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G R E G U R B A N

Metaculture

How Culture Moves through the World

FOREWORD BY BENJAMIN LEE

PUBLIC WORLDS, VOLUME 8
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS
MINNEAPOLIS LONDON

Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
http://www.upress.umn.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Urban, Greg, 1949-
Metaculture : how culture moves through the world / Greg Urban.
p. cm. — (Public worlds ; v. 8)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8166-3841-1 (hard : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8166-3842-X (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Culture. 2. Social values. 3. Intercultural communication. 4. Civilization, Modern—Philosophy. 5. Tradition (Philosophy) I. Title. II. Series.
HM621 .U72 2001
306—dc21

2001003515

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

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12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Nature cannot be ordered about, except by obeying her.
—Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620),
book 1, aphorism 129
(translated by J. Spedding)

. . . we create continuously before us the road we must journey upon . . .
—Thomas Pynchon, *Mason and Dixon*

Behavioral Sciences, a research institution nonpareil. My consciousness, at the time, was saturated by images of the rocky shorelines and golden hills of northern California, to be sure, but also by the gustatory impressions of those lovely meals prepared daily by Susan Beech for our delectation. I am thankful to the Center's directors Neil Smelser and Bob Scott for making this possible, as well as to the fellows during the 1998–99 academic year. Among my most constant interlocutors at the time were John Gumperz and Dan Segal, and also Don Brenneis and Wynne Furth.

Various friends and colleagues read manuscript versions and supplied invaluable comments, including Don Brenneis, Steve Feld, Aaron Fox, Laurie Graham, Webb Keane, Ben Lee, and Susan Lepselter. Adrian Cowell supplied information on the Uru-eu-wau-wau contact, as well as help with Figure 3. Fran Sarin of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's Photo Studio prepared Figures 12a and 12b from the Asch and Chagnon film. Thank you all.

I received copious feedback on excerpts of this manuscript (in varying degrees of preparation) presented as papers at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in 1996, 1997, and 1999; at the University of California at Santa Cruz (anthropology), the University of Chicago (anthropology), Northwestern University (communication studies), Stanford University (both linguistics and cultural anthropology), Swarthmore College (linguistics), and Yale University (Latin American studies); and at a summer NEH Institute at Northwestern University. The influence of colleagues too numerous to mention has, as a result, found its way into my thought and writing.

Lastly, I would never have watched the movie *Babe* or had such intimate familiarity with the phenomena of cultural motion through families, not to mention motivation for writing this book, had it not been for my daughter, Jess, and her wonderful mom. They have my lasting love and appreciation.

And that's how—in part and in brief, to be sure—an idea became, through social interactions, a book.

1

The Once and Future Thing

Hic iacet Arthurus,
rex quondam rexque futurus.
Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur,* book 21, chapter 7

The Vector of Futurity

The answer is culture, but the riddle continues to vex, as if we have not yet gotten it, not seen quite clearly. What moves through space and time, yet has no Newtonian mass? What is communicated from individual to individual, group to group, yet is not a disease?[1] Our sphinx, in vaporous apparition, peers down. Yes, this is the right word, but have we penetrated the veil of mystery? For there is more. The ghost-like journey of our thing (or is it things?) takes place along pathways, social pathways, that it itself lays down. It creates the space that makes its movement possible. How can it accomplish this social world-building task? The paradoxical answer is that it must look like what has come before it, like what has already been down that way. Its secret is in the mixture of oldness and newness that makes the journey possible. The king is dead; long live the king!

Culture is necessarily characterized by its "onceness." It has been. But culture is also on its way somewhere—whether or not it gets there—and, hence, it is also characterized by its futurity. What I hope to do in this

book is follow this intrinsic vector of movement into a future. To leave it at "onceness" results in the trope that has dominated anthropology throughout the twentieth century. Culture recedes into a past, slipping away into ever murkier origins. Hence, it must be salv?ged, dug up, preserved. There is the romance of discovering the thing in all of its dripping nostalgia.

But that trope misses the essential dynamism of culture, its restlessness, its itchy movement into uncharted and mysterious futures. There is something risky about the movement, but also something exciting. An appropriate figure for this riskiness, this restless seeking, is the entrepreneur, whose status as culture-bearer has been obscured by anthropology's obsessive concern with onceness and its reluctance to follow the vector of futurity. The entrepreneur takes something old into a new world, or tries something new out on an old world. The former is transparently cultural—taking the already given to new people, new places, another generation, hoping that something from the past will carry over. I propose to show, however, that the latter is no less cultural—giving something new to the same people (although I'll question what it means to be "new," and also what it means to be the "same people").

Reduced to its simplest formula, culture is whatever is socially learned, socially transmitted. It makes its way from point A (an individual or group) to point B (an individual or group). This book seeks to explore the no-man's-land between A and B. Rather than asking: What is the culture of A?—a traditional anthropological question where the fact of prior movement is read off of difference in the present—this book asks: What gets from A to B? How does it make that journey? Are some things better suited to make the journey than others? Do some travel more quickly than others? Are some more long-lived?

In the simplest case—I'll explore more complex ones later, including mass mediation of culture—if something immaterial is to get from an individual A to another individual B, it must first be lodged in a material entity—a story carried through the air in sounds, a gesture—that B can perceive. Let's call that material, perceptible entity α. α is a discrete and, possibly, unique thing. When it dies, it is gone.[2]

However, my interest is in something that lives on after α dies. α in effect undergoes a phoenix-like rebirth in other objects of the senses—another story, another gesture, another thing. The original is dead (or maybe it is not), but the original lives on in its copies. I catch a glimpse of culture, get a sense of its movement, if I find that B, subsequent to encountering α, produces a material form β, and β looks like or resembles α.

What carries over, in this case, is nonmaterial. The stuff moving through space and time is an abstract form or mold for the production of something material—a story that happens to be lodged in audible sounds, the abstract and reproducible outline of a gesture that happens to be incarnated in physical movements. The transitory home of culture is things in the world. But the stuff of culture is immaterial.

On the temporal trail of resemblances, I find myself in my outside observer's hat—my anthropologist's pith helmet, as it were—making judgments about similarities and differences between α and β. And in the case of things cultural, or so I want to argue, there is always, in some measure, a mixture of similarity and difference. Just how similar α and β have to be to be considered manifestations of the "same" cultural element is a matter of judgment, and it is a judgment that I, as an outside observer, can and must make in order to investigate culture.

However, if I as an outside observer can make this judgment, so too can participants in the ongoing set of social relations of which A and B are part. Such judgments made by natives about similarities and differences—continuity with the past and change—are part of what I will call *metaculture*, that is, culture that is about culture. A may pass to B not only the core of similarity between α and β that helps to circumscribe the cultural element; A may also pass on a judgment about the relationship of α to β. That judgment will be encoded in another material entity, another "story," so to speak, for which the written name ALPHA, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, might be appropriate to distinguish it as a metacultural form. Thus, ALPHA is metacultural in relationship to α because ALPHA is about α.

What makes ALPHA metacultural is not its physical characteristics as object—the combination of letters A + L + P + H + A—but its meaning, the fact that it is about other aspects of culture. As the abstract metacultural element gets passed on, that element could be studied by an outside observer as just another part of culture. But for the participants, the meaningfulness of one specific manifestation of the metacultural element might suffice to calibrate or define the relation of α to β—for example, the statement "β is the same as α," and, hence, that both are manifestations of the same cultural element, or "β is something new; it is not like α."

One aspect of culture, conceived in this way, is not only its inherent dynamism, its built-in propensity for change, but also its ability to generate self-interpretations or self-understandings that help to define what change or sameness is. And I am by no means unaware of the irony that I am at this very moment generating a piece of metaculture (the book you have before you), insignificant as my own offerings may be when compared

with the veritable industry of metacultural production in the contemporary United States, including book and film reviews, about which I will have more to say in chapter 5. Indeed, the circulation of metaculture today reaches such remarkable proportions that nightly local news shows feature "news" (ALPHA) about fictional television shows (α). The Philadelphia channel 29 *Ten O'clock News*, for example, in its Sunday evening May 17, 1998, newscast, which directly followed the season finale of the show *The X-Files*, featured a news story on that show's leading actress, Gillian Anderson.

One question I will be asking throughout this book is: Why metaculture? What is this all about? And one answer I will be offering is this: Metaculture is significant in part, at least, because it imparts an accelerative force to culture. It aids culture in its motion through space and time. It gives a boost to the culture that it is about, helping to propel it on its journey. The interpretation of culture that is intrinsic to metaculture, immaterial as it is, focuses attention on the cultural thing, helps to make it an object of interest, and, hence, facilitates its circulation. The news story about *The X-Files* aids the circulation of the *The X-Files* itself, interesting people in it. From this perspective, metaculture is a supplement to culture.

Simultaneously, cultural expressions may also foster the circulation of the metaculture that is about them. In the case of *The X-Files*, the news story preview began:

> [Narrator's voice with logos, followed by film clips of actress Gillian Anderson]:
>
> Tonight, on Fox: Her TV show is a smash hit; now she has a feature film ready for the theaters. But what's life really like for *X-Files* star Gillian Anderson?
>
> [Cut to clip from interview with Anderson speaking]:
>
> "I wish I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you."
>
> [Cut to logo for Fox *Ten O'clock News*]:
>
> Find out tonight on the Fox *Ten O'clock News*.

The function of this clip was to get those who were already interested in, and, indeed, had just watched, *The X-Files* to stay tuned for the news.

The phenomenon of metacultural acceleration of culture, however, only discloses the mystery inside the enigma. We have yet to glimpse the riddle within. For the metaculture-culture relationship—wherein ALPHA means α—is itself a strange pathway of motion, the site of a magical interconversion. When it is put into place, a connection is established between two realms, one material, the other ethereal. Things in the world—objects

of the senses, like ceramic pots or the flickering surface images of films projected onto a silver screen—brush up against, make contact with, ideas about those things. And the ideas come in this way to have effectiveness in the material realm.[3] Something of the world gets into the idea, and something of the idea gets into the world. Herein lies a secret about cultural motion.

I do not wish to dwell on metaculture just yet, however, central as the concept is to the mystery surrounding modern cultural motion and important as it will be as this book progresses. Instead, I want to wade further into the problem of movement itself. For I have only mentioned the simplest case of motion, where an individual A transmits something to another individual B.[4] In a perhaps more typical case, B may not have received the element from any one A, let alone from exposure to only one single concrete manifestation (α) of the element. In the case of a story understood metaculturally as "traditional"—the myth of the Giant Falcon, for example, in the Brazilian Indian community residing at Posto Indígena Ibirama—B may have heard "the story," that is, various tellings understood as manifestations of a single story, from many different individuals at many different times. We can think of all of these variant manifestations of the cultural element as α_1, α_2, and so forth.[5] The judgment made by outside observers, in this case, as well as natives, if the interpretation is based on a metaculture of tradition, is that β is essentially like or one of the set of manifestations $\{\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \ldots, \alpha_n\}$, all of which encode or reflect or manifest a single abstract cultural element. β then becomes, effectively, α_{n+1}.

But what if a given manifestation of culture is not an incarnation of a single recognizable cultural element, let alone a copy of a given specific earlier "original," after which it is fashioned? What if outside observers, as well as natives, have a hard time pinning down a temporal connection grounded in linear movement? I am now thinking, especially, of contemporary Western art and scientific productions, where a given entity—a novel, say—may be regarded as something radically, well, "novel" by the circulating metaculture. Does this mean that the entity itself is sui generis, and therefore does not participate in the general processes of motion I am seeking to characterize, that the vector of futurity ceases to operate here? I propose to argue that such an entity—let us call it ω—may still be a manifestation of the movement of culture, just not the replication of a specific antecedent. Rather, the new production makes reference to a range of prior and seemingly disparate cultural elements. Without those temporal referents, the new entity would have little prospect of further motion or future circulation. It would simply be incomprehensible.

I am arguing that the novel production, rather than becoming α_{n+1}, in effect assimilates earlier manifestations of culture unto itself. The various manifestations of a whole set of cultural elements become, in effect, just the backdrop or ground for the emergence of the figure ω. They are the context of emergence of ω, and, in some sense, ω defines the collection of prior expressions as interconnected, as forming a system, just by virtue of calling up reference to all of them. What they share in common is that the traces of them can all be seen in ω.[6]

I realize, even as I write this, how cryptic it sounds. However, I hope it is apparent—and I will take up the matter further in chapter 2—that I am talking about what culture is like under "modernity." Under modernity, it is no longer possible to study just the linear motion of an abstract underlying element—for example, the myth of the Giant Falcon—which can be traced from A to B to C. In the kind of movement I am describing in the case of ω, past expressions of culture are only lightly hinted at by ω, haunting it without being fully apparent. In effect, ω brings all of those hinted-at entities forward into it, traveling along the vector of futurity. The movement of culture takes place in ghost-like fashion, with ω incarnating various aspects of different kinds of prior expressions, yet seeming to be new. Looked at from the perspective of ω-type culture, therefore, what appears to move through space and time is a whole system of relationships.

It is crucial to my argument that temporal movement is what makes possible the recognition of a system or structure. Systematicity appears to emerge, and, therefore, does in fact emerge, because ω contains within itself traces of all the cultural elements that were the backdrop against which it took shape. That is what brings those diverse cultural expressions together, making them form a system.

Having said this, it is also important to recall that modernity itself is part of a naturally occurring metaculture. As a part of metaculture, modernity is an attempt to define relations between α's and β's, with the vector of futurity pushing the β's forward towards ω-like expressions. I propose to take care to distinguish the metaculture of modernity from the cultural processes that the metaculture seeks to define. One conclusion I will draw is that modernity propels culture in a different manner than does "tradition," but that, even under an explicit metaculture of modernity, the linear movement is still detectable through probing fine details. The kind of movement that modernity stimulates—the movement of a system of relationships through us—is crucial to the reproduction of culture in what Walter Benjamin (1969) called "the age of mechanical reproduction."

I propose to explore culture's movement through the world by taking you on a journey I have myself taken. Yet I do so with a certain trepidation, derived not only from a loathing of those pointless personal narratives that make up too much of contemporary ethnography—the merciless blather of: "There I was, under the blue sky on a sandy beach, the palm trees swaying in the breeze . . ."—but also from the humility I feel in the revelation that this journey has brought. How can it be that, even in those moments when I most fancy myself a producer of novel ω expressions, I am but a humble and unwitting conduit for prior ω (or are they α?) expressions?

It was February 1982. I recall this, but I can also reconstruct it from my field notes. On February 10, in fact, I was in São Paulo, Brazil, and at precisely 8:40 A.M. local time I boarded a plane bound for Dallas, Texas. From there I would take another plane to San Antonio to rendezvous with my wife, then a first-year medical student at the Health Sciences Center of the University of Texas. I was a fledgling assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin, which is located eighty miles to the north. For the past several months, I had been residing at an indigenous post near the town of Ibirama in the southern Brazilian state of Santa Catarina, immersing myself in the local culture there to which I had grown so attached that refrains from the local origin myth ran through my head and, in almost dream-like fashion, communicated to me something profound about my own life: "I descend dancing, confronting my destiny."

Now I was coming back, even if only for a short break. There is always something revelatory about a return to the States after a prolonged stay abroad. The minutiae of daily life stand out as foreign despite their utter mundaneness—conveyor belts at the airport along which luggage streams, the shape and color of taxicabs, even the reassuring lilt of central Texas English. It is as if one sees and hears it all for the first time. The experience is fleeting, but it allows a special glimpse of reality—such as phenomenologists claim for the eidetic reduction, the process of stripping away the nonessentials to reveal experience's essences. Travel provides one with ready-made eidetic reductions. In my case, I would be going back to Brazil a month later for another prolonged stay. Meanwhile, I was eager to emerge, blinking, from what seemed an isolation from the American public sphere.

The hot topic of talk was nuclear war, global thermonuclear war. Ronald Reagan was president of the United States, having taken office just

a year earlier, and Leonid Brezhnev was leader of the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Berlin Wall was still standing.

How strangely familiar all of this nuclear war talk seemed, foreign though it was from my vantage point in the steamy tropics of Brazil. Yes—it reminded me of my youth. Standing on the playground of Oakview Elementary School, I recall a conversation with my childhood friend, Warren Webb. Would we see each other again? It was the autumn of 1962, with a chilling wind under gray skies adding a tangible layer of coldness to the inner chill we felt. How apt the metaphor of a cold war. If Kennedy launched a missile attack against Cuba, then—heaven forbid!—the Russians would attack us with nuclear weapons. There would be all-out nuclear war. We would lose that warmth of human companionship as we receded into our basement fallout shelters and, ultimately, as everyone secretly knew, into doom. Sōciability would vanish with the traces of life itself. The term "nuclear winter" had not yet been coined, but we would have known intuitively, through synesthesia, what it meant: the perpetual coldness of death.

But twenty years later, in 1982, America was warmed by the talk of nuclear war, a talk that gradually spread, building conversations and communities around it. Even my wife, ensconced in her own cave-like isolation of the first-year medical student, had come into contact with it. It was she who told me about a set of articles in the *New Yorker* magazine. She had heard about them on National Public Radio. I should look them up, she said, and I did.

The articles were by Jonathan Schell, a staff writer for the *New Yorker,* and they were later assembled into a little book called *The Fate of the Earth.* The articles were mesmerizing, though I cannot be sure, as I write this today, precisely why. How much did their interest have to do with my odd position, having just returned from field research in Amerindian Brazil? Was I the barbarian coming to Rome, beholding its glittering spectacle of public life? Was I fascinated by the novelty of Schell's words? Or, alternatively, was there in them the echo of something familiar, feelings I had known as a child, suppressed by twenty intervening years of distraction? After all, the nuclear hysteria of the 1950s and early 1960s gave way to the Vietnam era antiwar movement, and that movement dissipated into generalized "countercultural" activity in opposition not only to the American government, but also to the middle-class way of life itself. Schell had picked up on something—a fearful and steely coldness at the prospect of nuclear devastation—that the conviviality of the late 1960s and 1970s had

forgotten. But he managed to summon the latter to call attention to the former.

Here are some of the words I encountered in 1982:

> Four and a half billion years ago, the earth was formed. Perhaps a half billion years after that, life arose on the planet. For the next four billion years, life became steadily more complex, more varied, and more ingenious, until, around a million years ago, it produced *mankind*$_i$—the most complex and ingenious species of them all. Only six or seven thousand years ago—a period that is to the history of the earth as less than a minute is to a year—civilization emerged, enabling *us*$_i$ to build up a human world, and to add to the marvels of evolution marvels of *our*$_i$ own: marvels of art, of science, of social organization, of spiritual attainment. But, as *we*$_i$ built higher and higher, the evolutionary foundation beneath *our*$_i$ feet became more and more shaky, and now, in spite of all *we*$_i$ have learned and achieved—or, rather, because of it—*we*$_i$ hold this entire terrestrial creation hostage to nuclear destruction, threatening to hurl it back into the inanimate darkness from which it came. And this threat of self-destruction and planetary destruction is not something that *we*$_i$ will pose one day in the future, if *we*$_i$ fail to take certain precautions; it is here now, hanging over the heads of all of *us*$_i$ at every moment . . . It is as though life itself were one huge distraction, diverting *our*$_i$ attention from the peril to life. In its apparent durability, a world menaced with imminent doom is in a way deceptive. It is almost an illusion. Now *we*$_{i,j}$ are sitting at the breakfast table drinking *our*$_{i,j}$ coffee and reading the newspaper, but in a moment *we*$_{i,j}$ may be inside a fireball whose temperature is tens of thousands of degree. Now *we*$_{i,j}$ are on *our*$_{i,j}$ way to work, walking through the city streets, but in a moment *we*$_{i,j}$ may be standing on an empty plain under a darkened sky looking for the charred remnants of *our*$_{i,j}$ children. Now *we*$_i$ are alive, but in a moment *we*$_i$ may be dead. Now there is human life on earth, but in a moment it may be gone. (Schell 1982, 181–82; my italics and subscripts)

What to make of these words? Perhaps they seem strange to you because of my tinkering with italics and subscripts, or perhaps because they come out of a past that now seems unsettlingly distant, however familiar. If so, that is not bad, since they were also, in some measure (and even at the time), strange to me. Strange, but fascinating. I was drawn to them, like Princess Aurora, as if in a stupor, up the stairs to the sorceress Maleficent. They worked their magic on me, to the point, even, of getting me to do their bidding with regard to others.

Now I wish to conceal part of the story, however, in order that I may

later reveal it. For this part was, so to speak, concealed from me when I first reconstructed it. There was a piece to the puzzle I had misplaced or overlooked—an important piece, the period from 1982 to 1984. The absence nagged at me, but my recent reconstruction had ignored it, instead picking up the story in 1985, when I was back in Brazil, this time lecturing at the University of São Paulo on the arcane subject of semiotics, with a focus on Amerindian languages and cultures. My colleague and good friend, Sylvia Caiuby Novaes, intrigued by our conversations about nuclear war, arranged for me to give a public lecture on the subject.

In Brazil, the burning issues of public debate seemed far removed from those preoccupying the U.S. public sphere. This was especially true in the case of American scenarios for high-tech nuclear war—they were just not in the public consciousness of the people of São Paulo in the mid-1980s. In my talk, I used what had come to be, on American campuses, a standard technique for illustrating nuclear devastation. On a map of São Paulo, I superimposed a grid illustrating the blast effects of a five-megaton bomb detonated over the center of the city—"ground zero." American students would be (and were, on college campuses across the United States) duly horrified by this exercise. But in São Paulo, the response was different. One person quipped: "This is a *gringo* thing. I don't know what we have to do with it; we don't have bombs." Responding to my statement that a nuclear war could destroy all of humanity, not just Americans, someone else remarked (was this a uniquely Brazilian scenario?): "Well, it's not going to happen that way. You see, the bomb that was headed for Brazil, the guy who was there was probably asleep and forgot to press the button at the right time; and besides, if he did manage to press the button, that missile wouldn't work anyway. In any case, we have absolutely no control over this, so you guys up there in North America, you worry about it. You've got all the bombs; you've got all the power. It's your problem, so deal with it."

In my conscious reconstruction of the events, this story stood out in my mind.[7] I learned from this experience—and other related ones—that the rhetoric of the U.S. antinuclear movement did not necessarily travel well. As a piece of culture, the story of nuclear devastation made its way through various parts of North America, but it could also experience resistance to its movement outside of its natural pathways. What was the source of this resistance?

That question preoccupied me, and so I decided to take a closer look at Schell's book. What was perplexing was the seemingly inclusive and encompassing character of Schell's "we." His was a "we" of the human species

with which all people could (couldn't they?) identify: "It [evolution] produced *mankind*$_i$—the most complex and ingenious species of them all. Only six or seven thousand years ago . . . civilization emerged, enabling *us*$_i$ to build up a human world." The "us" here is clearly meant to have the same reference as "mankind"—"us humans." What could be more encompassing than this? And if one accepts inclusion in the category of human—aren't "we", after all, all humans?—then Schell's conclusion seems to inexorably follow: "As *we*$_i$ built higher and higher, the evolutionary foundation beneath *our*$_i$ feet became more and more shaky, and now, in spite of all *we*$_i$ have learned and achieved—or, rather, because of it—*we*$_i$ hold this entire terrestrial creation hostage to nuclear destruction, threatening to hurl it back into the inanimate darkness from which it came." Yes, we humans are responsible for this mess. How could my Brazilian audience that day not see this? Could they not identify with being human?

Inspecting Schell's pronominal usages under the microscope, the "us humans" seemed to be reshaped, remolded into something much more specific by its surrounding words: "Now *we*$_{i,j}$ are sitting at the breakfast table drinking *our*$_{i,j}$ coffee and reading the newspaper, but in a moment *we*$_{i,j}$ may be inside a fireball whose temperature is tens of thousands of degree." Well, wait a minute. Who sits at breakfast tables drinking coffee and reading newspapers? Not me, at least not in the months leading up to February 1982, when I first read these words. For me, the statement should have read: "Now we are sitting around campfires, listening to myths and scary stories about jaguars." And how about: "Now *we*$_{i,j}$ are on *our*$_{i,j}$ way to work, walking through the city streets . . ."? Again, not me. For me it should have been: "Now we are trekking through the forest, trying not to step on poisonous snakes." If Schell's words had a detectable hollowness in some measure even for me, then what about for others?

I actually undertook a detailed study of the 1,310 first-person plural pronouns I found in *The Fate of the Earth*.[8] This was not easy, as the pronominal references were not always as explicit as those in the passage I cited above. My technique was simply to go through and jot down what each "we" or "us" or "our" meant in its specific context, trying to presume nothing at the outset. However, it quickly became clear that the pronouns fell into certain broad classes over which you and I might quibble, but which give a general sense of the patterning of the first person plural pronoun in this text. The classes and their absolute numbers and frequencies are listed in Table 1.[9]

So I had some evidence here about the possible reasons for resistance to the flow of this particular bit of culture. While *The Fate of the Earth* was

Table 1. "We" Categories in Schell

CATEGORY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
1. Human species	855	65
2. Present generation of species	185	14
3. Within quotations	94	7
4. Ambiguous	68	5
5. Author plus readers	45	4
6. Generalized individual	36	3
7. Nongovernment	13	1
8. Nonscientist	12	1
9. United States	1	0
10. United States and U.S.S.R.	1	0
Totals	1,310	100

built up around a "we" of the human species—such "we's" accounting for 79 percent of all first-person plural usages in the text—specific inflections of that species-wide "we" suggested a more provincial perspective, more restricted meanings. Those meanings could be seized upon by someone to whom they did not seem transparent—as in the case of my Brazilian audience: "This is a *gringo* thing. I don't know what *we* have to do with it." The "we" of this remark specifically excluded me, and, presumably, all other gringos, though it is a "we" that might be readily inhabited by others, not just Brazilians. Could not many Third- and Fourth-World peoples identify with the statement: "We don't have bombs"?

Thus far my story is a heroic one, the anthropologist's perspective as outsider enables him privileged access to culture—in this case, to resistance to the movement of one piece of culture. However, our hero has not told the whole story. Something is not quite right; there is a piece missing. What happened between 1982 and 1984?

During that period, I now recollect, I was voraciously reading in the nuclear war literature, and, in the spring of 1984, I wrote a paper, "Cultural Representations of Nuclear War," which circulated samizdat, but which, mercifully, I never published. Moreover, I developed an undergraduate course, "Culture and Nuclear War," which I taught several times in the middle and late 1980s, and in which the unpublished paper was among the texts students were asked to read. I remember this, alas, only after having reconstructed the heroic tale—the tale of anthropologist as over and above culture, as one able to give privileged readings of culture (a notion I now find suspect, but not entirely wrong).

Why is this bit of self-archaeology humbling? So I wrote such a paper called "Cultural Representations of Nuclear War"—so what? It occurred to me only recently to look at that paper itself under the microscope, to see what pronominal patterns might be at work there. My first thought was that they should certainly be different from Schell's, since I was, after all, an anthropologist and a scientist, not a journalist. Moreover, the central argument of the paper was different from anything I had read in Schell or elsewhere. I was producing a piece of ω culture—or so I thought. My argument was that the then current antinuclear discourse was not taking account of the significant attachments that people have to collectivities like the United States or the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Such attachments had to be brought into focus if antinuclear discourse were to engage the peace-through-strength position in any meaningful way. But the attachments also had to be realigned if the world was to avoid a nuclear conflagration.

My technique in studying my own writing, fourteen years after the fact, was the same as it had been in Schell's case. For each occurrence of "we," "us," "our," or "ourselves," I jotted down what seemed to be its specific meaning in its context. I then looked for patterns. The patterns I found are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. "We" Categories in Urban (1984)

CATEGORY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
1. Human species	90	57
2. Present generation of species	34	21
3. United States	11	7
4. Students of anthropology	6	4
5. Author plus readers	5	3
6. Viewers of *Dr. Strangelove*	5	3
7. Within quotations	3	2
8. Those who talk about nuclear war	3	2
9. Participants in the nuclear debate	1	1
Totals	158	100

If you compare these with Table 1, you will see that some of the categories are different. Table 2 includes a students of anthropology "we," a viewers of *Dr. Strangelove* "we," a those who talk about nuclear war "we," and a participants in the nuclear debate "we" that are not found in Table 1. And these "we's" confirm my original intuition that my own "we" usage would

be distinct from Schell's. There are also, of course, the kinds of "we" in Schell that have no counterpart in my own paper.

However, the stunning result is the nearly identical frequencies of the human species and present generation of the human species "we"—the combined total for the human species "we" and the present generation of the human species "we" in Schell is 79 percent; in Urban it is 78 percent. The similarity is not coincidental. Compare the following passage from my paper (as I write this, the pronoun "my" gives me pause; was that really me? Should I not refer to myself in the third person as Urban 1984?):

> The variability of "right" from one culture to the next—which anthropologists discuss in connection with the concept of "cultural relativity"—does not affect the vehemence with which warriors endeavor to protect what they consider right. Nor has this moral variability been without its benefits for the species. On the contrary, alternative moral systems, alternative ways of doing things, provide a degree of flexibility, of adaptability in *our* species, that has allowed it, in the past 40,000 years or so, to expand into niches everywhere around the globe. This variability has been a key to *our* remarkable success.
>
> However, now, or so the proponents of disarmament maintain, a dark cloud has appeared on *our* previously sunny horizon—the specter of nuclear war. (italics added)

Was I producing a piece of ω culture, or was my work but a β copy of Schell's original? For those subscribing to a metaculture of novelty, the question looms large. Is worth not measured by the distinctiveness of one's expressions? Whatever the sources of Schell's own pronominal usage, this example provides evidence of the movement of culture through space and time—from Schell as A to me as B. Schell published his work originally in 1981. Presumably, he wrote it a year or two earlier. I drafted my paper in the spring of 1984, having read Schell's work first in February and March of 1982; thus, several years had passed from the time of Schell's α to the time of the β copy. The pattern of pronominal usage, as a detectable fragment of culture, managed to travel through time and across space from A to B, from Schell to me. What passed in this remarkable journey was an abstract pattern of pronominal usage, a pattern that has no detectable Newtonian mass. As I wrote my paper in the spring of 1984, a phoenix-like rebirth of the pattern was taking shape. And it was taking shape without my having been aware of it. Such is the mystery of culture.

What makes culture move? Part of the answer, or so I am arguing in this book, is that it is already in motion. And whatever is in motion tends to remain in motion unless something else stops it. This observation has been made implicitly or explicitly by many others, notably by the diffusionists,[10] for whom invention was understood as arduous, copying as easy. However, the principle—which I will, with only mild irony, refer to as the principle of inertia—is also intuitively appealing, and this for two different reasons.

The first has to do with simple presence or prior existence. Something tends to be copied just because it is there already. This is most apparent in the case of cultural and, especially, language learning by young children, for whom the models that are present are what tend to be reproduced. Why does a child learn the language it does? The answer is that it is the language spoken by those around it. This is inertial culture. The child does not set out to create something new. In the elementary case discussed earlier, the child B produces an expression β—for example, the word "mamma"—phonetically, [mama]—that happens to look like another earlier expression α produced by A, the parent. The principal reason for this is that the α expression is already there.[11] And the word might as well have been a gesture, a bodily posture, a facial expression, an attitude toward food or music, or any one of a number of capabilities under the control of B. The cause of β is the inertial carrying over of the abstract form of α, simply because of α's prior existence. This first type of inertia might be dubbed "existential."

There is a second and related, albeit distinct, intuitive reason for accepting a principle of inertia. It is possible to think of inertia as operating even in the motion of what I have been calling ω culture. In the present context, ω culture might be more appropriately, if wryly, dubbed "accelerative culture," that is, culture on the side of futurity, looking forward rather than backward, characterized by newness and novelty, rather than oldness and familiarity. In the case of accelerative culture, the expression ω produced by A—for example, Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*—is not simply a replica of some earlier book that has come before it, pace the main character in Borges's celebrated story, "Pierre Menard, Author of *Quixote*":

> [Menard] did not want to compose another *Quixote*—which is easy—but *the Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable

> intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes. ([1944] 1962, 39)

It must, instead, be significantly new.

The force behind such accelerative culture is the interest it generates, which stems in part from its novelty. It moves because it generates interest, catches the attention. How it accomplishes this task is what we (that is, you, the reader, and I, should you continue to so graciously accompany me on this journey) must investigate. However, one way it does so is by resembling something from the past that has already generated interest. The resemblances are not (or are not necessarily) blatant. And the whole cultural object cannot be a copy of some earlier original, the way one (re)telling of a myth, in a Brazilian Indian village, can be a copy of another. At the same time, the ω object must be recognizable to those in whom it is designed to kindle interest. To be recognizable, the object must draw upon earlier models, although it may—and, if it is truly original, must—weave together bits and pieces of different models. Consequently, the ω expression demands that it be analyzed if the continuities it contains are to emerge.

Those continuities—although present only in microaspects or facets of the overall cultural object—are examples of inertial culture. The β copies are copies not of a whole, recognizable cultural element, like a myth, but of some component of it, like the statistical frequencies of types of "we" usage. The principle of inertia, in the case of accelerative or ω culture, operates on α's that are pieces of a larger whole. The cultural elements flowing through the world give rise to specific aspects of the cultural object—the film or novel, for example—but not the whole recognizable object, which appears, therefore, to be new. This is what I meant in claiming that the "novel production, rather than becoming α_{n+1}, in effect assimilates earlier manifestations of culture unto itself." It represents a new combination of those manifestations or elements even as it contributes something new to them.

I am wary of the distractions, lurking at every turn, in the use of an analogy from physics. However, I cannot resist the observation that my own copying of the term "inertia" serves to illustrate what I am talking about. The word was already available to me as a prior α expression, which I could then import via a β copy into my larger ω expression—namely, the book I am writing. Indeed, any new utterance I produce necessarily contains β replicas of prior α expressions, if for no other reason than, as

Bakhtin noted: "Our speech is filled to overflowing with other people's words" (1981, 337).

My own interest in *The Fate of the Earth*, and, specifically, in its pronominal patterning, no doubt stemmed in part from the resemblances that patterning exhibited to other expressions with which I was familiar, and, moreover, which I had myself produced. A "we" of the human species was something by no means foreign to me as an anthropologist and scholar more generally. You will find it, should you look, in numerous anthropological writings as a statement of universal identification, even at the very moment when, in those writings, the plurality of worldviews, or "cultures," is being celebrated.

Picking a book off my shelf, Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*—a book published in 1973, and one I had read as a graduate student prior to encountering Schell's work—I turn to the chapter entitled "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," where Geertz argues for the crucial differentiating role of culture. Even as Geertz stresses differentiation, he saturates his prose with "we's" of the human species (italics added): "*We* are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish *ourselves* through culture . . ." (49); "Between what *our* body tells *us* and what *we* have to know in order to function, there is a vacuum *we* must fill *ourselves*, and *we* fill it with information (or misinformation) provided by *our* culture" (50); "*Our* ideas, *our* values, *our* acts, even *our* emotions, are, like *our* nervous system itself, cultural products—products manufactured, indeed, out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which *we* were born . . ." (50). Picking another book off the shelf, an elementary textbook in cultural anthropology (Nanda 1994), I find similar "we" usages. The "we's" are present there, to be sure, in much lower frequencies than in *The Fate of the Earth* or "Cultural Representations of Nuclear War," but they are there nonetheless, providing an inertial conduit for future "we's."

Part of my argument is that Schell's words could be taken up most readily, and would circulate most naturally, where familiarity with a "we" of the human species is already established—among academics, physicians, writers, artists, and the like. Even if that "we" occurs in lower frequencies than in Schell, and even if it is not put to the same political uses, the fact that something like it is already being produced by B renders a copy of the specific original produced by A more likely. α can serve as a model to be copied in part, at least, because α is recognizable; it looks like other expressions B has already produced.

In pronouncing a new word in a language, one I am just learning as an

adult, I use the sounds already available to me—the sound patterns of my old language. The result is the phenomenon known as "accent." Because I am used to producing certain sounds, certain α expressions, in certain ways, when I produce new sounds in β expressions, I do so in ways that resemble the α expressions I am accustomed to producing. This is the principle of inertia at work. But it is a second type of inertia, which might, in contrast with existential inertia, be dubbed "habitual."

A corollary of the principle of habitual inertia is that, where new ω expressions have little or no resonance with α expressions already being produced, there will be resistance to it. For example, where a "we" of the human species has no or little currency—I will give an example later—it will tend not to be taken up. It may actually arouse suspicion. Certainly, its movement will experience resistance. The social space through which culture moves is nonhomogeneous. It is a space configured by prior movements of culture and in which the motion of new culture is constrained, in part, by prior movements.

What reshapes social space is accelerative, rather than inertial, culture. Left to its own devices, inertial culture—the language, for example, one learns as a child—moves through those pathways for which the grooves have already been cut. Inertial culture does not reshape space, at least not by inertia alone. However, inertia can be harnessed by ω culture, which takes bits and pieces of available expressions and assembles them into new wholes. Such new wholes, therefore, have access to the different pathways of their constituent inertial elements. They can, by this means, cut across existing pathways. This is the case of culture produced by the entrepreneur. Such productions restlessly seek pathways, and they continuously refine themselves for the purpose of entering new pathways, of reshaping social space.

Cultural Caducity

The idea of an inertial culture—whether existential or habitual—implicitly underlies all arguments about culture. A child grows up speaking the language of those around it because that language—and not some other one—was there to be learned. The child adopts the mannerisms, gestures, tastes, and customs of its elders and peers because those mannerisms, gestures, tastes, and customs—not other ones—were there to be adopted. This is existential inertia. An adult, already fluent in one language, endeavors to speak another. The result is an accent in the new language. This is habitual inertia. Put the two together—existential and habitual inertia—and you have the anthropological concept of culture *sensu lato*.

What is missing from this view, however, is a conceptualization of accelerative culture. Insofar as inertial culture moves along social pathways that are described by its prior movement, its future is its past. Social organization appears as something resolutely separate or distinct from culture.[12] And it is hard to understand agency, activity, change, and development. It is hard to understand history. Social space is fixed once and for all, becoming a Newtonian space with absolute coordinates, absolute locations. However, accelerative culture opens the possibility that a new object—an ω object—can cut new pathways, can reshape social space by harnessing different strands of extant inertial culture.

Nor should the process of deceleration be ignored—the process, that is, whereby cultural elements undergo transformation in shape as they move. The original object decelerates, and, in the course of that deceleration, either dies out (caducity) or transmogrifies—eventually, over time, becoming a new thing unrecognizable to its ancestor. While inertia is at work, all things being equal, a cultural element will tend to be reproduced just because it is there. But in fact all things are not equal. There are forces that make the process of copying difficult and, hence, that render the transmission of culture problematic. Contemplating the durability of books, films, magnetic recordings, and the like—all of which are kinds of ω culture—it is easy forget what an achievement continuity is, an observation made long ago by the anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown ([1952] 1965). A given α expression may be subject to physical degradations[13]; it may not be accurately perceived or learned by B; B may be unable to produce an adequate copy of it for any one of a variety of reasons; or the original shape of α may cease to fascinate or be useful. Entropic forces such as these are summed up in the concept of "cultural drift,"[14] although they demand much closer scrutiny than has heretofore been given them.

As a consequence, accelerative characteristics—like poetic structuring, in the case of words or ritual movements, or practical utility, in the case of tools—must be built into cultural elements in order to insure their survival over time. And survival is the inherent telos of all culture: In some sense, it wants to continue on its journey through space and time. You—if you ever pass on any of the culture carried in this book—should not, therefore, imagine that culture survives just because of inertia. It survives because it is able to overcome the forces of deceleration that act upon inertia. All culture must undergo acceleration if it is to move through space and time,

and if it is to maintain its shape. As I will argue, the very idea of tradition as a kind of metaculture is an attempt to overcome entropic forces of deceleration, an attempt to impart a positive accelerative force to culture.

There is a second aspect to the decelerative problem with which I shall be concerned later. If the first type of deceleration may be dubbed "entropic," the result of forces tending to degrade or transform an inertial element, there is a second type that can be characterized as "competitive" deceleration. A given ω cultural expression moves into new territory, but as it does so, it competes for attention with existing expressions and elements. Indeed, elements invariably enter into competition in the age of mechanical reproduction, since older objects can linger on sufficiently to require displacement—as when a song rises on the pop charts, peaks, and then, a new one having come to take its place, declines. However, competition also occurs without mechanical intervention; the latter merely intensifies the effect. Owing to limitations on the number of cultural objects to which an individual or group can pay attention, some expressions must give way to others. The acceleration of certain cultural objects results in the deceleration of others. Acceleration thus produces deceleration under conditions of competition.

The Concept of Acceleration in Contemporary Cultural Theory

Though perhaps not formulated in terms of inertia and acceleration, there is, in fact, considerable interest among contemporary social and cultural theorists in the phenomena these concepts describe. I take a brief look here at three such arguments: Benedict Anderson's ([1983] 1991) study of the role of print media in relation to the rise of nations; Pierre Bourdieu's ([1975] 1984) consideration of the role of the "habitus" in relation to taste; and Antonio Gramsci's notion, especially as formulated by Chantal Mouffe (1979), of "articulation" in relation to hegemony.

PRINT MEDIA AND IMAGINED COMMUNITY

A fascinating version of the inertial argument can be found in Benedict Anderson's ([1983] 1991) inventive, and now itself widely circulated, interpretation of the rise of nationalism through what he called "print capitalism." In this argument, people who share a common vernacular language are aided in their recognition of their commonality as a "people"—their imagining of themselves as a community—by the circulation of printed literature. The very fact of circulation—that is, the fact that people have access to the same printed materials—helps to give them a sense that they share something in common.

There is another side to the argument. It is not just that people share access to a printed literature that fuses them into a people. The literature to which they have access also contains within itself, in the form of its semiotic construction, an awareness or consciousness of other people as coparticipants in a single social reality. This problem of the semiotic construction of social consciousness is something I want to take up again in chapter 3, for it has bearing on the issue of acceleration, and, in particular, of how a cultural element can be designed to secure its own circulation.

Here I want to focus on another question. Why does the printed literature circulate along the pathways it does? The implicit argument in Anderson is an inertial one, in particular, an argument having to do with habitual inertia. The movement of cultural elements—in this case, the dissemination[15] of books, newspapers, and the like—is impelled, in part, by the fact that the elements are the continuation of something old. They are already familiar. The basis of their familiarity, their oldness, is the vernacular language in which they are written. Even though the books, newspapers, and the like are new—they are ω culture—an aspect of them is old, namely, the language they employ.

Anderson's argument about vernacular languages is that they help to circumscribe the limits of circulation of printed material, and hence to determine which groups of people would imagine themselves as nations. His is by no means a mechanical argument. He stresses the "interplay" between linguistic diversity, technology, and capitalism, noting that not all vernaculars become the basis for nations (Anderson [1983] 1991, 43). Furthermore, boundaries might be established despite the sharing of a vernacular language, as in the case of England and the newly emergent United States, or Spain and the Latin American nations. However, the *prior* existence of a spoken vernacular facilitates the flow of printed material written in that vernacular. The new cultural objects—the printed items—seize upon an old element or set of elements—the language of their expression. The pathways through space of the new expression are in part described by the pathways of the older elements that they continue.

There is something more here, however, from the point of view of motion. Print dissemination did not simply seize upon the existing inertia pathways of language. It also seized upon the existing inertial pathways of trade, and those two were not identical. This is the essence of the ω-like character of print. As an emergent class of cultural objects, printed

discourse inserted itself into two patterns of cultural flow: commercial items passed by trade, and language passed by domestic reproduction and schooling. The motion of culture was accelerated by print, its pathways of motion changed, because the pathways of commerce could be made to intersect with those of language. The result, if you believe Anderson—and there are good reasons to do so—is the territorial parameters of at least certain modern nations.

It is not that the pathways so established were rigidly determinant. True, without modification—in this case, without translation—the printed object would be too unfamiliar to be interpretable; hence, it could not survive its journey into a new land. However, a cultural element that, because of its design features, holds interest for a broader audience, can break out of these inertial constraints. For this reason, incidentally, a theory of cultural motion is incompatible with a complete linguistic relativism. The movement of a cultural element across linguistic boundaries, though admittedly through translation, is evidence that something—even if not everything—can and does carry over. Not just any object finds its way into translation. There must be something about that object that recommends or demands its translation.

Look at one of the Greek legends—about Pygmalion, for example—written down some two thousand years ago by the Roman poet Ovid. The story tells of a sculptor and king of Cyprus named Pygmalion who sculpted his ideal woman, with whom he then fell in love. Marston retold the story in English in 1598 in his *Metamorphosis of Pigmalion's Image*. And it was even adapted and retold in W. S. Gilbert's 1871 comedy, *Pygmalion and Galatea*. Something about the story carried over in these various retellings, something powerful enough to overcome the inertia of the specific language of its tellings, something that allowed it to break out of those inertial constraints placed on its motion through space and time.

Not only can the cultural element traverse language boundaries, providing sufficient interest accrues to it for other reasons, but the language itself can move. Indeed, it would be a corollary of the principle of accelerative culture that a language will tend to spread in proportion to the number of linguistically encoded expressions within it that are of interest for speakers of other languages. When the numbers and degree of interest are low, translation suffices. But after a point, it becomes more expedient for the language itself to spread.[16] The movement of ω expressions induces the movement of the quintessential set of α expressions—language.

Social space is nonhomogeneous, and the question is: How does nonhomogeneity arise? Pierre Bourdieu's landmark study, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, grounds the analysis of social differentiation in tastes (for art, music, food, clothing, body style, and so forth) in an inertial theory of culture. For Bourdieu, people differ in their tastes because of the differing life circumstances in which they happened to grow up. They acquired the tastes they did because those tastes were there to be acquired. This is inertial culture of the first variety I discussed earlier—existential inertia. People acquire something because it is already there.

However, Bourdieu is also concerned with acceleration and its relationship to habitual inertia. The result of acquisition of tastes through the operation of inertial culture is the creation in the individual—literally, in the individual's body—of a systematic set of dispositions, which Bourdieu, following Marcel Mauss (1979), calls the *habitus*. These dispositions condition the response an individual will have to any new cultural element with which he or she happens to come into contact. They are, therefore, analogous to the second kind of inertia discussed earlier, habitual inertia, the kind in which B's ability and/or likelihood to find interest in and reproduce some aspect of an ω expression is conditioned by the prior expressions B has produced—as in the case of the accent when one learns a second language as an adult. The habitus is the filter created by inertial culture for new expressions. The flow of new expressions follows pathways laid down by old elements.

At the same time, if only inertia were at work, people would be locked into their positions in a larger social space, condemned by the tastes they acquired as children. In fact, however, they are not so condemned. They can travel through that space, in accord with what Bourdieu calls "trajectories." What makes those trajectories possible? It is the fact that tastes—as evidence of embodied habitual inertial culture—can change. In Bourdieu's scheme, taste is part of cultural or symbolic capital, that is, forms of capital that are distinct from, but interconvertible in some measure with, economic capital. The idea of acceleration is inherent in Bourdieu's model precisely because taste is made a form of acquirable capital.

The acquisition of cultural capital, or, in present terms, the transformation of habitual inertial culture, is illustrated—to continue the earlier theme—in the twentieth century refraction of the Greek myth of Pygmalion. I am referring, of course, to George Bernard Shaw's 1916 play by that name, later turned into a popular Lerner and Loewe musical, and then

into a successful 1964 film, *My Fair Lady*. The central plot of the original myth is recognized here only with difficulty, but the new plot is strikingly Bourdieuian: A cockney-speaking flower girl comes to phonetics professor Henry Higgins to learn how to "talk like a lady." Higgins makes a bet with a friend that he can, in fact, transform this woman, turning her into a lady in speech and manner so thoroughly, so convincingly that she could pass for having acquired her accent and manners in a family, the normal way in which accent and taste are understood to be acquired. As Bourdieu suggests is possible, Higgins is in fact successful. The flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, cannot, by those who make it their profession to know—in this case, another linguist—be picked out as Higgins's creation. Higgins is, so to speak, the social sculptor, and Eliza his statue. Like Pygmalion, he finds himself in love with his creation.

Such a scenario is evidence for the acceleration of culture. How else than through a change in the course of her inertially acquired culture could Eliza have come to pass for an upper-class British lady?

But if acceleration is possible at the individual level, as the culture that passes to Eliza from Higgins transforms her, can ω cultural objects themselves reshape the social space through which culture moves? This is a topic on which I will have more to say in chapter 6, but it should already be apparent, from the preceding discussion of Anderson, that I consider this conclusion inescapable. Social space is reconfigured, however incrementally or radically, by the motion associated with specific ω cultural objects. While Bourdieu himself seems to attribute considerable solidity to social space—and there is in fact considerable solidity to it—the possibilities for its transformation, whether gradual or radical, are implicit in his concern with accelerative processes.

HEGEMONY AND ARTICULATION

The work of Antonio Gramsci (1985), especially as filtered through Chantal Mouffe (1979) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), is intriguing in light of accelerative culture because Gramsci was explicitly concerned with how new configurations of social relations might be achieved. What is crucial for present purposes is that, according to Gramsci, reconfiguration can be *achieved*. That is, leadership is not simply determined by the inertial character of social space. While the character of that space is an important determinant, new configurations are possible, even if their newness is constrained. This kind of understanding focuses attention on the possibly shifting character of space through time.

Indispensable to the achievement of hegemony—that is, the achievement of leadership by a group—is the synthesis of prior cultural elements in new expressions—that is, ω expressions—in present terms. Mouffe (1979, 193) views this process as one of articulation. According to her, the patterning of extant cultural elements contains an implicit alignment around a hierarchy of social relationships—like the organization of iron filings in the presence of a magnet. The principle of that organization is what Gramsci called a "hegemonic principle." Mouffe considers the cultural elements to be "articulated" in relationship to one another.

To unpack this in present terms, Mouffe is talking about a social space that is constituted inertially via the movement of cultural elements through individuals. Hierarchy is a result of differential movement through a nonhomogeneous space. In this regard, the model is similar to that proposed by Bourdieu. However, crucial to the Gramsci-Mouffe scheme is the idea that, for some individuals to exercise leadership, there must be active consensus. That is, there must be a shared understanding that, despite the different positions individuals are occupying, they do, in fact, occupy the *same* space. Hence, there must be cultural elements that communicate this sense of participation in a single space, and those elements themselves must be widely circulated; they must form part of the inertial culture of leaders and led, alike.

George Bernard Shaw's version of the myth of Pygmalion, for example, as a bit of Gramscian hegemonic culture, has something in it for everyone. Upper-class values—the culture carried by the leaders—are affirmed as those toward which everyone, as embodied in Eliza Doolittle, ought to aspire. Of course those values, that culture, that way of life are good ones—nay, even superior ones, the story assures us. Our leaders can rest content that their leadership, their world, is being affirmed. Yet there is something in it also for the led—the great American hope that everyone can ascend the social ladder, that they can acquire the accents, the manners—in short, the culture—of the elites. This is a dream or a myth into which they can buy. Here is a bit of hegemony at work.

A key to articulation is that the widely circulated cultural objects—Shaw's *Pygmalion*, or Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*—must contain analytically separable elements that link up with the inertial elements that are distinctive of the various isolable parts of the nonhomogeneous space.[17] In particular, they must contain subelements recognizable to both the leaders and the led. There is a difference here from the notion of a "shared culture," since any given element need not be shared by all of those who are in leadership positions, or all of those who are among the led. *My Fair Lady* may not be everyone's cup of tea. What is important, instead, is that there be

elements (in the plural) whose pathways of movement link together some of the leaders with some of the led; the elements must do so by drawing together pieces of inertial culture from both leaders and led. Complete consensus—probably never obtained in fact—would be achieved when some set of elements capturing an agreed-upon participation in a single space was in fact universally shared.

Such a social space, however, could still be inertial if all of the elements in question were simply reproduced over time. The accelerative aspect of the Gramsci-Mouffe framework is to be found in the process of achieving new articulations. In Mouffe's words: "Ideological struggle in fact consists of a process of disarticulation-rearticulation of given ideological elements in a struggle between two hegemonic principles to appropriate these elements" (1979, 193). The process must depend upon the production of new expressions, and, hence, on ω culture.

At the same time, this struggle seems to have, at least for Gramsci, an end. The end is the realignment whose parameters are already set by a Marxist theory of class. In Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the process of disarticulation-rearticulation appears to become perpetual and is intimately linked to their idea of a democratic politics. In present terms, their vision is of the continual production of ω expressions. I will be arguing later that something like this is already happening under a metaculture of modernity, but that the result is not, and perhaps is necessarily not, social equality.

Boundaries

I would like to resume the journey I left off earlier, namely, the journey mapped out by my investigation of "we" usage. For the story does not end with Schell and myself. My curiosity about "we's" led me to examine other political writings—and I will be reporting some of my investigations in chapter 3. However, here I wish to pick up the story in the mid-1980s, when it occurred to me to look at the writings of someone working for the U.S. government, someone who was directly inside of it. Because Schell's focus was nuclear war and he was arguing an "antinuclear" position—do away with the weapons—I wanted someone who would espouse a "peace-through-strength" position. A logical candidate was Caspar Weinberger, then secretary of defense under Ronald Reagan. In 1986, he published an article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* entitled "U.S. Defense Strategy."

I subjected the article to the same kind of scrutiny I had applied to *The Fate of the Earth* and, much later, my own "Cultural Representations of Nuclear War." I looked at each first-person plural usage and jotted down what seemed to be its meaning in its specific context. Just as in the other studies, patterns quickly emerged. However, the patterns here were quite distinct from those I found in the other studies. I summarize the results in Table 3.

Table 3. "We" Categories in Weinberger (1986)

CATEGORY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
1. United States	137	63
2. Reagan administration	29	13
3. Ambiguous	28	13
4. Department of Defense	8	4
5. Within quotations	7	3
6. President and I	5	2
7. United States and U.S.S.R.	3	1
8. U.S. government	2	1
9. Human species	1	0
Totals	220	100

Again, I do not expect that you, the reader, would come up with exactly the same statistical results, were you to do this study. The meaning of each "we" is a matter of interpretation. However, the interpretation is not unconstrained, and I would expect your study to confirm the pattern these results suggest.

The pattern is that Weinberger's "we" is primarily a "we" of the United States. The "we" of the human species, so prominent in Schell and in Urban 1984, is found here only in trace amounts (one occurrence out of 220), just as a "we" of the United States is found in trace amounts only in Schell (one occurrence out of 1,310), although it plays a more substantial role in Urban. What to make of this? The answer, I propose, is that such differences are characteristic of cultural boundaries. But of what are those boundaries made?

The "boundary" separating Weinberger from Schell could well be a flimsy one, a matter of the statistics of only one ω expression produced by each. Weinberger might on another day author a piece reminiscent of *The Fate of the Earth*, and Schell might produce something resembling "U.S. Defense Strategy." If my suspicion is correct, however, these different statistical patterns reflect distinct α-type cultural elements. They obey the principle of inertia, even though they can be employed as constituents

within pieces of noninertial, accelerative culture—such as the actual writings produced by Schell and Weinberger.

The inertial character of these elements is in fact of the second type mentioned above—habitual inertia. B is attracted to cultural expression α because B has already produced similar expressions. The statistical patterning of "we" is analogous to the phenomenon of accent. If you try to pronounce new words in a language you are learning as an adult, you tend to pronounce them with an accent. It is not that you could not ever learn to pronounce the words as a native speaker does; it is that the path of least resistance is to do what you have always done. Inertia sets in; to change patterns requires effort.

Correspondingly, Schell could adopt the statistical patterning of "we" in Weinberger's article only with effort, just as Weinberger could adopt Schell's use of "we" only with effort. It is not that the passage cannot be made—witness Eliza Doolittle's miraculous transformation of accent and mannerisms in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Change of inertially guided patterns is always possible. It is rather that to make the change requires effort. Eliza had to procure the aid of phonetician Henry Higgins: "I don't want to talk grammar, I want to talk like a lady." In the end, she did "talk like a lady," and she did marry a "gentleman." But it is easier to continue in the familiar pattern, to follow the grooves that have already been cut. The inertia of habituation is at work. To put it differently, the patterning of "we" in each case is not the product of a momentary whim, or so I am claiming, but reflects microstrands of cultural movement. The "we's" are part and parcel, in each case, of a more enduring habitus, as Bourdieu would call it.

To see whether my suspicion might be correct, I did follow-up studies of other writings by Weinberger, who is, fortunately, a prolific writer.[18] He resigned his post as secretary of defense in 1987, and, as of 1998, was writing a column for *Forbes* magazine, of which he was publisher. I sampled some of his commentaries in *Forbes*, and picked one out at random from June 15, 1998. The title of it is "Protecting the ABM Treaty Instead of Our People." Written twelve years after "U.S. Defense Strategy," the "we's" of this piece, if anything, exhibit an intensification of the patterns found in the earlier work. There are, in this short essay, twenty-four distinct occurrences of the first-person plural pronoun. Every one of them is, in fact, a "we" of the United States, as the anaphoric usage of the very opening sentence suggests: "I am continually struck by how few people in the audiences I address here and abroad know that the *U.S.*$_i$ has no effective defense against missile attack, whether it be directed at *our*$_i$ troops in the field, *our*$_i$ cities or *our*$_i$ allies."

My proposal is not that Weinberger could not construct an essay around a "we" of the human species. It is that the "we" of the United States comes naturally to him as a result of longer habituation. These "we's" are part of inertial culture. To change that pattern would require the expenditure of effort. The easier course is to continue to inhabit the "we" to which one is accustomed.[19]

There is some suggestion, as well, in Weinberger's case that the "we" of the United States was also inertial in the first sense (the existential sense)—that is, that it was simply there to be replicated when he was a child. I have no direct evidence of this, for obvious reasons. However, I ran across a fascinating interview with Weinberger that originally aired on television (C-Span) on July 15, 1990. Here is an excerpt from the interview:

> BRIAN LAMB Caspar Weinberger, secretary of defense for seven years for this country and author of the new book, *Fighting for Peace*. Why do you start your book by telling us about your father's bedtime story when you were a little kid?
>
> CASPAR WEINBERGER Well, it was such an interesting bedtime story. He told us, told my brother and me, the story of the Constitution, how the Constitution was formed and the various compromises that had to go into the creation of the House and the Senate, and this was not the sort of story that you would ordinarily think would hold the attention of anyone of fairly tender years—I guess I was maybe seven or eight, nine, something like that—and yet he told it in such a fascinating fashion. He was an attorney, but a very broad-gauge man and a great father, and I just became thoroughly fascinated with not only the Constitution and its formation, but the legislative procedure, and, indeed, everything connected with government.
>
> LAMB You obviously remember the details of it—how, you say, it went on for weeks?
>
> WEINBERGER Yes, it was a long story—he just took us right through the constitutional convention and all the problems in Philadelphia and how hot it was and how the delegates started to go home and the difficulty of keeping a quorum. It was . . . it was a remarkable performance in every way.

The "we" usage in this stretch of discourse—the "we" of "my brother and me"—is not what intrigues me here. What intrigues me is the suggestion that the inertial pattern may have been present in childhood. Weinberger may have begun to reproduce a "we" of the United States—which he carried on so prominently—in part, at least, because it was there in the

household to be reproduced. Certainly, in his own reconstruction of his childhood, Weinberger attributes his father's story about the constitution to his burgeoning interest in "everything connected with government."

Whatever the case, the prominent identification with a "we" of the United States has persisted in Weinberger's writing for some time. This patterning of "we," as a bit of microculture, has been taken up by him, and passes through him to others. The movement through time and space of such a piece of culture defines a boundary simply because there are other patterns of "we" usage alternative to the one that Weinberger might have inhabited. In particular, there is the "we" of the human species in Schell.

One might think of such a pattern as a two-dimensional figure—let's say a circle, for simplicity's sake—that moves through time to form a cylinder or tube. The cylinder wall is a boundary of social space. It may not be a boundary that is difficult to cross, but it is one that appears more and more solid when the motion of this isolated pattern—this cultural element—is reinforced by the motion of other cultural elements. In that case, the position within social space defined by the boundaries of the element may become recognizable to people more generally, and it may be actually labeled as a position. Such labels are, of course, a part of metaculture. They are culture—they themselves move through space and time. But they are also about culture.

It is possible to imagine the construction of a new cultural element—one, for example, in which the two "we's" are brought into harmonious relationship. If such a new ω expression were effectively constructed, it might be able to harness the inertial force of the previously separated elements, moving through both of the places within social space simultaneously. Such an ω expression would be accelerative, and it would effectively reconfigure the social space, which is, after all, a space mapped out by the movement of inertial elements over time. It comes to appear to be stable and fixed by virtue of a metaculture that labels different places within it. Even in this case, there was a clear divide between a "prostrength" and an "antinuclear" position.

As I think back on it now, that was my implicit desire—never realized—in writing the little 1984 piece, "Cultural Representations of Nuclear War." Its intended audience was of the highly educated adult variety—readers of the *New York Review of Books*, for example, to which I actually sent the piece, receiving in return a kind and encouraging note of rejection, for which I am now grateful.

At the time, I had not yet discovered the "we" patterns in either Schell or Weinberger. However, I knew that I was not wholly happy with Schell's

brooding vision, impressed as I was with its cosmological scale. After all, it completely ignored the United States as an important something in the world, something to which I myself was attached. For one solution to the problem Schell posed would be for the United States to simply give up its weapons unilaterally, perhaps even to give up its commitment to a capitalist way of life in favor of Soviet-style communism. Wasn't that just as unthinkable as the possibility of nuclear annihilation of the species? What would I be if I were not an American? Isn't my life so thoroughly intertwined with the culture that is within me that I cannot distinguish the death of my culture from my biological death? As Geertz says, paradoxically using a "we" of the human species, "Our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural products" (1973, 50).

While never as immersed in a "we" of the United States to the extent that Weinberger was, nevertheless Schell's seeming rejection of it provoked a reaction in me. I wanted to do something that would correct it, that would right this wrong. I now recognize my aborted ω expression as a failure. True, 7 percent of my "we's" in that piece were of the United States variety—as compared with only a single such instance out of 1,310 in Schell's case. This is a full one hundred–fold difference. Nevertheless, my overwhelming tendency was to follow Schell's pattern. The inertial force of my identification with a humanistic "we" was just too great. The accelerative culture I had hoped to produce fizzled. But wasn't something like it—or many such things like it—necessary if a genuine dialogue were to be established, if there were to be any bringing into alignment of these disparate positions? Wouldn't social space have to be reconfigured to solve the problem?

Structure, System, and Rationality as Derivatives of Movement

The movement of cultural elements in space and time seems to take place *through* a structure—a point of view that the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1976, 1981, 1985, 1995; also Kirch and Sahlins 1995), among others, has vigorously argued. From this point of view, structure is understood as a system of relationships linking diverse elements into a larger whole and constraining the movement of those elements. Isn't structure, therefore, rather than movement, the proper starting point for cultural analysis? Isn't it prior to movement? Indeed, isn't it able to be studied independent of movement—a conceit dating back to Saussure's original work on language?

What I hope to convince you of by the end of this book is that structure is in fact not prior to movement, in some absolute sense, but rather a derivative of movement. It is not that structure does not exist; it is rather that structure is a consequence of the way in which cultural elements move through space and time. In particular, structure (or system) is the result of a combination of the inertial and accelerative properties of culture, and it is something that emerges momentaneously when it is lodged in particular things—specific, unique cultural expressions, whether α or ω. Indeed, this is, I believe, a singular merit of a view of cultural motion—it is not simply an alternative to late twentieth-century concepts of culture as structure, but an idea from which what are genuine and valid insights about structure can be derived.

It is easiest to see this in the case of an ω cultural expression. By my definition, an ω expression is something new. It is accelerative in the sense that it takes old cultural elements—which can be microelements such as patterns of pronominal usage—and fuses them into new wholes. In bringing those elements together into a single thing, like a book, it simultaneously makes those elements part of a larger whole. That larger whole—the unique cultural expression, such as Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*—gives the impression that those elements were always interrelated, even before the whole was produced in the unique expression. Acceleration therefore produces the illusion of prior structure—real as the constraints of past motion may be when only inertial motion is involved. Something that is the property of a thing in the world appears to be a property of a system that is thingless.

Of course, the system may have been created for the first time in that thing in the world. This was my own conceit in my youthful work, "Cultural Representations of Nuclear War." I thought I could bring together different parts of social space by articulating them in a single essay. But, while my attempt was a failure, such articulations can and do occur. Different strands of local culture come together in things—ω expressions. Moreover, because the ω expressions have a circulation of their own, as they move through space and time—a circulation that draws upon the parts of space inertially constituted by the movements of their constituent elements—the parts so brought together can become a single thing. Culture can be structured.

The structure is not totalizing, unless every strand of local culture can be synthesized into a single thing-in-the-world—a difficult task, indeed. But the emergence of partial structures, drawing upon certain elements and their trajectories, produces the idea that a complete structure is possible. This is the presupposition of a metaculture of modernity, such as I will

examine in chapter 2 and throughout this book. And, if it is possible to articulate all cultural elements in a single thing, then that possibility can be held up as a goal, an ideal towards which individual transmitters and producers of culture can aspire. A premium is thus placed on the purposeful attempt to articulate structure, the rational or consciously calculated attempt to weave interconnections.

If culture is that which is socially transmitted, why place emphasis on the purposeful attempt to articulate structure? Why prod individuals in the direction of rationality? For this is, after all, what a metacultural emphasis on creating new cultural objects does. But what is in it for culture? This is a mystery to which I have devoted considerable attention, and to which this book offers one solution.

It is possible for individuals to be regarded as mere transmitters of culture, as the conduits through which culture flows. Such is the essence of a metaculture of tradition—an idea about individuals as conduits. Yet the view from tradition—as a kind of objective characterization of culture, disregarding for the moment the role of this metacultural idea in producing motion—focuses only on the inertial side of culture, and, even so, fails to comprehend the decelerative forces acting on that inertial culture. It is a view that comprehends onceness, but fails miserably at futurity. Any cultural element, to survive, requires that some measure of accelerative force be added to it. Otherwise, it deforms and disintegrates or evolves into something else. Yet culture has a telos: It wants to be carried on, and this means resisting entropic deceleration.

There is more. If I am right, it is the telos of certain kinds of culture, at least, to spread—although spread, through globalization, may be a way of trying to achieve temporal continuity.[20] This is the itchy, restless side of culture. That restlessness is the mother of rationality—of the urge to get culture from A to B. It is a side of culture that induces missionary zeal. It is a side of culture that motivates entrepreneurs. It may even be a side of culture that stokes the ambitions of would-be conquerors. Without this restlessness, culture is content to move along pathways whose grooves it has already cut, content to perpetuate itself through time along routes with which it is already familiar. With it, culture is propelled into a lateral motion whose end is to encircle the globe, and from there, perhaps, to move elsewhere.

The Paradox of Observation

What could be more straightforward than the contrast between α and ω culture? A cultural object—a word, a myth-telling, a ceramic pot, for

example—can be understood as a replica of what has come before it, or, alternatively, as something new and distinct, something that draws on the past, but changes it in significant ways. Yet, from the point of view of empiricism, there is something unsettling about the contrast. Scratch its surface, and the outlines of something quite different begin to emerge.

The simple contrast appears empirical enough. It makes reference to the perceptible world, for sure. The senses, or instruments that are extensions of the senses, must be used to detect the similarities and differences. Two ceramics pots, for example, can be closely examined for techniques of painting, coiling, and firing. Is one so similar to the other as to suggest that both are replicas of some prior originals, or, perhaps, that one is a copy of the other? Or, alternatively, is one so different from its predecessors as to suggest that it constitutes something new—an innovation over older patterns? Empirical observation is crucial to answering these questions, but does it suffice?

Here one can view the cultural investigator as scientist, studiously documenting perceptible things in the world, examining their objective characteristics. In the first half of the twentieth century, anthropology was this kind of positive science. Researchers collected cultural objects from around the world, catalogued them, studied their properties, mapped their distributions around the globe. They even detected patterns of motion of cultural elements, which they described in terms of processes of diffusion or independent invention or, perhaps, even brain structures.

But something unsettled this sunny paradigm of normal science. Since the cultural objects were produced by people who had their own understandings of the world, what role should be accorded the native's judgments in relation to the anthropologist's? In a profound article, "The Psychological Reality of Phonemes," Edward Sapir ([1933] 1968) proposed that his own observations of phonetic differences in Native American languages did not always or perfectly correspond to those of the Native Americans from whom he collected the linguistic information. To take an English example, which Sapir used, the seemingly unitary sound "p"—as in the words "pin" and "spin"—appears under close observation to consist of at least two distinguishable sounds, a "p" (writable as [p^h]) with a little puff of air after it, which can be detected by saying the word while holding a small strip of paper in front of one's mouth, and a "p" (writable as [p] or [$p^=$]), with little or no corresponding puff of air. Yet the distinction is difficult for native speakers of American English to bring into conscious focus, easy though it may be for them to reproduce in words. Should the two sounds be regarded as distinctive by the anthropologist?

The problem is compounded by the fact that there are some languages—Urdu, for example, a language of Pakistan—within which native speakers readily recognize the difference. As a young assistant professor, I recall using the "p" example in a large introductory undergraduate cultural anthropology class. I spoke the words "pin" and "spin" and asked whether anyone detected a difference between the two "p's." A hand from the back of the room shot up. "'Tis perfectly obvious," the student said, and proceeded to describe the puff of air after the "p" in "pin." I asked him whether he had learned about this distinction in another class—linguistics, perhaps—but he said no, he had not learned about it anywhere. It then occurred to me to ask him what his native language was, and, sure enough, he responded: "Urdu."

Sapir's study led to one of the great insights of twentieth-century linguistics, namely, that there were two kinds of sounds in language: those that the outside observer, through careful observation, can detect, and those that are salient in the consciousness of native speakers. Study of the former became known as "phonetics" and of the latter as "phonemics." Within cultural anthropology, the contrast was generalized to one between "etics"—culture as objectively describable by an outside observer—and "emics"—culture as construed by the native inhabitants of that culture themselves.

The distinction has been, in considerable measure, the raison d'être of cultural anthropology, and, perhaps, of studies of culture more generally in the latter twentieth century. If there are emic perspectives, is the cultural scientist's own perspective one of them? If so, how can one be sure that one's view of the world is "objective"? Perhaps the scientist of culture is just another native with a quirky emic perspective. How can one be certain of making contact with the world in reporting empirical observations of it? A cloud of radical self-doubt descended upon the sunny paradigm of positive research.

One solution for language was propounded by Roman Jakobson (Jakobson and Waugh 1987). It can be summed up in the dictum "phonetics is a comparative phonemics," and generalized as "an etics is a comparative emics." In other words, to understand what linguistic sounds human beings are capable of perceiving or cognizing, we need to compare the different phonemic systems around the globe. Phonetics, within this method, takes as its object the repertoire of all sounds produced by all such phonemic contrasts. Hence, there is an implicit call to researchers to go out into the world and study the different phonemic systems through which sound is rendered intelligible.

By analogy—and this comes close to describing the project mapped out by the great anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques* series—human beings cannot directly grasp the world as it is simply by reflecting upon their sensory observations. Since emic perspectives intervene between the individual and the world, the best hope of grasping the world, insofar as a human is able to, is by studying and comparing the different emic systems through which the world is rendered understandable by people. This philosophical vision of the relationship between understanding and the perceptible world motivated a generation of scholars—I was one of them—to embark upon journeys to the remote corners of the earth in search of alternative emic frameworks, the systematic comparison of which would shed light on great philosophical questions about reality and the ability of humans to comprehend it.

If the goal of research is to determine the range of sounds that have been empirically used for purposes of phonemic contrast in languages around the globe, or if the goal is to map the human cognitive apparatus through which reality has been processed, then the etics-as-comparative-emics model works well. But what if one's goal is to understand culture itself—not just the human cognitive apparatus—as a phenomenon in the world, as an object of scientific interest? What if one's goal is to study the motion of culture through the world, especially its trajectory into a future? Can one be sure that the past history of phonemic contrasts exhausts its future history? And if a future phonemic system generates consciousness of a new sound, was that sound already there, waiting to be discovered by the future system, or was the sound itself something new, something whose existence could not have been comprehended within an etics-as-comparative-emics framework?

The problem is one of the relationship between ALPHA and α, or between OMEGA and ω, that is, the metacultural characterization by natives (or by the observer, for that matter) and the cultural object. But that relationship—which is characterized in Figure 1—leads to two radically opposed and at least partially unsatisfactory alternatives, though both also capture elements of truth.

One interpretation is empiricist: The metacultural characterization of the object is ALPHA (or OMEGA) because the object really is an α (or ω), that is, because it really is sufficiently similar to (or different from) its predecessors to warrant being called ALPHA (or OMEGA). The qualities of perceptible cultural objects determine metacultural characterizations of them. The world of cultural things discloses itself directly to metacultural understanding, finds its way into or is reflected in that understanding.

Figure 1. Empiricist (up arrow) and relativist (down arrow) interpretations of culture-metaculture relations.

The other interpretation is the relativistic one: The object is only α (or ω) because it is construed by metaculture as ALPHA (or OMEGA). The perceptible world does not work its way into the metacultural construal. Any perceptible cultural object might be construed in either way. Metacultural construal is part of an arbitrarily imposed understanding of the world, a way of cutting up reality—in the cookie-cutter image—that is only one among several or many—perhaps, even, infinitely many—possible ways. This is the solution for which some contemporary cultural analyses have opted.

While the two possibilities seem irreconcilably at odds, in fact they come together in a third possibility inherent in the paradox of observation—in the seeming paradox, namely, that observation affects the thing observed. What if the idea contained in and carried by metaculture is not only about the thing in some passive sense, a detached representation of the thing's past characteristics or of its relationship to the past? What if the idea is interested also in the thing's future? Then the idea will want to make contact with the perceptible object, will want to contain a truth about it, a truth that must include the object's relationship to the past, but a truth that wants to direct the object toward a future that it envisions. This is, of course, what the sculptor Pygmalion does in contemplating the slab of marble. He sees it for what it is. But he also sees it for what it can become.

If something of the cultural object finds its way into the metacultural interpretation—that is, if the interpretation is not arbitrary relative to the object—does the metacultural interpretation find its way into the object? Might not the metacultural interpretation actually influence the cultural object and fashion it, at least in some measure, after its own image? Construed in this way, metacultural interpretation is a force in the world of perceptible things, not just an arbitrary conscious representation of things construed as indifferent to their representation. This active, though ethereal, force might then be responsible for the acceleration of culture,

whether via an emphasis on maintaining tradition—and, hence, on overcoming the forces of dissipation to which culture, moving through the world, is subject—or, alternatively, via an emphasis on newness, which propels culture in directions that the ideas in some measure, at least, foresee.

Figure 2 is an attempt to graphically represent this dynamic linkage where both metaculture and culture are moving through the world, circulating among people, not as two wholly independent forms of motion taking place on unconnected planes, but rather as forms or planes of motion that are dynamically interconnected through representation. The proposal is that culture is not just something that can be represented in metaculture, but something whose very nature—whose existence as thing in the world—is positively affected by that representation.

This proposal is confined to a limited range of phenomena, namely, those involving the interaction between cultural objects and metacultural representations.[21] Can it have broader implications for understanding reality? This is where future trajectories surface as important. What, precisely, is a cultural object, and what might become one? So long as cultural objects are confined to a few ceramic pots here and there, to some ephemeral words passed on over the generations, it is easy to imagine a reality independent of culture, a reality that, unlike the cultural object, does not require culture for its perpetuation. There is a fixed, timeless quality to it, just as there is to tradition; this is ironic, or perhaps not so ironic, since the concept of an immutable reality itself may be one of the last bastions of traditionalism.

Yet culture has shown itself to be a formidable shaper of reality. Can land be reclaimed from the sea? Yes, with the help of cultural learning. Can rivers be diverted from their course of flow? Yes, with the help of cultural knowledge. Can lush forests be turned into deserts or deserts into lush forests? Yes, thanks to culture. What are the limits of control over reality by this mysterious thing?

A noteworthy irony of the late twentieth and now early twenty-first

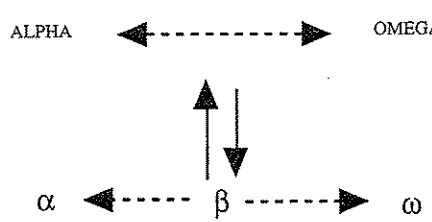

Figure 2. Dynamic interconnection between culture and metaculture.

century has been talk about biological determination of human life, talk growing out of the human genome project, as well as out of attempts to locate medical disorders and human propensities in genes. I find no irony in the research agenda underlying these claims, nor in any specific result. What strikes me as ironic,[22] rather, is that this talk has been occurring at the precise moment in history when biogenetic engineering—cumulated cultural learning—is making possible the achievement by culture of an unprecedented degree of control over the genetic apparatus, control enabling the creation of new life forms and the alteration of old ones, of a God-like control. True, culture has been gaining control over biology for hundreds and thousands of years through domestication and breeding of plants and animals and through regulation of biological reproduction among humans. But cumulated learning—that is, culture—has made possible control of biological reproduction on a new scale. Where is that control lodged? It can only be in metacultural ideas about cultural processes, and, in particular, about the cultural practices surrounding biological manipulation.

Who can foresee the limits to the capacity of culture to reshape reality after its own image? Do those limits lie at the edge of the ocean, with the tides studied by Isaac Newton as evidence for gravity? Or will culture find ways to harness and even affect those great forces of nature? What about the glacial movement of tectonic plates on the earth's surface that give rise to earthquakes and reshape the face of the planet? Will we forever be able to make observations in this area without those observations, paradoxically, reshaping the world we observe? Perhaps the line will be drawn there as to what is immutable and what outside the control of culture. Or perhaps the safe place to draw the line, once and for all, will be with the orbital motion of heavenly bodies, since we can at least imagine an age in which culture might achieve complete terrestrial domination. Surely, though, planetary motion will never succumb to the control of culture, will never be subject to reshaping from the ethereal realm of ideas—unless, of course, one subscribes to something like the Biblical view: "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2).

It is just too hard presently to foresee the limitations on culture, and hence on the metacultural shaping of reality, especially given the equally awesome capacity of culture—is this not, after all, our sphinx?—to strike us down, destroy humanity, hurl it back into a dark age, as in Schell's nightmare vision. But even the humble and seemingly insignificant processes

investigated in this book—the role of metacultures of newness and tradition in maintaining or reshaping such cultural objects as myths and films—reveal something of epistemological significance. The metacultural plane cracks open, and the great chisel of Pygmalion descends towards the marble of an unformed world, imparting the ethereal force of ideas to perceptible things. Yes, something immaterial is in our midst, something whose elusiveness and riddles perplex us, but must not stop us from continuing with research. After all, the sphinx is guardian of a passage—a wondrous, if strange, passage into an unforeseen future. This is one trip we will not want to miss. Yet, the sphinx waylays travelers on their journey, prompting them, upon pain of death, to correctly solve the riddle. Can we be sure that our own sphinx will not kill us, should we fail to answer its questions? What more powerful incentive could there be for future generations of researchers? Yes, the motion of culture is the central mystery of our time, the last frontier for an older science, and the first test of a newer one, yet unborn.

2

In Modern Time

The moving finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.
Edward Fitzgerald, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859), stanza 51

Surface Textures

The sleek curves and shiny surfaces of stainless steel cooking pots from the 1950s and 1960s—the period of my youth—seemed to me so natural, as if they were an expression of the scientific, rational surface texture of my then lived world, the same kind of smooth curvature found in the close-cropped, oiled hair of men or the bun hairstyle of women or the girdles women wore to smooth out their surface appearance. My memory is jogged by the visual signatures of Hitchcock movies from that period. When did I detect the change? Probably before I went off to college in the late 1960s, but it was in college that it really hit home (perhaps my first anthropological epiphany): The style of my youth wasn't "natural," part of some immutable order of the universe; it was socially learned, socially transmitted, moving through the world and changing, part of that mysterious phenomenon of motion called culture.