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# Opening a Dialogue between Cultural Conservatism and Modernism

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A theme that by now has become more than a little familiar to readers of *democracy* is the conflict between cultural conservatism and modernism. The former is often a vehicle for the defense of tradition; its chief concern is not “high” or “elite” culture, but the more popular beliefs and practices of community life. The protection and cultivation of these beliefs and practices is figured as politically progressive—progress here signifying the reinvigoration of the values people hold in common in opposition to the brutal march of development. From the perspective of the cultural conservative, the modernist serves the ideology of this development insofar as he celebrates the new at the expense of the accepted, and insofar as he thinks of culture—or makes cultural products—in a form that speaks to a very small elite of culture consumers who have passed through an education/initiation to which most people do not have access.

From the point of view of the modernist, the cultural conservative is necessary to defend forms of expression that are in decline, if not anachronistic. The defender of tradition may simply be viewed as “anticulture,” since culture is assimilated by the modernist to the cultivation of innovation. The defender of a community’s beliefs and practices is either naive or in bad faith: he celebrates community life without really participating in it; defends a faith without sharing in it the way other believers do.

Despite their mutual antagonism, the cultural conservative and the modernist do share some of the same presuppositions and goals. The terms of their debate mask a fundamental commonality that I will point to in this essay. But there is likewise a crucial difference between them, and in this difference and in this commonality lie the possibilities for a new dialogue.

The contrast of modernist and conservative subsumes another opposition that dates back to the origins of western culture: namely, that of elite and popular, or high and low. For the cultural conservative, modernism is elitist: its isolation

from the needs and desires of ordinary people is bridged only by condescension. The hermetic and self-referential qualities of much modernist art and discourse is a way of keeping culture at a distance from "the people."

The modern historical basis for this charge of elitism is the identification of modernism with the "art-for-art's sake" movement. It would be a mistake, however, to view the basis even for this strain of modernism as a rejection of popular culture, or as the dismissal of the beliefs and practices of community life. The rejection of historicist styles and bourgeois entertainment that was a condition of "art-for-art's-sake" cannot be correctly assimilated to a rejection of tradition generally.<sup>1</sup> Instead, this early modernist movement should be seen as part of an effort to break down the established forms of mediation between the spectator and the work of art; to create a new experience of culture that would not be dependent on the social hierarchies of the day.

Important forms of early modernism, however, can be seen not only in terms of a rejection of social hierarchies, but in terms of a retreat from social reality.<sup>2</sup> The modernist fascination with psychic phenomena and deep dionysian desires can be considered an abandonment of the political or public realm. Indeed, it is in this regard that modernism is often considered not only as isolated from the concerns of ordinary people, but as fundamentally, and sometimes dangerously, antipolitical.

It is here that we can see one of the important paradoxes in the political perspective on modernism, because the charge of aggressive elitism stems from the artists' attempts to break through what they saw as political forms that were disconnected from our strongest desires. Rather than a retreat from the political or historical, the modernist "dive into the depths" was often part of the attempt to give new meaning and force to a political life that had become a symptom of, rather than a response to, alienation (the best example in this regard is surrealism). Such an attempt can be labeled "antipolitical" only insofar as one accepts a rigid distinction between the personal and the political. This distinction, in any case, cannot be coherently upheld by someone who also wants to maintain the political importance of preserving the traditions of a community because they satisfy some fundamental human need or desire.

The charge that modernism in general is antipolitical is clearly off the mark when one considers the politicization of aesthetic categories that has been an important facet of modern artistic expression since the beginning of the twentieth century. Whether one focuses on epic theater, surrealism, or contemporary Latin

1 On the use of popular traditions in early modernist art, see Peter Jelavich, "Popular Dimensions of Modernist Elite Culture: The Case of Theater in Fin-de-Siècle Munich," in *Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. S. Kaplan, D. LaCapra (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).

2 This is a central theme in Carl Schorske's study of modernism in Vienna: *Fin de Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

American fiction, it is clear that modernism has been an expression of, as well as a participant in, some of the major political conflicts of our time.<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of the cultural conservative, however, this participation can not only be criticized for creating an elitist art, but also for being allied with antidemocratic social and political elites. That is, the cultural celebration of the new contributes to the legitimation of the ideology of technocracy. Thus modernism comes to be identified with modernization, and the celebration of the new with the destruction or clearing away of the traditional.

The marriage of modernism and modernization, although it has in a few cases (for example, futurism) been consummated, is at best an uneasy alliance. Technocracy depends on structures of tradition antithetical to much of the spirit and practice on modernism. Technocracy is based in large part upon the process of routinization—sophisticated practices developed out of a discipline of unquestioned assumptions—whereas this process has been one of the prime targets of critical modernism. Routinization, although it may often have results inimical to the cultural conservative, necessarily preserves a vast domain of quasi-ritualistic beliefs and practices that “go without saying” in much the same way as does conservatism. Thus, the role of tradition in the methodology of modernization should be recognized along with that of modernism in the ideological legitimation of technocracy. Neither the modernist nor the cultural conservative can afford to avoid the confrontation with technocracy and modernization by merely throwing stones at one glass house from another.

For the cultural conservative, modernism seems to be politically engaged in little more than uncritical progressivism. Similarly, the modernist sees only blind, unquestioning tradition in the politics of cultural conservatism. The celebration of the new, or of the old, for its own sake, seems to each to be the straitjacket for cultural expression that the other wants to force on an unwilling public. In any case, it seems clear that this public will neither make the leap into a future fully disconnected from its past nor remain bound within traditions that have become alien to people in a changing world.

The issue for both the cultural conservative and the modernist is the presentness of the past. That is, each has the task of finding in the past elements that can nourish our present lives, in contrast to the burden of history that feeds off present possibilities and drains them of their potential power. The fact that one is more likely to see nourishing elements where the other sees burdens should not obscure their shared problematic: how to understand present possibility in relation to tradition. More accurately, their task is to grasp the ways in which we always already connect possibility and tradition in our actions and language. All of the noise about

<sup>3</sup> Some of the more important political conflicts in which modernism was a factor are discussed by Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

uncritical progressivism and blind traditionalism is an expression of a shared concern with this connection, and of a desire to legitimate and make use of particular facets of it.

**M**y comments thus far seem to indicate that there is not all that much at stake in the debate between the modernist and the cultural conservative. Although they do share a common problematic, there is, of course, an important difference in the ways that they confront their shared concerns. In the following pages, I will examine an example of this difference by looking at a theme that is crucial to much of modernist art and which is also a predominant concern of cultural conservatism. By doing so, I hope to show where a dialogue between the modernist and the traditionalist can profitably inform a political perspective on contemporary culture.

A key theme in the aesthetics of modernism is the effort to defamiliarize what is normally taken for granted. The substitution of simultaneity for linear time, the juxtaposition of ideas and images that seem to have no logical or intrinsic connection with one another, the willful creation of ambiguity and paradox, and the decentering of the subject are all examples of the modernist impulse to undermine the given. The point of this impulse varies greatly within the branches of modernist art: from the cubists' evocation of the multidimensional nature of the object-world to the didactic alienation of Brecht's theater. In all of its forms, however, the aesthetic of defamiliarization is meant to jar the public out of its habitual modes of perceiving and interacting with the world.

The cultural conservative who values tradition must look with deep suspicion at this aesthetic of defamiliarization. One of the chief functions of tradition is to make man at home in the world, to make the world a home for man. Whether one regards modernism as the demystification of the illusions of everyday life, or as a decadent expression of our fragmented condition, it is clear that it aims to break up this home, if not undermine its foundations. The cultural conservative does not see the value in celebrating our alienation especially in light of the more radical attempt to deconstruct our notion of truth so that there would be no possibility of replacing our given traditions with any substantial beliefs that people could share.

The modernist project of demystifying the given is, however, no longer incompatible with the cultural conservative's effort to preserve tradition, insofar as modernism itself has now become a tradition, a fact of our cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> The familiarity with which we approach the form of defamiliarization challenges the modernist and the cultural conservative to rethink their connection with the past,

<sup>4</sup> One of the important points established by Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

and to reevaluate their dependence on an historical sense that mediates between innovation and preservation. Such a reevaluation might prevent the modernist search for defamiliarization from degenerating into a purile, nihilistic desire to shock, as it would prohibit the cultural conservative's "democratic" legitimation of the status quo under the cover of a preservation of select traditions of mythically "ordinary people." As modernism is recognized as a tradition, it can enter on equal terms into a dialogue with cultural conservatism, since the former could not simply celebrate the new without destroying itself, and as the latter's protection of tradition would include the preservation of modernism. This dialogue could lead to a richer comprehension of the ways in which our past sets boundaries for the significance of our present action, as well as of the ways in which we give new meanings to memory through artistic creation. The modernist and the cultural conservative can join in this dialogue without sacrificing their most important principles. Indeed, these principles now call for such a dialogue.

Of course, it may be that partisans of the modern and of substantive traditionalism will continue to speak past on another in their anger about "uncritical progressivism" and "blind traditionalism." Only mass culture would benefit from this failed dialogue, since the culture industry thrives on being able to empty both innovation and tradition of their critical and revelatory aspects in order to provide entertainment without the dangers of cultivation or education. If, however, the modernist and the cultural conservative can recognize the common ground of their different concerns, recognize their mutual ties to a past made real only through our projects and actions in the present, then their dialogue would begin to bridge the gap between elite and popular culture to enhance the possibilities for a living tradition to confront, rather than flee from, the exigencies of the contemporary world.