensions and struggles of modernity are to be understood in relation to its own inherent moral horizon and favoured social forms. The strains are to be explained partly by the tensions implicit in these and partly by the ways in which the social developments they facilitated have rendered them problematic — the way the development of the market economy and rationalized bureaucracy are at present endangering individualism, consensual politics, and the public sphere, for instance.

On line (1), I believe that the short discussion above of the rise of the public sphere may already have begun to suggest the superiority of the cultural approach. It remains, of course, to continue this argument by looking at the connected development of other modern social forms: popular sovereignty, revolution, and nationalism.

On line (2), the forward agenda involves examining some of the malaises of modernity, cultural and political, to see what light can be cast on them from each perspective. I believe that here too the superiority of the cultural theory cannot but shine forth, as we look at, for example, the place of the politics of recognition in our contemporary society, or the way in which our typically modern sense of connectedness to the cosmos impacts on modern politics. But I can only hope to redeem this claim quite a bit further down the road.³⁸

³⁸ I have begun to raise these issues, in *The Malaise of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), and *The Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).