

uncontrolled violence. Peace ceases to figure on the register: it is not a good we can attain.

Of course, the countervailing factor may not revise our gamut of choices so dramatically. It may simply show that the values of our originally preferred regime cannot be integrally fulfilled or that they will be under threat from a previously unsuspected quarter, or that they will be attended with dangers or disadvantages or disvalues not previously taken into account, so that we have to make a choice as in the peace-versus-good-art case above. Thus not all alterations of the framework will undermine the original values. But we can see that the converse does hold, and all undermining will involve a change in the framework. For if we leave the original framework standing, then the values of its preferred regime will remain as fully realizable goods, even if they are attended with certain evils which force on us a difficult choice, such as that between peace and good art, or progress and psychic harmony, or whatever.

In this sense we can say that a given explanatory framework secretes a notion of good, and a set of valuations, which cannot be done away with—though they can be over-ridden—unless we do away with the framework. Of course because the values can be over-ridden, we can only say that the framework tends to support them, not that it establishes their validity. But this is enough to show that the neutrality of the findings of political science is not what it was thought to be. For establishing a given framework restricts the range of value positions which can be defensibly adopted. For in the light of the framework certain goods can be accepted as such without further argument, whereas other rival ones cannot be adopted without adducing over-riding considerations. The framework can be said to distribute the onus of argument in a certain way. It is thus not neutral.

The only way to avoid this while doing political science would be to stick to the narrow-gauge discoveries which, just because they are, taken alone, compatible with a great number of political frameworks, can bathe in an atmosphere of value neutrality. That Catholics in Detroit tend to vote Democrat can consort with almost anyone's conceptual scheme, and thus with almost anyone's set of political values. But to the extent that political science cannot dispense with theory, with the search for a framework, to that extent it cannot stop developing normative theory.

Nor need this have the vicious results usually attributed to it. There is nothing to stop us making the greatest attempts to avoid bias and achieve objectivity. Of course, it is hard, almost impossible, and precisely because our values are also at stake. But it helps, rather than hinders, the cause to be aware of this.

CHAPTER THREE

SOCIAL THEORY AS PRACTICE

In this chapter and the next, I want to argue that we could gain a great deal by examining our theorizing about social matters as a *practice*. My claim is that the activities of searching for, creating, espousing and rejecting theories are too little understood, and that they are far from being unproblematic, as we often assume in our concern to focus on the *content* of our theories.

Moreover, I want to maintain that gaining clarity about the practice of theorizing will help us to understand more about the scope and validity of our theories. Being more reflectively clear about what we do in our theoretical activity will help us to answer questions which we cannot even properly pose as long as we remain convinced that social theory is a straightforward matter of designing hypotheses and comparing them to the facts.¹

In particular, I hope to throw light on two important questions in what follows. The first concerns how we validate social theories. The second starts from the answer to the first and asks what is involved in offering a theoretical account of societies very different from our own.

I

What makes the whole matter appear unproblematic to us is the hold of what I want to call the natural science model, the widespread view that the natural sciences can provide us with paradigms for the methods and procedures of social science. *We think* we understand the activity of exploring nature. Here, too, we are certainly over-complacent. But we tell ourselves a tolerably clear story of what goes on in natural science, and the very success of our research seems to indicate that we have here the

¹ I realize that there are important points of convergence between the views I'm defending here and the thesis of Pierre Bourdieu in his very interesting book, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), but he has a somewhat different starting point and works within a different tradition.

norm for science in general. The prestige of this norm then stops further enquiry.

But this is in fact disastrous. I want to try to show this first by examining the relation of theory to practice, that is, of the practice of theorizing to the other practices which theory guides. Let us look first at the model the natural sciences offer of this relation.

Let us take the example of physical theory. This gives us, among other things, a picture of underlying mechanisms or processes which explain the causal properties and powers of the things we are familiar with. We know that the kettle will heat up in contact with the fire; the kinetic theory will tell us what underlies this heat transmission, so that we understand it as consisting more fundamentally in a transfer of kinetic energy. But in some cases, the picture of the underlying reality turns out to be surprising, or strange, or paradoxical, in the light of our ordinary common-sense understanding of things. We have to adopt quite a radically revised view about the nature of things to explain what goes on.

But part of what is involved in having a better theory is being able more effectively to cope with the world. We are able to intervene successfully to effect our purposes in a way that we were not before. Just as our common-sense pre-understanding was in part a knowing how to cope with the things around us, so the explanatory theory which partly replaces and extends it must give us some of what we need to cope better. Theory relates to practice in an obvious way. We apply our knowledge of the underlying mechanisms in order to manipulate more effectively the features of our environment.

There is a constant temptation to take natural science theory as a model for social theory: that is, to see theory as offering an account of underlying processes and mechanisms of society, and as providing the basis of a more effective planning of social life. But for all the superficial analogies, social theory can never really occupy this role. It is part of a significantly different activity.

There is, of course, an analogy. Social theory is also concerned with finding a more satisfactory fundamental description of what is happening. The basic question of all social theory is in a sense: what is really going on? We have to ask this question because our common-sense descriptions of what is happening are inadequate, or sometimes even illusory. They fail to give us an explanatory grip on our situation, or to help us act effectively. And the answers offered by theory can be surprising, strange, even shocking to common-sense.

But the big disanalogy with natural science lies in the nature of the

common-sense understanding that theory challenges, replaces or extends. There is always a pre-theoretical understanding of what is going on among the members of a society, which is formulated in the descriptions of self and other which are involved in the institutions and practices of that society. A society is among other things a set of institutions and practices, and these cannot exist and be carried on without certain self-understandings.

Take the practice of deciding things by majority vote. It carries with it certain standards, of valid and invalid voting, and valid and invalid results, without which it would not be the practice that it is. For instance, it is understood that each participant makes an independent decision. If one can dictate to the others how they vote, we all understand that *this* practice is not being properly carried out. The point of it is to concatenate a social decision out of individual decisions. So only certain kinds of interaction are legitimate. This norm of individual independence is, one might say, constitutive of the practice.

But then those who carry on this practice must, in general and for the most part, be aware of this norm and of its application to their own action. As they vote, they will generally be capable of describing what is going on in terms like these: 'this is a valid vote', or 'there is something dubious about that', or 'that's foul play'. These descriptions may of course be mistaken; but the point is that awareness of this kind is an essential condition for a population's engaging in this practice. If no one involved had any sense of how their behaviour checked out on this dimension, then they would not be engaged in *voting*. They would have to be carrying on some other activity which involved marking papers, some game that we do not yet understand.

In this way, we say that the practices which make up a society require certain self-descriptions on the part of the participants. These self-descriptions can be called constitutive. And the understanding formulated in these can be called pre-theoretical, not in the sense that it is necessarily uninfluenced by theory, but in that it does not rely on theory. There may be no systematic formulation of the norms, and the conception of man and society which underlies them. The understanding is implicit in our ability to apply the appropriate descriptions to particular situations and actions.

In a sense, we could say that social theory arises when we try to formulate explicitly what we are doing, describe the activity which is central to a practice, and articulate the norms which are essential to it. We could imagine a society where people decided things by majority vote, and

had a lively sense of what was fair and foul, but had not yet worked out explicitly the norm of individual independence and its rationale in the context of the practice. In one clear sense, their doing so would amount to a step into theory.

But in fact the framing of theory rarely consists simply of making some continuing practice explicit. The stronger motive for making and adopting theories is the sense that our implicit understanding is in some way crucially inadequate or even wrong. Theories do not just make our constitutive self-understandings explicit, but extend, or criticize or even challenge them. It is in this sense that theory makes a claim to tell us what is really going on, to show us the real, hitherto unidentified course of events.

We can distinguish some of the forms this kind of claim can take: it may be that we see what is really going on only when we situate what we are doing in a causal matrix which we had not seen or understood. Marx's theory provides a classic example of this kind of claim: the proletarian is engaged in making contracts with independent owners of capital to exchange his labour power for wages. What he fails to see is that the process in which he so engages by contract is building the entrepreneur as owner of capital, and entrenching his own status as an agent without other recourse than selling his labour for subsistence. What looks like an activity between independent agents is actually part of a process which attributes to these agents their relative positions and status.

In this case, the constitutive self-understanding which is upset is that which belongs to the activity of making and fulfilling contracts between independent agents. On one level, this self-understanding is not wrong; and it is certainly constitutive of a capitalist society in Marx's view. That is, workers have to understand themselves as free labourers in order to be proletarians. But when we see it in the broader matrix, its significance is in an important way reversed. What seemed a set of independent actions are now seen as determined and forced. What seemed like one's making the best of a bad job now is seen as a yoke imposed on one.

But the Marxist theory also upsets the political self-understanding described above, that of decision by majority vote in 'bourgeois' society. For in fact the matrix of the capitalist economy severely restricts the choices open. Options which reduce profitability threaten everyone with economic decline, and potential mass unemployment. These severe limits will in general mean that the very options which are offered to voters will be pre-shrunk, as it were, to be compatible with the continued unhampered operation of the capitalist economy. So once again, what looks like

a collective decision freely compounded out of the autonomous individual choices is in fact structurally determined. Or so the story goes according to this theory.

This is one kind of claim, which alters or even overturns our ordinary everyday understanding, on the grounds that our action takes place in an unperceived causal context, and that this gives it a quite different nature. But there are also theories which challenge ordinary self-understanding and claim that our actions have a significance we do not recognize. But this is not in virtue of an unperceived causal context, but because of what one could call a moral context to which we are allegedly blind.

Plato's picture of the decay of the polis in the Republic provides a well-known example of this: what seems like the competition of equals for place and fame is in fact a fatal abandonment of moral order, engendering a chaos which cannot but deepen until it must be brought to an end in tyranny. The inner connection between democracy and tyranny is hidden from the participating citizen, because he cannot understand his action against the background of the true order of things. He just stumbles from one to the other.

In our day, there are a number of theories of this kind abroad. We can think on one hand of Freudian-influenced theories, which portray the real motivations of political actors, and the real sources of political power and prestige quite differently from the rational, instrumental, utilitarian forms of justification that we usually provide for our choices and allegiances. Or think on the other side of the picture often presented by opponents of the culture of growth: we blind ourselves to the importance to us of a harmony with nature and community in order the more effectively to sacrifice these to economic progress. Indeed, some of the most influential of these theories critical of growth find their roots in Plato. We have only to think of the late E. F. Schumacher.

Critical theories of this kind often propound some conception of false consciousness. That is, they see the blindness in question as not just ignorance, but in some sense motivated, even wilful. This is not to say that theories which portray our action as taking place in a broader causal context cannot also invoke false consciousness. Marxism is a case in point. They must do so to the extent that the causal context is one that ought normally to be evident, so that its non-perception is something we have to explain. But this need for a special explanation of non-perception becomes the more obvious when what we allegedly fail to appreciate is the moral or human significance of our action.

There is a particular kind of theory which is sometimes invoked to

challenge our everyday understanding that I would like to single out here, because it will be important in the later discussion. Theories of this kind refer to what I will call shared goods. By 'shared good', I mean something different and stronger than mere convergent good, where people may have a common interest in something. A good is shared when part of what makes it a good is precisely that it is shared, that is, sought after and cherished in common. Thus the inhabitants of a river valley have a common interest in preventing floods. This is to say that each one has an interest in the same flood prevention, and this is so irrespective of whether they have some common understanding of it, or indeed, whether they form a community at all. By contrast, shared goods are essentially of a community; their common appreciation is constitutive of them.

The well-known example is the one central to the tradition of civic humanism, the citizen republic. This takes its character from its law; so that the citizen's action takes on a crucial significance by its relation to the laws: whether it tends to preserve them, or undermine them, to defend them from external attack, or to weaken them before enemies, and so on. But the good here is essentially shared. The laws are significant not *qua* mine, but *qua* ours; what gives them their importance for me is not that they are a rule *I* have adopted. The culture in which this could confer importance is a quite different one, a culture of individual responsibility, perhaps even incompatible with that of the republic. Rather the laws are important because they are *ours*. And this cannot simply mean, of course, that our private rules converge on them; their being ours is a matter of our recognizing them as such together, in public space. In other words, that the significance is shared is a crucial part of what is significant here. Public space is a crucial category for republics, as Rousseau saw.

Some theorists in our tradition have taken shared goods seriously. They include, I believe, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau, de Tocqueville; in our day, Arendt and Habermas, to mention just two. A rather diverse lot. But a central notion they share is that having important meanings in common puts us on a different footing with each other, and allows us to operate as a society in a radically different way. The thinkers of the civic humanist tradition were interested in how men could become capable of acting together in a spontaneously self-disciplining way, the secret of the strength of republics. Machiavelli, indeed, saw this as the secret of strength in the most direct and crude military terms. But the general insight shared by all thinkers of this cast is that

our way of acting together is qualitatively different when we act out of shared significance. This is the basis of what Hannah Arendt called 'power', attempting to redefine the term in the process.

This can be the basis for a challenge to our everyday understanding, where this takes on an atomist cast, as it frequently does in contemporary Western society. People often tend to construe the political process, for instance, as constituted by actions for purely individual goals. The only common goods recognized are convergent. Society is understood as the interaction of individual agents. This self-understanding is challenged by theories of shared goods, with the claim that our actions also take place in a context of shared ends, which our everyday conception does not acknowledge. What we do may strengthen or undermine our shared goods, but this significance of our action escapes us. So that we can, for instance, be in process of destroying our republican political community blindly. The destructive import of our action is lost on us. Of course, this kind of theory can appear paradoxical, since it seems to be supposing that some goods which are shared are not fully perceived. But I hope to show later on how this paradox can be resolved, and that a theory of this kind must be taken quite seriously.

In any case, we have seen several ways in which theory can claim to tell us what is really going on in society, challenging and upsetting our normal self-descriptions, either through identifying an unperceived causal context of our action, or by showing that it has a significance that we fail to appreciate. And I suppose, in order to make this list a trifle less incomplete, I should add that theories are not necessarily as challenging to our self-understanding as the ones I have mentioned here. They can have the function just of clarifying or codifying the significance which is already implicit in our self-descriptions, as I indicated earlier. For instance, some elaborate theory of the order of being, and the related hierarchy of social functions, may fit perfectly into the practices of a stratified society. It may simply codify, or give explicit expression, to the habits of precedence and deference already in being.

And the theories of the causal context can play the same unchallenging role. Since the eighteenth century, our culture is saturated with theories of the economy, which show the train of transactions effecting the production and distribution of goods as following laws. These purport to make us aware of regularities in the social process of which we would otherwise be ignorant. But this knowledge may just complement our self-understanding, not overthrow it. Not all theories of political economy are revolutionary. This was Marx's complaint.

Relative to the 'democratic' picture of ourselves above as deciding matters through majority vote, certain theories of the economy are not at all upsetting. They present us, for instance, with a picture of 'consumer sovereignty', matching in parallel our political image of voter sovereignty. These theories of the economy promise to show us how to design policies which are more effective, which intervene with greater awareness and hence success in the underlying processes of the economy. To do this, as with any application of technology, we have to respect the scientific laws governing this domain. But this is not seen as making a sham of choice, as in the Marxist picture.

II

These theories challenging or not, all claim, to tell us what is really going on. This was the analogy with natural science. But the disanalogy emerges when we see what introducing social theory brings about. The case is different here, because the common-sense view which theory upsets or extends plays a crucial, constitutive role in our practices. This will frequently mean that the alteration in our understanding which theory brings about can alter these practices; so that, unlike with natural science, the theory is not about an independent object, but one that is partly constituted by self-understanding.

Thus a challenging theory can quite undermine a practice, by showing that its essential distinctions are bogus, or have a quite different meaning. What on the 'democratic' picture looks like unconstrained choice is presented as unyielding domination by Marxist theory. But that means that one of the constitutive norms of the practice of majority decision is shown as in principle unfulfillable. The practice is shown to be a sham, a charade. It cannot remain unaffected. People will treat this practice and the connected institutions (e.g., legislatures) very differently if they become convinced of the challenging theory. But this is not a matter of some psychological effect of further information. The disruptive consequences of the theory flow from the nature of the practice, in that one of its constitutive props has been knocked away. This is because the practice requires certain descriptions to make sense, and it is these that the theory undermines.

Theory can also have the radically opposite effect. An interpretation of our predicament can give added point to our practices, or show them to be even more significant than we had thought. This is, for example, the effect of a theory of the chain of being in an hierarchical society. Relative to our 'democratic' picture, some theory which showed that important

economic or other issues are up for grabs, and await our determination, would have the same heightening effect.

But a theory can do more than undermine or strengthen practices. It can shape or alter our way of carrying them out by offering an interpretation of the constitutive norms. Let us start again from our picture of 'democratic' decision by majority rule, the picture which is implicit in our practices of elections and voting. There are a number of ways of understanding this process. We can see this by contrasting two of them.

On one hand, we have an atomist model, which sees society as a locus of collaboration and rivalry between independent agents with their individual goals. Different social arrangements and different dispositions of society's resources affect the plans of members differently. So there is naturally struggle and competition over policy and position. 'Democratic' decision-making allows people equal input and weight in determining how things are disposed, or tolerably near to this. This view might be made more sophisticated, so that we see the political system as open to 'inputs' in the form of 'demands' and 'supports', and as producing as output an 'authoritative allocation of values', in which case we could develop quite a complex intellectual grip to describe/explain the political process.²

Quite different from that would be a republican model, issuing from one of the theories of shared goods mentioned above. From this standpoint the atomist theory is ignoring one of the most crucial dimensions of social life, viz., the degree to which the society constitutes a political community, that is, the kind and degree of shared ends. A society in which all goals are really those of individuals, as they are portrayed in the atomist scheme, would be an extreme case, and a degenerate one. It would be a society so fragmented that it was capable of very little common action, and was constantly on the point of stasis or stalemate.

A society strong in its capacity for common action would be one with important shared goods. But to the extent that this was so, the process of common decision would have to be understood differently. It could not just be a matter of how and whose individual demands are fed through to the process of decision, but would also have to be understood at least partly as the process of formulating a common understanding of what was required by the shared goals and values. These are, of course, the two

² David Easton, *The Political System* (New York, 1953), and *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York, 1965).

models of decision that are invoked in the first two books of the *Social Contract*. Rousseau's aim is to show how one can move from the first to the second; so that we no longer ask ourselves severally, what is in our individual interest (our particular will), but rather what is the proper content of the general will. The proper mode of social choice is where the policy selected is agreed upon under the right intentional description. It is vital that it be adopted as the right form of a common purpose, and not as the point of convergence of individual aims. The latter gives us merely *la volonté de tous*, whereas a true community is ruled by its *volonté générale*.

Rousseau thus presents in very schematic sketch the notion of a certain form of social decision, which for all those thinkers who fall in the civic humanist tradition is seen as normative. Societies fail to have true unity, cohesion, strength to the extent that their decisions emerge from the will of all as against the general will. The immense gap between the atomist and general will theories is thus clear. What the second sees as a defining feature of the degenerate case is understood by the first as a structural feature of all societies. Which is just another way of saying that what is for the second the crucial dimension of variation among societies is quite unrecognized by the first.

But it ought to be clear that the general acceptance of either of these models will have an important effect on the practices of social decision. These practices may be established in certain institutions, which may be the same from society to society, or in the same society over time. But within this similarity, the way of operating these institutions will obviously be very different according to whether one or the other model is dominant, that is, has become the accepted interpretation. Where the atomist model is dominant, decision-making of the general will form will be severely hampered, suppressed and confused. Where on the contrary some self-understanding of common meanings is dominant, the scope for will-of-all decisions will be circumscribed within the bounds of explicit common goals.

Indeed, there might be no quarrel with this point about the effect of these theories. The problem might be seeing why their effect is not greater; why, for instance, the dominance of atomist theories does not put paid to general will decisions altogether. The answer lies in the fact that a theory is the making explicit of a society's life, that is, a set of institutions and practices. It may shape these practices, but it does not replace them. So even though some feature may find no place in the reigning theory, it may still be a constitutive part of a living practice.

The notion of the general will can be seen as a way of formulating the constitutive norm of decision-making for communities with shared goods. Even if this norm remains unformulated and unrecognized, it may still be that the community retains certain shared goods. These will still be central to certain of its practices, for example, to the kinds of arguments that are acceptable/unacceptable in public debate, even if there is no theoretical formulation of why this is so. Shared goods may be reflected in the norms strongly held to govern public life, or in the ceremonial surrounding the state, even where they have dropped out of the accounts of politics that citizens give to themselves and others.

Of course, these goods will be considerably restricted, and much less vigorous in public life than where they are explicitly acknowledged. And they will certainly be in danger of eclipse. But they may nevertheless still be operative. Theory can never be the simple determinant of practice. I want to claim later that something like this gap between theory and practice is true of our society.

This is the striking disanalogy between natural science and political theories. The latter can undermine, strengthen or shape the practice that they bear on. And that is because (a) they are theories about practices, which (b) are partly constituted by certain self-understandings. To the extent that (c) theories transform this self-understanding, they undercut, bolster or transform the constitutive features of practices. We could put this another way by saying that political theories are not about independent objects in the way that theories are in natural science. There the relation of knowledge to practice is that one applies what one knows about causal powers to particular cases, but the truths about such causal powers that one banks on are thought to remain unchanged. That is the point of saying that theory here is about an independent object. In politics, on the other hand, accepting a theory can itself transform what that theory bears on.

Put a third way, we can say that while natural science theory also transforms practice, the practice it transforms is not what the theory is about. It is in this sense external to the theory. We think of it as an 'application' of the theory. But in politics, the practice is the object of theory. Theory in this domain transforms its own object.

This raises different problems about validation in political theory. We cannot think of this according to a simple correspondence model, where a theory is true to the extent that it correctly characterizes an independent object. But it is also totally wrong to abandon the notion of validation altogether, as though in this area thinking makes it so. The fact that

theory can transform its object does not make it the case that just anything goes, as we shall see below. Rather we have to understand how certain kinds of changes wrought by theory are validating, and others show it to be mistaken.

But before trying to show how this is so, I have to acknowledge that a powerful current in our culture resists strongly the idea of political theory as transforming its object. Partly because of the very puzzlement about validation just mentioned, and partly for other reasons, the temptation has been strong to assimilate political theory to the natural science model. This would then aspire like physics to yield knowledge about the unchanging conditions and regularities of political life. This knowledge could be applied to effect our ends more fully should we find occasion and justification.

Of course, it is difficult to present theories which claim to identify the true significance of our actions in this light. And so the attempt is usually made with theories of the causal context. The various theories of the political economy have tended to be of this form: certain consequences attend our actions regardless of the intentions with which they are carried out. So no alteration in our self-understanding will alter *these* regularities. Our only way of changing the course of things is by *using* these regularities to our own ends. In short, practice must apply the truths of theory. We have here exactly the relation of natural science.

We have been brought generally to consider economics as a science of this kind. People believe, for instance, that monetarism is true or false as a proposition about how certain economic transactions concatenate with others. If true, it could thus be the basis of a policy which would bring about its effects in a given economy regardless of the intentions and self-understanding of the agents in that economy. The policy would be merely technical, in the sense that it would work entirely without altering the way people conceive their predicament or understand the alternatives open to them. For the economic laws the policy banks on allegedly operate quite irrespective of such changes.

Perhaps there is some justification for this as far as economics is concerned. There are certain regularities which attend our economic behaviour, and which change only very slowly. But it would be absurd to make this the model for social theory in general and political theory in particular.

First, there are cultural conditions of our behaving according to these regularities. Economics can hope to predict and sometimes control behaviour to the extent that it can because we can be confident that in

some department of their lives people will behave according to rather tightly calculable considerations of instrumental rationality. But it took a whole vast development of civilization before the culture developed in which people do so behave, in which it became a cultural possibility to act like this; and in which the discipline involved in so acting became widespread enough for this behaviour to be generalized. And it took the development of a host of institutions, money, banks, international markets, and so on, before behaviour of this form could assume the scale it has. Economics can aspire to the status of a science, and sometimes appear to approach it, because there has developed a culture in which a certain form of rationality is a (if not the) dominant value. And even now, it fails often because this rationality cannot be a precise enough guide. What is the rational response to galloping inflation? Economics is uncertain where we ordinary agents are perplexed.

Second, we could not hope to have a theory of this kind, so resistant to our self-understanding (relatively resistant, as we have seen), outside of the economic sphere. The regularities are there, and resistant, to the extent that behaviour responds to narrow, circumscribed considerations. Economic behaviour can be predictable as some game behaviour can be; because the goals sought and the criteria for their attainment are closely circumscribed in a given domain. But for that very reason, a theory of this kind could never help explain our motivated action in general.

Various attempts to explain political behaviour with an economic-model theory always end up either laughable, or begging the major question, or both. They beg the question to the extent that they reconstruct political behaviour according to some narrowly defined conception of rationality. But in doing this, they achieve not accuracy of description of political behaviour in general, but rather they offer one way of conceiving what it is to act politically, and therefore one way of shaping this action. Rather than being theories of how things always operate, they actually end up strengthening one way of acting over others. For instance, in the light of our distinction above between atomist and general will constructions of democratic decision-making, they help to entrench the atomist party. Setting out with the ambition of being natural science-type theories of an independent reality, they actually end up functioning as transforming theories, as political theories normally do, but unconsciously and *malgré elles*. They thus beg the interesting question: 'Is this the right transforming theory?' because they cannot raise it; they do not see that it has to be raised.

If, on the other hand, they try to avoid this partisanship by becoming

rather vague and general in their application, allowing just about any behaviour to count somehow as rational, then they become laughable. Theories of this kind generally hover between these two extremes. An excellent example is the conversion theory of politics mentioned above in connection with the name of David Easton.

What emerges from this is that the model of theory as of an independent object, or as bearing an object resistant to our self-understanding, has at best only partial application in the sciences of man. It can apply only in certain rather specialized domains, where behaviour is rather rigid, either because largely controlled by physiological factors, or because a culture has developed in which what is done in a given department is controlled by a narrow range of considerations, as in games or (to some degree) economic life. But this could never be the general model for social science, and certainly not that for a science of politics.

III

Which brings us back to the question of validation. What is it for a theory to be right? We cannot just reply that it is right when it corresponds to the facts it is about. Because, to oversimplify slightly, political theories are about our practices (as well as the institutions and relations in which these practices are carried on), and their rise and adoption can alter these practices. They are not about a domain of fact independent of, or resistant to, the development of theory.

Put tersely, our social theories can be validated, because they can be tested in practice. If theory can transform practice, then it can be tested in the quality of the practice it informs. What makes a theory right is that it brings practice out in the clear; that its adoption makes possible what is in some sense a more effective practice.

But this notion of validating theories through practice may seem even more bizarre and suspect than the idea that theories may not be verified by the facts. What we need in order to make it less strange is to come to a better understanding of the uses of theory.

Our reflections on natural science familiarize us with the idea that theories describe and explain the phenomena of some domain, and help us to predict them. But it should be clear from the above discussion that this cannot be all that social theory does for us. I argued above that social theory can affect practice, just because it can alter our self-descriptions, and our self-descriptions can be constitutive of our

practices. One of the things social theory does, I suggested, is make explicit the self-understandings which constitute our social life.

But then it is clear that our formulations can serve more than descriptive purposes. We may be led to formulate some self-understanding in order to rescue a practice, to make it possible to continue it, to put it on a securer basis, or perhaps to reform it, or purify it. The point, one might say, of the formulation here is just to provide the constitutive understanding necessary for the continuing, or reformed, or purified practice.

This of course is true first of all of many of our pre-theoretical formulations in myth and ritual. A founding myth, or our public ceremonial, expresses in public space our common ends, or shared goods, without which we would be incapable of acting together in the way our institutions call for. For example, we are capable of fighting together in war, or sharing power in some particular way, only because we have a common understanding, to which some public expression is indispensable, and these formulations are its public expressions.

But with certain advances in culture, there may arise the need for theoretical formulations, that is, we feel the need to submit our discourse of self-understanding to the special disciplines of objectivity, rigour, and respect for truth which are constitutive of the activity we know as theorizing. This may be the case as much with our common understandings as with the individual attempts at orientation, by which we try to define our place in society and/or history.

There is no doubt that modern culture makes this demand. Ours is a very theoretical civilization. We see this both in the fact that certain understandings formulated in modern theories have become incorporated in the common understandings by which political society operates in the West, and also in that, however oversimplified and vulgarized these theories may become in attaining general currency, an important part of their prestige and credibility reposes on their being believed to be correct theories, truly validated as knowledge, as this is understood in a scientific age.

For instance, I would claim that atomist theories of the polity, and even more obtrusively, corresponding theories of the economy, have entered into the common understanding of modern Western democracies, perhaps in a debased and garbled and oversimplified form, but with the prestige of theoretical truth behind them. These views are indeed not without rivals in the general understanding; it is not simply atomist. But part of the challenge to them comes from rival theories propounded by minorities, for instance Marxism. This too may be thought vulgarized

and oversimplified, but essential to its appeal is the prestige of Science, to which it lays claim.

Ours is an inescapably theoretical civilization. Some of the reasons for this are not too hard to identify. One of the basic underlying conditions, of course, is the prestige of science in our way of life. But on top of this, the rise and prominence of political economy has been of great importance.

We are all convinced that there are mechanisms of social interaction which are not clear on the surface, regularities which have to be identified through study and research. Even people who are not at all uneasy about the implicit understanding of the society's institutions, and are not tempted at all to think that this understanding is somehow illusory, nevertheless accept that there is more to social interaction than can meet the eye. There are laws of society which have to be laid bare in a theory.

But people also turn to political theory because they feel the need to get clearer what society's practices involve. These practices seem problematic because they are already the locus of strife and trouble and uncertainty, and have been since their inception. I am thinking in particular of the central political practices of modern Western democracies: elections, decisions by majority vote, adversary negotiations, the claiming and according of rights, and the like. These practices have grown in our civilization in a context of strife, replacing sometimes violently earlier practices which were incompatible with them. And they are practices which by their nature leave scope for struggle between different conceptions, policies, ambitions. Moreover, their introduction was justified by polemical theories which challenged the dominant views of the pre-modern era. Hence by their nature and history these practices constantly push us to find and redefine their theoretical basis.

And so our society is a very theory-prone one. A great deal of our political life is related to theories. The political struggle is often seen as between rival theories, the programmes of governments are justified by theories, and so on. There never has been an age so theory-drenched as ours.

In this situation, while political agents may turn to theories as guides, or as rhetorical devices of struggle, many others turn to them in order to orient themselves. People reach for theories in order to make sense of a political universe which is full of conflict and rival interpretations, and which moreover everyone agrees is partly opaque. When in addition, people's purposes are frustrated in unexpected ways, for example when they are beset with intractable stagflation, or anomic violence, or

economic decline, the sense of bewilderment is all the greater; and the only cure for bewilderment seems to be correct theory.

Theory thus has an important use to define common understandings, and hence to sustain or reform political practices, as well as serving on an individual level to help people orient themselves. Let me coin the term 'self-defining' for these uses of theory, in contrast to the explanatory ones that we usually focus on.

Then two points emerge from the above discussion: this self-definition is essentially also a definition of norms, goods, or values; and there are in each case practices of which it is the essential enabling condition.

This is pretty obvious with theories which formulate common understandings. A theory of the self-governing republic gives us a certain notion of our shared good, which as we saw is constitutive of certain practices. But its principal rival, the atomist theory, which gives us an instrumental picture of political society, involves no less of a definition of the political good.³ This is seen quite differently, and reposes principally in the efficiency of the political system in satisfying our demands, as well as in the responsiveness of political institutions to the demands of different categories of people, and thus in the distributive justice of demand-satisfaction. Some of the central features of modern society, such as the trend towards rationality and bureaucratization in government, are essentially linked to this instrumentalist understanding.

But the same points can be made about individuals' attempts at orientation. In fact, people seek orientation in their political world not just to have a cognitively tidy universe, but for much more powerful reasons. In some cases, it will be because they need the political realm to be a locus of important significance. Either they want political structures to reflect their central values, or they require that political leaders be paradigms of these values, or they seek a form of political action which will be truly significant, or they require the political system to be the guardian of the right order of things; be it in one way or another, they are reluctant to look on political structures simply as instruments which are without value in themselves – albeit an influential strand of modern political theory tends in just this direction.

Others desire to feel in control. They want to objectify the social world by science, so as to have the confidence that they can cope with it, manipulate it given the right conditions. This is, of course, one of the strong motives for natural science modelled theories. Still others seek to establish

³ See chapter 2 above.

a sense of their own worth by espousing theories which show themselves to be clearly separate from, perhaps even in combat with, the evil, muddle, ambiguity, or failure they see around them. This is especially evident in theories which justify terrorist violence. But then the very satisfactions of becoming oriented, in one or more of these ways, may give one a sense of having achieved more clairvoyant practice which is quite specious. This can generate very powerful mechanisms of self-delusion. And these orientations are the basis of certain practices, just because they define our relation to the good, to what is really or potentially of value in political life.

In any case, it is clear that theories do much more than explain social life; they also define the understandings that underpin different forms of social practice, and they help to orient us in the social world. And obviously the most satisfying theories are those that do both at once: they offer the individual an orientation which he shares with his compatriots, and which is reflected in their common institutions.

But we might be tempted to reply that all this, while true, has nothing to do with our question, how do we validate theory? Sure, there are all sorts of self-defining uses of theory, but these have nothing to do with its truth. Naturally, granted what is at stake, human beings will always be tempted to espouse theories that give them a sense of moral orientation, and perhaps even more theories which support the practices they find advantageous. So that those who are doing well in capitalist society, and to whom governments are responsive, will easily warm to an atomist, instrumentalist theory, while those who are pushed to desperation as victims of systematic deprivation may well be attracted to theories of extreme conflict, and accept some justification of terrorism.

In short, the self-defining uses of theory are simply ideological in the pejorative sense. One can scientifically explain why certain theories serve the self-definition of certain people, but that they do so says nothing of itself for their truth. Of their truth, we can only judge by seeing how they describe and explain. In the end, all our objections to validating by correspondence with the facts must be swept aside. If we are talking scientifically, that is what it comes down to. So runs the reply.

Social theories would be in this respect exactly like theories in the natural sciences. If someone told us that he accepted a theory in physics or chemistry because it gave him a satisfactory moral orientation to his world, or supported the right political practices, we should judge him irrational or corrupt. These are motives of the crimes against science, such as the suppression of Galileo, or the propagation of Lysenko's theories in

the Soviet Union. These considerations cannot be allowed as relevant to truth.

My central claim is that this reply, and the parallel it invokes, is deeply mistaken. Of course, nothing could be more common than the interested and 'ideological' use of social theory. How could it be otherwise when so much is at stake? But this is not the same thing as saying that there is no such thing as the objective validation of a theory in its self-defining use. The fact that we have an overwhelming temptation to fudge in this domain in the service of our material and psychological interests does not at all mean that there is no truth of the matter here, and that the self-defining uses of theory are nothing but the reflection of these interests.

My thesis can perhaps best be expressed here in two related propositions:

1. There is such a thing as validating a social theory in its self-defining use, as well as establishing it as explanation/description.
2. Validating a theory as self-definition is in an important sense primary, because understanding what is involved in such validation will frequently be essential to confirming a theory, even as an adequate description/explanation.

Theories as self-definitions cannot just be seen as reflections of interest, because they make a certain kind of claim. They claim to offer a perspicuous account of the good or norm which is the point of a certain practice. Rousseau's republican theory of the general will offers a certain conception of the shared good informing the practices of republican self-rule. The atomist theories define conceptions of rationality and efficacy. If I accept an orientation towards my political society as rightfully the guardian of the correct order of value, then I define a certain notion of guardianship, which I see as the point of certain laws, ceremonies, structures.

Now this is the kind of claim that can be right or wrong, and that in principle at least, we can validate or disconfirm. It is something we can test in practice. This is so, because since theories enable practices to take a certain shape, a theory which badly misidentifies the goods we can seek in a certain domain will ground a practice which will fail to realize these goods. The practices informed by wrong theories will be in an important way self-defeating.

And this is, I would argue, the essence of the claim made by opponents of a given theory in real political debate. Thus people who are sceptical of a Rousseauian view hold that his conception of the shared good in the general will is too simplistic and unitary. Precisely for this reason they see

the practice it grounds as self-defeating, because it fails to achieve a generally acknowledged freedom, but on the contrary degenerates into despotism. This is rightly thought of as self-defeating, because freedom was the point of the practice. On the other side, opponents of atomist views argue that a truly atomist polity would be utterly devoid of civic spirit; it would therefore require a maximum of bureaucratic surveillance and enforcement to function. It would thus defeat the ends of freedom, justice and demand-satisfaction.

These examples are, I believe, representative of real debate between living theories. It is rare that one sees two utterly independent goods, whose definition is not in dispute, but which define rival policy goals, at the centre of a major political debate. As one looks at the Soviet system from the outside, a Westerner may feel that it would make more sense if they defended their society on the grounds that it minimizes disorder, while we prefer ours for its freedom and democracy. But in fact, this is not what the debate is about between the two systems. It concerns the nature of freedom and democracy, whose definition is in dispute.

Between two quite independent rival goods, the practice criterion could not select. But between two rival conceptions of the goods we can seek in societies of a certain kind, practice can allow us to arbitrate in principle. Of course, when something big is at stake, both sides will have every motive to lie, and fudge, and suppress the truth and confuse the issues. But this is not to say that the issue cannot be arbitrated by reason.

On the contrary, it can; and we can now perhaps see better how. First, it should be clearer why the disputes are not like those between rival causal hypotheses, where one affirms and another denies a hypothetical: if *p* happens, then *q* will befall. This latter kind of dispute supposes that we agree on the descriptions 'p' and 'q'. But it is the basic terms of politics which are in question when theories clash. The contestants will probably disagree over certain hypotheticals in the course of the argument (e.g., whether pursuing certain objectives will lead to bureaucratization, or will undermine stability). But what is at stake is not a set of hypothetical propositions, for example, of the kind: if we carry out the practices as the theory prescribes, the good will ensue. Because we are dealing with an ordinary hypothetical here, where the condition described in the protasis is independent of that described in the apodosis. Rather the good sought under the description offered by the theory is constitutive of the practice we seek to realize. What is at stake is more like rival maps of the terrain. One might say, the terrain of possible practices is being mapped in contour, and this purports to give the shape and slope of the heights of value.

The proof of a map is how well you can get around using it. And this is the test of theories considered as self-definitions. In this they are closely analogous to the pre-theoretical understandings we have of things. When I overcome some confusion I may be in about the disposition of my limbs, or the way I am moving my body, or the lie of the land, and have a more perspicuous view of things, this shows its superiority in enabling me to act more effectively. I know I have a better grasp of things when I am able to overcome the muddle, confusion, and cross purposes which affected my activity hitherto.

Analogously, I want to argue that to have a better theoretical self-definition is to understand better what we are doing; and this means that our action can be somewhat freer of the stumbling, self-defeating character which previously afflicted it. Our action becomes less haphazard and contradictory, less prone to produce what we did not want at all.

In sum, I want to say that, because theories which are about practices are self-definitions, and hence alter the practices, the proof of the validity of a theory can come in the changed quality of the practice it enables. Let me introduce terms of art for this shift of quality, and say that good theory enables practice to become less stumbling and more clairvoyant.

We should note that attaining clairvoyant practice is not the same thing as being more successful in our practices. It may be that there is something deeply muddled and contradictory in our original activity, as for instance Marxism would claim about the practices of 'bourgeois' democracy. In which case, theoretical clarity is not going to enable us better to determine our own fate within the context of bourgeois institutions. Rather what the theory will have revealed is that this enterprise is vain; it is vitiated at the very base. But practice can be more clairvoyant here because we can abandon this self-defeating enterprise, and turn to another goal which makes sense, that is, revolution. Of course, if we bring this off, we shall have been more successful overall; but not in the practices we originally set out to understand, which we have on the contrary abandoned. And just getting the right theory does not ensure that we can bring off the revolutionary change. We may just be stymied. Still, if the theory is right we would be capable of more clairvoyant practice, which in this case would just consist in our abandoning the muddled, self-stultifying effort to determine our fate freely within the structures of the capitalist economy.

My second thesis is that for some theories understanding what is involved in validating the self-defining use will be essential to their confirmation.

This can be the case in two ways. First, there can be cases in which the historical evidence is insufficient, in the sense that certain possibilities have not been tried. Or in any case, this is what one side in the argument can often claim. This always arises in debates about radical social theories, for example of egalitarian participatory democracy, or anarchism. Their opponents ask us to look at the historical record: when have these theories ever been successfully applied? Their protagonists reply that the conditions have never been right; the real test case is yet to come.

To the extent that the protagonists are right, then the validation we are waiting for is of the theory in its self-defining use. We are awaiting a case in which our social life can be shaped by it, and it can show its value in practice.

But of course the hotly contested question in this kind of debate will bear on just this, how incomplete is the historical record? To what degree can past experiences be deemed valid predictors of new possible experiments? Does the virtual absence of anarchist societies from the historical record show this form to be impossible? Does the fact that the experience of mass democracies up to now exemplifies to a large degree the elite competition model show more participatory forms to be impossible?

How do you decide this kind of question? Presumably the answer turns on how you interpret the historical record. But this is relevant precisely as a record of *stumbling or clairvoyant practice*. The conservative claim is just that the failure of previous attempts amounts to a case of the self-defeat that attends a practice informed by a wrong theory. The radical answer will always be that the failure springs from other sources, external factors, lack of propitious economic, or educational, or military conditions, and so on.

The argument about a general will theory mentioned above is a case in point. For its opponents, the disaster which has attended various attempts to supersede 'bourgeois' representative democracy is sufficient proof of the error of this theory. But its defenders will argue that it has only been tried in the most unfavourable economic, cultural or military conditions; where it ought never to be attempted; and that the obstinate refusal of those responsible for these attempts to acknowledge the unpropitiousness of the conditions has turned their theory itself into a travesty of the original idea. It is in these terms that the debate is frequently engaged between conservatives and socialists about the lessons to be drawn from the Soviet experience. For the former, this experience is a crucial negative test; for the latter, it is a grotesque caricature of socialism.

I do not want to try to show who is right here. My point is rather that

one cannot make and argue for a reading of this kind unless one understands what it is for a wrong theory to render a practice self-defeating, or a more correct theory to make it relatively unimpeded. In other words, you have to understand what it is to validate a theory as self-definition in order to glean from the historical record some defensible view of the theory's future prospects.

This kind of validation of a theory against the historical record is thus quite different from what is normally understood as the verification of a theory by comparison with an independent domain of objects. Here the confirmation has to take account of the way in which theory shapes practice. To test the theory in practice means here not to see how well the theory describes the practices as a range of independent entities; but rather to judge how practices fare when informed by the theory.

My claim is then that testing theories in practice plays an essential part in validating social theories. In the immediately preceding discussion, I have been talking about reading history to settle disputes about theories as self-definitions. But the same theories serve both for self-definition and for explanation. To give good grounds for a theory in an argument about either is to give good grounds for it *tout court*.

For in fact disputes about self-definition are inextricably bound up with questions of explanation, and vice versa. The argument whether the inhumanities of the Soviet system are to be put to the account of socialist theory, or rather attributed to other factors, is also an argument about how various developments of Soviet history are to be explained. And the reverse: any explanatory hypotheses about Soviet history have inescapable relevance to the question, what lessons are to be drawn about the theories which ought to inform our future practice.

A little reflection will show why this must be so. What makes it the case that there is such a thing as the self-defining use of theory, and that it can be validated in practice, viz., the fact that human beings frame self-understandings which shape their activity, this same basic feature has to be taken into account wherever it is relevant when we are trying to explain human action in history. In other words, where and to the extent that social action has been informed by self-understanding, this will have to figure in any valid explanatory account, together with an assessment of the way and degree to which this understanding facilitated or impeded the action.

It follows that explanatory theories have to be concerned with the same basic inter-weaving of theory and practice which we examine when we test self-definitions. Explanation also involves inescapably an appraisal

of how theory has shaped practice, and of whether or how this has been self-defeating. Thus whether we examine the record for purposes of explanation of self-definition, we have to ask largely overlapping questions. The same core of judgements will be central to both enquiries.

And that is why I have spoken above of theories which have explanatory or self-definitional *uses*. This is to take the core of judgements at the heart of both enquiries and identify it with the theory. But even if we think of the two enquiries as issuing in distinct theories, the close connection emerges in the fact that adopting a given self-definitional theory has strong consequences for the explanatory theories one can consistently adopt, and vice versa. The two orders of questions are logically linked via their common core. You cannot establish something in relation to one debate without deciding a great deal about the other.

Thus the activity that I am calling testing theories in practice is indispensable to the validation of our social theories. It is not just that we may sometimes be called on to test theories as self-definitions in our own practice. What is of much more general relevance, we have to make use of our understanding of what it is to test in practice when we examine the historical record; and this whether our interest in the disputed theories is explanation or self-definition.

And this is what distinguishes social from natural science, where testing theories in practice plays no role at all. Of course, the contrast is not complete. Some social theories can be at least partly tested on a simple verification model. Certain economic theories, like monetarism, are of this kind. One might think that monetarism can be refuted if controlling the money supply does not succeed in slowing inflation while leaving growth unimpeded.

But economic theories of this sort are the exception rather than the rule in social science. Most theories are not of the kind that can simply be *applied* in practice; they affect practice only in shaping or informing it. And for these, simple verification against an independent domain is impossible.

And even these seemingly clear cases of verifiable theory may turn out to be muddy. Suppose the defenders of monetarism try to save it from the discredit of its failure as a policy by arguing that extraneous cultural or political factors – managerial practices, trade union rigidities – prevented its beneficent effects from ensuing. Won't we have to follow the argument back into the domain where theories as self-definitions shape our practice?

As a matter of fact, the entire debate about inflation in the last decade

can be seen as an illustration of this shift. Economists started off with an unshaken faith in their science as the source of verifiable explanations. Inflation was explained by factors that could be manipulated, that is, by factors which could be adjusted without any change in people's self-definitions: the level of demand, levels of taxation, size of government deficit, growth of money supply. At the beginning of the 1980s, we are more ready to ask ourselves whether inflation isn't largely fuelled by our political relations, in other words, in part by the self-definitions implicit in our dominant practices. From the point of view of our discussion here, this reappraisal means a shift from reliance on theories which still fit the natural science models to theories which are self-consciously about practices.

What I have been arguing in the preceding discussion is that theories about practices are validated in a way special to them. And this way can only be understood, if we see more clearly what we are doing when we create, espouse, propound social theories. In this way, I am trying to redeem my opening claim, that we need to see social theory as practice in order to understand what its validation amounts to.

In the next chapter I will turn to another issue which I think is also illuminated by this understanding.

CHAPTER FOUR

UNDERSTANDING AND ETHNOCENTRICITY

I

The main thesis of the last chapter has been that we ought to turn to look at what we *do* when we theorize; that when we do we see that theories serve more than descriptive and explanatory purposes, they also serve to *define* ourselves; and that such self-definition *shapes* practice. But if all this is true, I argued, then the use of theory as self-definition also has to be borne in mind when we come to explain, when we practise, social science.

For even though theory may be serving us, the social scientists, simply as an instrument of explanation, the agents whose behaviour we are trying to explain will be using (the same or another) theory, or proto-theory, to define themselves. So that whether we are trying to validate a theory as self-definition, or establish it as an explanation, we have to be alive to the way that understanding shapes practice, disrupts or facilitates it.

But this raises a number of questions about the relation between the scientist's explanatory theory and the self-definitions of his subjects. Suppose they offer very different, even incompatible, views of the world and of the subjects' action? Does the scientist have the last word? Can he set the world-view of his subjects aside as erroneous? But to condemn this world-view does he not have to stand outside it, and is this external stance compatible with understanding their self-definitions?

We come here to one of the main issues of the debate around *verstehende* social science. And this had to arise. Because in fact my thesis amounts to an alternative statement of the main proposition of interpretive social science, that an adequate account of human action must make the agents more understandable. On this view, it cannot be a sufficient objective of social theory that it just predict, or allow us to derive, the actual pattern of social or historical events, and the regularities which occur in it, described in whatever language admits of unambiguous verification. A satisfactory explanation must also make sense of the agents.

This is not to say, of course, that it must show their action as making sense. For it very often does not. Frequently they are confused, malinformed, contradictory in their goals and actions. But in identifying the contradictions, confusions, etc., *we* make sense of what they did. And this means that we come to see how as *agents* – i.e., beings who act, have purposes, desires – they came to do what they did, and to bring about what befell.

Now my argument has been converging onto a similar conclusion. For my contention has been that social theory has to take subjects as agents of self-definition, whose practice is shaped by their understanding. And this is just an alternative way of stating the thesis that we have to give an account of them as agents, and that we cannot do this unless we understand them, that is, grasp their self-understanding. The opposing ideal of a verifiable, predictive science, on the model of the natural sciences, is, I have argued, a chimaera.

I hope that the above discussion may help us to set aside two common misapprehensions about interpretive social science. The first is that what it demands of us is empathy with our subjects. But this is to miss the point. Empathy may certainly be useful in coming to have the understanding we seek; but it is not what understanding consists in. Science is a form of discourse, and what we want is an account which sets out the significance of action and situation. What we are crucially looking for, therefore, is the right language in which we can make this clear. I will say more on this shortly.

The second misapprehension is the one evoked by my questions above. It is to the effect that understanding the agent involves adopting his point of view; or, to speak in terms of language, describing and accounting for what he does in his own terms, or those of his society and time. This is the thesis which has been associated (rightly or wrongly) with the name of Peter Winch.¹ Taken strictly, it would seem to make social science rather unilluminating, and in some circumstances next to impossible. It would make it unilluminating, since in many cases actors are confused, misinformed, have contradictory purposes, and their language may reflect this. Simply recovering their self-description may cast no light at all on what was going on. Indeed, the starting point of our scientific effort may be that we find something perplexing in their action as they understood it. And in the limit case where we are dealing with a so-called 'primitive' society,

¹ See his *The Idea of a Social Science* (London, 1958) and 'Understanding a primitive society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1 (1964), pp. 307–24.

that is one which is pre-scientific, which has not yet produced a discourse of reflective theory, a scientific account in their terms would be quite impossible.

But this kind of demand has nothing to do with interpretive social science as I have been expounding it here. On the contrary, in the normal case what is demanded of a theoretical account is that it make the agent's doings clearer than they were to him. And this may easily involve challenging what he sees/saw as the normal language of self-description. We saw a case in the previous chapter with the Marxist theory claiming to reveal the language of free contract as a sham. But the need to challenge the agent's self-descriptions does not take away in the least from the requirement that we understand him as an agent. Understanding someone cannot simply mean adopting his point of view, for otherwise a good account could never be the basis of more clairvoyant practice.

There is, however, an important truth which underlies this confusion. And that is that making sense of agents does require that we *understand* their self-descriptions. We may, indeed often must, take account of their confusion, malinformation, illusion; but we make sense of them if we grasp *both* how they see things *and* what is wrong, lacunary, contradictory in this. Interpretive social science cannot by-pass the agent's self-understanding.

We might distinguish the two theses in this way: interpretive social science requires that we master the agent's self-description in order to identify our *explananda*; but it by no means requires that we couch our *explanantia* in the same language. On the contrary it generally demands that we go beyond it. The false assimilation of interpretive science with adopting the agent's point of view does place exactly this crippling restriction on the explanantia. But if, on the other hand, we attempt to by-pass his self-descriptions even in picking out our explananda, we have put paid to any attempt to make sense of him.

Now there is a strong temptation to by-pass these self-descriptions, which is felt particularly by those who accept natural sciences as the model for social science. We can easily see why this is so, if we examine what is involved here.

The kind of understanding we are looking for is what we could call 'human understanding'. It is the kind we invoke when we say things like: 'I find him incomprehensible', or 'At last I understand what makes her tick', or 'Now we understand each other'. And as I said above, having this is not just a matter of feeling empathy. Because what we are talking about here is discursive understanding. We can sometimes, of course, just be 'on

the same wave-length' with someone, have a kind of unformulated pre-understanding of him, but this is not the kind of thing we need for a theoretical account.

Getting the kind of human understanding of someone which we can formulate involves coming to be able to apply what I want to call (following Elizabeth Anscombe) the 'desirability characterizations' which define his world. I come to understand someone when I understand his emotions, his aspirations, what he finds admirable and contemptible in himself and others, what he yearns for, what he loathes, and so on. Being able to formulate this understanding is being able to apply correctly the desirability characterizations which he applies in the way he applies them. For instance, if he admires sophisticated people, then understanding him requires that I be able to apply this concept 'sophisticated' in the sense it has for him.

Perhaps that way of putting it is a bit too quick, because some of what he feels, desires, etc., will be unformulated by himself; whereas to figure in my account, it has to be formulated. So, in slightly more complex terms, my claim amounts to this: that the explicit formulation of what I understand when I understand you requires my grasping the desirability characterizations that you yourself clairvoyantly use, or else those which you would use if you had arrived at a more reflective formulation of your loves, hates, aspirations, admirabilia, etc. These are the self-descriptions (in a somewhat extended use of this term) which I want to claim are crucial for social science, for grasping those applied by the agent is essential to identifying our explananda.

Now thereby hangs a problem for science. Take, for example, the desirability characterizations we attach to actions to make ourselves more understandable, such as 'just', 'charitable', 'generous'; and those we apply to ways of life, such as 'integrated', 'fulfilled', 'dedicated', 'free from illusion'; and also negative ones, like 'fragmented', 'false', 'hollow', 'shallow', etc.; all of these pose two problems as candidates for scientific discourse as this is usually conceived.

First, they cannot be intersubjectively validated in an unproblematic way. Whether a way of life is truly integrated or free from illusion is a matter of potentially endless interpretive dispute. Moreover, we tend to believe that there are or may be certain moral pre-conditions, certain pre-conditions of character, for the successful discernment of these properties. We do not expect callow youth to have as good an eye for the life free from illusion as those who have grown wiser with age (a class which is not, of course, co-extensional with those who have aged). When

it comes to understanding what a life of fine sensibility is, some people are distressingly philistine. And so on. Using this kind of concept, one cannot hope for replicable findings on the part of any scientifically competent observer. Or put another way, 'scientific competence' for terms of this kind would have to include certain developments of character and sensibility which themselves are only recognizable as such from the standpoint of those who have acquired them.

Closely connected with this vulnerability to interpretive challenge is a second feature: these terms are inextricably evaluative; and what is more, they are what one could call strongly evaluative. I want to speak of strong evaluation when the goods putatively identified are not seen as constituted as good by the fact that we desire them, but rather are seen as normative for desire. That is, they are seen as goods which we ought to desire, even if we do not, goods such that we show ourselves up as inferior or bad by our not desiring them. Now along with unambiguous application, it is usually thought that the terms of a scientific discourse should offer a value-free account. And thus in this respect, too, the desirability characterizations whereby we understand people seem inappropriate for a science of society.

Thirdly, and for some thinkers decisively, the use of desirability descriptions seems to endanger the aspiration to a universal science of society. For those descriptions are culturally specific. The values of one culture are frequently not replicable in another; we can find nothing exactly corresponding to them. To describe people in their terms is to describe each culture in different terms, and terms which are incommensurable, that is, which have no exact translation in other languages.

But then this brings us up against the issue which Winch's writings have raised. Suppose we are trying to give an account of a society very different from our own, say a primitive society. The society has (what we call) religious and magical practices. To understand them in the strong sense discussed above would require that we come to grasp how they use the key words in which they praise and blame, describe what they yearn for or seek, what they abhor and fear, and so on. Understanding their religious practices would require that we come to understand what they see themselves as doing when they are carrying out the ritual we have provisionally identified as a 'sacrifice', what they seek after in the state we may provisionally identify as 'blessedness' or 'union with the spirits'. (Our provisional identifications, of course, just place their actions/states in relation to our religious tradition, or ones familiar to us. If we stick with these, we may fall into the most distorted ethnocentric readings.) We

have no way of knowing that we have managed to penetrate this world in this way short of finding that we are able to use their key words in the same way they do, and that means that we grasp their desirability characterizations.

But because applying any desirability characterizations has the three difficulties mentioned above, it is naturally tempting to try to finesse this understanding. We can see this temptation at work in many of the theories adopted in social science. For instance, a case like the one we are examining here might tempt us to finesse understanding with a functionalist theory. We come at the society in question with some general thesis about religion, that religious practices perform certain functions in society, for example, that they contribute to social integration. On the strength of this principle, we can perhaps dispense with an understanding of what the priest or medicine man is doing in the terms of his own society. One identification we have of this ritual activity is that it is part of a process which contributes to social integration. This may allow us to explain what is going on, for instance, why rituals happen when they do, at the times of year they do, or more frequently in periods of stress, and so on. We may perhaps thus hope to dispense altogether with an understanding of ritual action in the agents' own terms.

This will seem the more plausible if we argue that the significance of a great many actions of people in any society escape their full consciousness or understanding. We cannot expect that the members of the tribe will have a clear grasp of the socially integrative nature of their religion as we do. Their understanding of this is, on the contrary, almost bound to be distorted, fragmentary, 'ideological'. Why should we pay any special attention to it, once we are on to a more satisfactory account of what is going on, which we now have, thanks to our functional theory? This course seems all the more evidently superior, since our theory is in a language of science, whereas the discourse of the tribe's self-understanding manifestly is not.

Now the interpretation thesis, which I want to defend, holds that the attempt to finesse understanding in this way is futile. It can only lead to sterility. I hope that, if I cannot prove, I can at least illustrate this thesis if we examine a bit further this example of a functional account of religious practices. I hope it will be clear, however, that the argument is meant to apply to any attempt to finesse understanding through a putatively 'scientific' identification of the action of the subjects under study, whether this be on the individual or the social level.

Consider the problem of validating a functional theory. Here a great

many of the criticisms made of functionalism, even by other mainstream social scientists, can be shown, I think, to demonstrate rather the indispensability of understanding. Take the question of knowing how much you have explained. Even if a functional theory could get over the challenge of showing how it could be positively established, that is, of what can be said to make us believe it – and this is no small issue, because brute induction will not be decisive in this kind of case – the question can arise of how much we have explained. Let us say there is some truth in the claim that religions generally contribute to social integration; and that we can establish this. The question still arises of the significance of this finding. How much can we explain of the actual shape of the religious practice in this society by this functional theory?

It could be, for instance, that although religions are generally integrative, a very large number of possible religious practices could have done the job equally well in this society. In this case, our functional theory would do nothing to explain the kind of religion we see here, why there is this kind of ritual, that form of hierarchy, that type of fervour, those modes of blessedness, and so on. In short, most of what we want to explain in a given society may lie outside the scope of the explanation; which may at the limit sink to the marginal significance of the background observation that disruptive religions tend to destroy the societies in which they take root, and hence flourishing religion tends not to be disruptive.

Even though we may show our theory to be true, in some sense, we may be challenged to show that it is significant. Does it explain something substantive about the religious forms of the society, or is it rather in the nature of a banal observation about the poor long-term prospects of disruptive religions?

The only way to meet this challenge is to take up the attempt to show how the detail of the religious form – the kind of ritual, the form hierarchy, etc. – can be explained by the functional theory. We have a closely analogous case if we take historical materialism, which is very much like a functional theory – and indeed, is a functional theory, if we agree with G. A. Cohen's interpretation.² Historical materialism claims to be able to explain the evolution of the 'superstructure' of society, for example the political and religious forms, in terms of the evolution of the 'base', that is the relations of production. Sceptics of historical materialism have doubts precisely about the scope of what is to be explained by the relations of production. Can we really account for political and religious change in these terms?

² Karl Marx's *Theory of History* (Oxford, 1978).

Marxists are thus challenged to explain precisely the detail of political and religious development: can one explain the rise of Protestantism, the differential spread of Lutheran and Calvinist theologies? And so on.

The challenge to explain details is essential to the validation of this kind of theory. But it is a challenge which cannot be met, except by acquiring an adequate understanding (in our strong sense) of the actions, theologies, ideals, and so on, which we are trying to explain. There is no way to finesse the requirement of understanding. Our Marxist or other historian convinces us he has explained the detail when he can give a convincing interpretation of it in his canonical terms. But to give a convincing interpretation, one has to show that one has understood what the agent is doing, feeling here. His action/feeling/aspirations/outlook in his terms constitutes our explanandum.

In the end, there is no way to finesse understanding if we are to give a convincing account of the explanatory significance of our theory. I hope it will be evident that this applies not only to functionalist theories, but to any attempt to identify what agents are doing in 'scientific' language, be it that of holistic functionalism, or of individual utility-maximization, or whatever.

II

What I have been trying to show is that although there is a strong temptation to by-pass agents' self-descriptions arising from the strong pull of the natural science model, any attempt to do this is stultifying, and leads to an account which cannot be adequately validated.

The view which I am defending here, which I can call the interpretive view, or the *verstehen* view, or the thesis that social theories are about practices, has to be marked off from two other conceptions. One is the original enemy, the natural science model, which I have been arguing against all along. And the other is a false ally, the view that misconstrues interpretation as adopting the agent's point of view. Let me call this 'the incorrigibility thesis', just to give it a name, because in requiring that we explain each culture or society in its own terms, it rules out an account which shows them up as wrong, confused or deluded. Each culture on this view is incorrigible.

The interpretive view, I want to argue, avoids the two equal and opposite mistakes: on one hand, of ignoring self-descriptions altogether, and attempting to operate in some neutral 'scientific' language; on the other hand, of taking these descriptions with ultimate seriousness, so that they

become incorrigible. Social theory in general, and political theory especially, is very much in the business of correcting common-sense understanding. It is of very little use unless it goes beyond, unless it frequently challenges and negates what we think we are doing, saying, feeling, aiming at. But its criterion of success is that it makes us as agents more comprehensible, that it makes sense of what we feel, do, aim at. And this it cannot do without getting clear on what we think about our action and feeling. That is, after all, what offers the puzzle which theory tries to resolve. And so there is no way of showing that some theory has actually explained *us* and *our* action until it can be shown to make sense of what we did under *our* description (where this emphatically does *not* mean, let me repeat, showing how what we did made sense). For otherwise, we may have an interesting, speculative rational reconstruction (like the functional theory above), but no way of showing that it actually *explains* anything.

But it might still be thought that I have been too quick with the incorrigibility thesis. It does not just come from a confusion of explananda and explanantia. There is also a serious moral point. Social science aspires not just to understand a single society, but to be universal. In principle, social scientists strive to understand not just their own society and culture but foreign ones. Indeed, the discipline of anthropology is concerned with virtually nothing else.

In this context, to insist blithely that social science has the task of correcting our common-sense understanding – a demand which may sound properly radical when it comes to understanding our own culture – may be to encourage dangerous illusions when it comes to understanding other cultures. One of the striking faults of transcultural and comparative social science has been its tendency to ethnocentrism. At the outset, it was European students who interpreted other societies in terms derived from European culture, very often at the cost of extreme distortion, and frequently also in an unflattering light. Now students from other cultures are also engaged, but the difficulties and dangers are still present. Some have been even tempted to despair of any cross-cultural understanding.

In this situation, it might be argued, to speak of social science as correcting everyday understanding is to invite scientists of a dominant culture to 'correct' the self-understandings of the less dominant ones by substituting their own. What is really going on then becomes simply what *we* can recognize in our own terms; and their self-descriptions are wrong to the extent that they deviate from ours. Transcultural study becomes a field for the exercise of ethnocentric prejudice.

No one can doubt that this has happened. We have only to think of theories like that of Sir James Frazer, which portrayed primitive magic as a kind of early and largely mistaken technology, to see how distorted our perspective can be.

It is in face of this tendency that the incorrigibility thesis seems to have a lot going for it. For it seems guaranteed against ethnocentricity. Indeed, one could easily come to believe that it is the only real safe-guard against it. We understand each culture in its own terms, and we never can fall into the error of misunderstanding one according to the categories of another. This seems to be the message that emerges from Peter Winch's very persuasive 'Understanding a primitive society'.³

From this point of view, the interpretive thesis may seem especially vulnerable. At least the natural science model can make a claim for neutrality, by looking for a scientific language which is outside all cultures, and thus can hope to be non-culture-relative. But the *verstehen* view, while not allowing for such neutral languages, nevertheless sets us the task of challenging and going beyond other people's self-understanding. But if not in their terms, how else can we understand them but in our own? Aren't we unavoidably committed to ethnocentricity?

No, I want to argue, we are not. The error in this view is to hold that the language of a cross-cultural theory has to be either theirs or ours. If this were so, then any attempt at understanding across cultures would be faced with an impossible dilemma: either accept incorrigibility, or be arrogantly ethnocentric. But as a matter of fact, while challenging their language of self-understanding, we may also be challenging ours. Indeed, what I want to argue is that there are times where we cannot question the one properly without also questioning the other.

In fact, it will almost always be the case that the adequate language in which we can understand another society is not our language of understanding, or theirs, but rather what one could call a language of perspicuous contrast. This would be a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both. It would be a language in which the possible human variations would be so formulated that both our form of life and theirs could be perspicuously described as alternative such variations. Such a language of contrast might show their language of understanding to be distorted or inadequate in some respects, or it might show ours to be so (in which case, we might find that understanding them

³ *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1 (1964), pp. 307–24.

leads to an alteration of our self-understanding, and hence our form of life – a far from unknown process in history); or it might show both to be so.

This notion of a language of perspicuous contrast is obviously very close to Gadamer's conception of the 'fusion of horizons' and owes a great deal to it. An excellent example of an illuminating theory in comparative politics which uses such a language (or languages) is Montesquieu's. The contrast with despotism was, of course, not an unqualified success, because it was not based on a real understanding of the alien (Turkish or Persian) society. But Montesquieu's contrast between monarchy and republic brought about a great deal of understanding of modern society precisely by placing it relative to (at least the traditional image of) republican society in a language of perspicuous contrast.

This conception of contrast clearly avoids the pitfalls of the incorrigibility thesis. Our account does not have to be in the language of understanding of the agents' society, but rather in the language of contrast. And the agents' language clearly is not taken as incorrigible. At the same time, we are not committed to an ethnocentric course. This much has been learned from the arguments of Winch and others, that the other society may be incomprehensible in our terms; that is, in terms of our self-understanding.

And our conception is also superior to the natural science model. For it can accept the validity of the *verstehen* thesis. In fact, allegedly neutral scientific languages, by claiming to avoid understanding, always end up being unwittingly ethnocentric. The supposedly neutral terms in which other people's actions are identified: the functions of functional theory, or the maximization-descriptions of various consequentialist accounts of individual action, all reflect the stress on instrumental reason in our civilization since the seventeenth century. To see them everywhere is really to distort the action, beliefs, and so on of alien societies in an ethnocentric way. A good example is the theory of development dominant until recently in American political science. This was based on the notion that certain functions were being performed by all political systems, only in different ways by different structures. But these functions, for example interest-aggregation and articulation, are only clearly identifiable in advanced industrial society, where the political process is played out through the articulation of individual and group interests. This identification of functions pre-supposes a degree of individuation which is not present everywhere. The importance of understanding another people's language of self-understanding is precisely that it can protect us against this kind of ethnocentric projection.

We can see how the three approaches – the natural science model, the incorrigibility thesis and the interpretative view – relate if we take a well-discussed example. This is the question of how to account for the exotic practices of primitive societies; for instance their magic. This is the issue taken up by Winch in his 'Understanding a primitive society'.⁴

Very crudely put, there are two families of position on this issue. The traditional view of earlier Western anthropology, going back to Frazer, is to see magic as a kind of proto-science/technology, an attempt by primitive people to master their environment, to do what we do better by modern science and technology. This view naturally gave grounds for criticizing the factual beliefs seen as implicit in the magical practices, for instance the belief in magical powers and spirits.

This theory is naturally congenial to proponents of a 'neutral' scientific language. It allows us a way of identifying what these people are doing, at least what general category their actions fit in, transculturally. At least to get this far, we do not need to grasp their self-understanding in all its peculiarity.

In contrast to this, the rival view is influenced by the incorrigibility thesis or by other similar doctrines. It holds that identifying these practices as a proto-technology is an ethnocentric howler. Rather we have to understand what is going on here as a quite different practice, which may have no corresponding activity in our society. The various rituals of magic are thought to have a 'symbolic' or 'expressive' function, rather than being intended to get things done in the world.⁵ The tribe dances to recover its sense of the important meanings it lives by in face of the challenge of drought, rather than seeing the dance as a mechanism to bring on rain – the way we see seeding clouds, for instance.

We can see that this view puts the magical practices beyond the strictures of our modern science and technology. The tribe is not making a factual error about what causes precipitation, they are doing something quite different which cannot be judged in these terms; indeed, should not be judged at all, since this is just their form of life, the way that they face the human constants of birth, death, marriage, drought, plenty, etc. There may be nothing quite corresponding to it in our society. We have to understand it in its own terms; and it is the height of ethnocentric gaucheerie to judge it in terms of one of our practices which are all quite

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See J. H. M. Beattie, 'On understanding ritual', in Bryan Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford, 1970).

incommensurable with it. To come to grips with it we need understanding.

Now the view I am defending here would disagree with both these approaches. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, it would accuse both of them of sharing an ethnocentric assumption: that the tribe's practice must be *either* proto-science/technology *or* the integration of meaning through symbolism. For it is a signal feature of our civilization that we have separated these two, and sorted them out. Even our pre-modern forebears of four centuries ago might have found this a little difficult to understand. If we examine the dominant pre-seventeenth-century world-views, such as the conceptions of the correspondences that were so important in the High Renaissance, it is clear that what we would consider two quite independent goals – understanding what reality is like, and putting ourselves in tune with it – were not separated, nor separable. For us, these are goals which we pursue respectively through science, and (for some of us perhaps) poetry, or music, or flights into the wilderness, or whatever.

But if your conception of man as rational animal is of a being who can understand the rational order of things, and if (following Plato) we hold that understanding this order is necessarily loving it, hence being in tune with it, then it is not so clear how understanding the world and getting in tune with it can be separated. For the terms in which we get in tune with it, and lay bare the significance of things, must be those in which we present it as rational order. And since it is rational order, these will be the most perspicuous terms of understanding. On the other side, to step beyond the conceptual limits of attunement to the world, to cease to see it as a rational order, to adopt, say, a Democritan perspective on it, must be to step beyond the conceptual limits of perspicuous understanding.

I am reminding us of this bit of our past only to illustrate what it can be like not to have sorted out two goals which we now consider quite distinct and incombable. We do this because the seventeenth-century revolution in science involved, *inter alia*, sorting these out and rigorously separating them. This has been the basis for our spectacular progress in natural science of the last three centuries.

So the hypothesis I put forward is that the way to understand the magical practices of some primitive societies might be to see them not through the disjunction, either proto-technology or expressive activity, but rather as partaking of a mode of activity in which this kind of clear separation and segregation is not yet made. Now identifying these two possibilities – respectively, the fusion and the segregation of the cognitive or manipulative on one hand, and the symbolic or integrative on the other

– amounts to finding a language of perspicuous contrast. It is a language which enables us to give an account of the procedures of both societies in terms of the same cluster of possibilities.

Unlike the neutralist account, it does not involve projecting our own gamut of activities on to the agents of the other society. It allows for the fact that their range of activities may be crucially different from ours, that they may have activities which have no correspondent in ours; which in fact they turn out to do. But unlike the incorrigibility view, it does not just accept that their particular activities will be incommensurable with ours, and must somehow be understood on their own terms or not at all. On the contrary, it searches for a language of perspicuous contrast in which we can understand their practices in relation to ours.

This means that their self-understanding is not incorrigible. We avoid criticizing them on irrelevant grounds. We do not see them as just making a set of scientific/technological errors. But we can criticize them. For the separation perspective has *in certain respects* shown its undoubted superiority over the fusion perspective. It is infinitely superior for the understanding of the natural world. Our immense technological success is proof of this. It may be that we are inferior to the primitives in other respects, for example our integration with our world, as some contemporaries would hold. But this is something which the language of contrast should help us to assess more clear-headedly. It certainly contributes to our understanding, whatever the verdict, because we can see how the modern scientific perspective is an historic achievement and not the perennial human mode of thought.

This example was meant to show how the interpretive approach, far from leading to ethnocentrism, ought properly understood to bring about the exact opposite, because it will frequently be the case that we cannot understand another society until we have understood ourselves better as well. This will be so wherever the language of perspicuous contrast which is adequate to the case also forces us to redescribe what we are doing. In the above example, it forces us to see the separation of knowledge of and attunement with the cosmos as something we have brought about, one possibility among others, and not as the inescapable framework of all thought. We are always in danger of seeing our ways of acting and thinking as the only conceivable ones. That is exactly what ethnocentricity consists in. Understanding other societies ought to wrench us out of this; it ought to alter our self-understanding. It is the merit of the interpretive view that it explains how this comes about, when it does.

As a matter of fact, in the world encounter of cultures over the last four

centuries, there has been a great deal of alteration in self-understanding through meeting with others. Only it has been very unevenly distributed. It was the societies who were less powerful who felt the full force of the constraint to alter their traditional terms of understanding. The dominant culture, the European, was for a while afforded the luxury of ethnocentricity. Power can allow itself illusions.

But as the world moves towards a new equilibrium of power, a new kind of mutual understanding ought also to be possible unless the different parties are again tempted to flee from it into the convenient illusions of scientific or religious infallibility. In so far as a new mutual understanding involves a new self-understanding – and this can be disturbing – the temptations to flee may be all too pressing.

III

I have tried to present a view here of social and political theories as theories about practice. In this they are to be sharply contrasted with the theories which have developed in the natural sciences. The temptation to assimilate the two is very strong in our civilization, partly because of the signal success of the natural sciences, partly because they seem to promise a degree of technological control over things which we often long for in society.

But to yield to this temptation is to fall into a distorted conception of what we are doing in social science. And this has a cost. We generate not only bogus explanations and specious knowledge, but we also encourage ourselves to look for technological solutions to our deepest social problems, which are frequently aggravated by our misguided attempts to manipulate their parameters.

I have tried to argue that learning to situate our social theorizing among our *practices* can free us from these misconceptions. It can enable us to understand better what it is to validate a theory. We can see how explaining another involves understanding him. And at the same time, it can give us some insight into the complex relations that bind explanation and self-definition, and the understanding of self and other.

In this paper, I have tried to get to the root of the intellectual and moral malaise which we feel in theorizing about very different societies. If explanation demands understanding, then how can we ever be confident that we have explained what goes on in another society? But more, if the account is to make sense to us, how can it avoid being critical? And what gives us this right to declare that others are wrong about themselves? The

moral malaise in particular makes us want to flee into a supposedly neutral social science, or into a debilitating relativism.

My contention has been that there is no cause to lose our nerve. Understanding is inseparable from criticism, but this in turn is inseparable from self-criticism. Seeing this, of course, may give us an even stronger motive to panic and take refuge in a bogus objectivity, but it ought to discredit decisively the justifying grounds for this move.

This brings to the fore another facet of the interweaving of explanation and self-definition which has been implicit in much of the above discussion. What I have been trying to sketch above is the way in which understanding another society can make us challenge our self-definitions. It can force us to this, because we cannot get an adequate explanatory account of them until we understand their self-definitions, and these may be different enough from ours to force us to extend our language of human possibilities.

But what this also shows is the way in which explanatory sciences of society are logically and historically dependent on our self-definitions. They are logically dependent, because a valid account, I have argued, must take the subject as an agent. But this points also to an historical dependence: within any given culture, the languages of social science are developed out of and nourished by the languages of self-definition which have grown within it. The idea of a science which could ignore culture and history, which could simply by-pass the historically developed languages of political and social self-understanding, has been one of the great recurring illusions of modern Western civilization.

Supposedly independent and culture-transcendent theories of politics turn out to be heavily dependent on certain parochial Western forms of political culture. For instance, a conception of the political system as responding to the demands generated by individuals or partial groups within society is obviously heavily dependent for whatever plausibility it may possess on the individualist practices of modern Western politics, within which government institutions figure mainly as instruments. If we did not have an institutional and political life in which negotiation and brokerage between individual and group interests played such a large and legitimately accepted role, there would not even be a surface case for explaining our political life by these theories.

But the fact that our practices are of this kind is itself dependent on the self-definitions of an individualist kind which have grown in our civilization; and these in turn have been fed by the atomist-instrumentalist theories which bulk so large in modern thought. So that contemporary

political science has a large unacknowledged, and hence also undischarged, debt to modern political theory.

The self-definitions, in other words, give the explanatory theory some fit. Which is far from saying that the fit is perfect. On the contrary, the vice of these individualist theories is that they ignore important other sides of Western political reality, those that are bound up with the practices of self-rule, and our self-understanding as citizen republics. It can be argued that these are as fundamental and integral to our reality as the practices captured in atomist-instrumentalist theories. And these, of course, have been explored and further defined in other traditions of political theory, for example the tradition of civic humanism, or from a revolutionary perspective, Marxist or anarchist theory. The practice of Western society today is partly shaped by the definitions these theories have provided. And they have correspondingly offered the bases of critical political science.

Thus the supposedly culture-free political science, which models its independence of history on the paradigm of natural science, is in fact deeply rooted in Western culture. What is worse, its roots are in one of the warring tendencies in Western political culture. So that it is not only unaware of its origins, but also deeply and unconsciously partisan. It weighs in on behalf of atomist and instrumentalist politics against the rival orientations to community and citizen self-rule.

But when one comes to comparative politics, the distortion is even greater. The supposedly culture-free model is applied to societies in which nothing closely analogous to the atomist-instrumentalist politics of the West exists, and the result is both unilluminating and tendentious. That is, nothing very much is explained in the politics of these non-Western societies, while the theory insinuates the norm of instrumentalist good function as the unquestionable telos of development. The confused model of value-free, culture-transcendent science hides from its practitioners both their ethnocentrism and their norm-setting. In fact they are unconsciously setting for non-Western society a goal which no Western society would consent to for a minute. Because in fact, in Western politics, instrumentalist politics has been tempered and counter-balanced and controlled by the politics of citizen participation. Indeed, the fact that this equilibrium is now under threat is, I believe, the source of a major crisis in Western society.

But the influence of inappropriate, Western and pseudo-universal models over the social science of some non-Western Countries – exemplified, I would argue, by the impact of American behaviouralism on

Indian political science – is due to more than historic relations of unequal political power. If we take this impact as an example, it is closely bound up, I should want to claim, with a failure to appreciate that an illuminating political science of Indian society would have to be based on Indian self-definitions.

But this failure itself is due to the relative absence in traditional Indian thought of self-definitions of *politics*, by which I mean something like: the practices by which people contribute, cooperatively or in struggle, to shape the way power and authority are exercised in their lives. As Ashis Nandy has argued,⁶ there is a traditional Indian reflection on statecraft, focussed on non-moral and non-responsible uses of power; and there are conceptions of the proper order of things, even with a specific place for political power, if we follow Louis Dumont.⁷ But politics as a realm of activity with its own intrinsic norms, its own specific good or fulfilments, had no place in this tradition.

This is not surprising. This notion of politics, it could be argued, was invented in the West, more specifically, by the Greeks. And this was itself no accident, in that the Greeks had developed practices of participation in power that few other peoples had. Traditional India, one could say, did not need the concept of a practice it did not possess.

But politics exist in contemporary India. There are practices by which people contribute to shape the incidence of power, whatever inequalities and exclusions may mar the democratic process. Contemporary India thus does need a concept of this kind. But if I am right, this is one thing that cannot be provided ready-made from outside. An appropriate concept – or concepts – of politics in India will only arise through an articulation of the self-definitions of people engaged in the practices of politics in India. That is, after all, how the few notions of politics which offer us any insight at all arose in the West. It is, I believe, the only path by which such concepts can arise. And it follows from what I argued above that this would not just be of relevance to India. A more appropriate political science for this society would transform comparative politics. It would put the challenge of developing an adequate theoretical language in which very different practices of politics, Indian and Western, could be compared in an illuminating way. To achieve such a language would in turn transform the understanding each of our societies has of itself. The international community of scholars has potentially a great deal to gain from work in India.

⁶ See his 'The making and unmaking of political cultures in India', in Ashis Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology* (New Delhi, 1980).

⁷ See *Homo hierarchicus* (Paris, 1966).

CHAPTER FIVE

RATIONALITY

What do we mean by rationality? We often tend to reach for a characterization in formal terms. Rationality can be seen as logical consistency, for instance. We can call someone irrational who affirms both *p* and not-*p*. By extension, someone who acts flagrantly in violation of his own interests, or of his own avowed objectives, can be considered irrational.

This can be seen as a possible extension of the case of logical inconsistency, because we are imputing to this agent end *E*, and we throw in the principle: who wills the end wills the means. And then we see him acting to prevent means *M* from happening, acting as it were on the maxim: let me prevent *M*. Once you spell it out, this makes a formal inconsistency.

Can we then understand the irrationality in terms of the notion of inconsistency? It might appear so for the following reason: the mere fact of having *E* as an end and acting to prevent *M* is not sufficient to convict the agent of irrationality. He might not realize that the correct description of his end was '*E*'; he might not know that *M* was the indispensable means; he might not know that what he was now doing was incompatible with *M*. In short, he has to know, in some sense, that he is frustrating his own goals, before we are ready to call him irrational. Of course, the knowledge we attribute to him may be of a rather special kind. He may be unable or unwilling to acknowledge the contradiction; but in this case, our imputation of irrationality depends on our attributing unconscious knowledge to him.

Thus logical inconsistency may seem the core of our concept of irrationality, because we think of the person who acts irrationally as having the wherewithal to formulate the maxims of his action and objectives which are in contradiction with each other.

Possibly inconsistency is enough to explain the accusations of irrationality that we bandy around in our civilization. But our concept of rationality is richer. And this we can see when we consider the issue: are

there standards of rationality which are valid across cultures? Can we claim that, for instance, peoples of pre-scientific culture who believe, let us say, in witchcraft or magic are less rational than we are? Or at least that their beliefs are less rational?

This is the question discussed by Peter Winch in his celebrated article 'Understanding a primitive society'.¹ He takes as the basis of his discussion Evans-Pritchard's study of witchcraft among the Azande, and he vigorously rebuts the suggestion that we can condemn Azande beliefs about witchcraft and oracles as irrational.

One might think that this imputation was pretty hard to rebut when Evans-Pritchard seems to catch Azande in what looks like a flagrant contradiction. Post-mortem examination of a suspect's intestines can reveal or fail to reveal 'witchcraft substance', and hence show conclusively that he was/was not a witch. Now this belief, together with beliefs about the inheritance of witchcraft, ought to make the test sufficient to show that all members of the suspect's clan were/were not witches. A very few post-mortem results scattered among the clans ought to settle the question for everyone for all time. But the Azande apparently do not draw this conclusion. They go on treating the question as an open one, whether *X* or *Y* is a witch. Are they irrational?

Winch argues against this conclusion. The above just shows that the Azande are engaged in a quite different language game: 'Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world.'² So it is a misunderstanding to try to press Zande thought to a contradiction here.

I cannot help feeling that this answer is insufficient as it stands. Even if the Azande are not interested in building a theoretical understanding of the world, it surely matters to them if their whole system for imputing witch status lands them in a contradiction. Their whole practice seems to imply that there is very much a fact of the matter whether *X* is a witch, and it is this which would seem to be threatened if the criteria were to yield contradictory results.

But in fact the Azande were probably quite justified on their own terms in brushing off Evans-Pritchard's objections. If one wanted to derive a theoretical defence from what is implicit in their judgements and practice, it might not be hard to do so. One might say something of the kind: witch

¹ P. Winch, 'Understanding a primitive society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1 (1964), pp. 307-24.

² *Ibid.*, p. 315.

power is mysterious; it doesn't operate according to the exceptionless laws that you Europeans take as the basis of what you call science. But only if you assume this does the contradiction arise.

But of course, no such answer was forthcoming. And here we come to what is perhaps the crucial difference for our question between Zande society and ours: we have this activity of theoretical understanding which seems to have no counterpart among them.

What is theoretical understanding? The term goes back, of course, to the Greek expression which we translate as 'contemplation' (*theōria*). And however far the modern usage has strayed from the original, there is a continuity. This consists in the fact that a theoretical understanding aims at a disengaged perspective. We are not trying to understand things merely as they impinge on us, or are relevant to the purposes we are pursuing, but rather grasp them as they are, outside the immediate perspective of our goals and desires and activities. This is not to say that a theory may not have a big pay-off in practical or productive terms; nor even that the motivation for engaging in theoretical enquiry may not be this expected pay-off. But it remains the case that the understanding itself is framed in terms of a broader perspective, and it gives us a picture of reality which is not simply valid in the context of our goals. The paradox of modern scientific practice is the discovery that such detached understanding has a much higher eventual pay-off.

The original idea of 'contemplation' carried the sense of this disengaged perspective; and although there has been a battle in our civilization as to what this entailed, and most notably a sharp discontinuity in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, about which more below, we are still recognizably the heirs of those who coined this Greek term. This kind of activity implies two connected things: that we come to distinguish this disengaged perspective from our ordinary stances of engagement, and that one values it as offering a higher – or in some sense superior – view of reality. We do not find these things in every culture, and this makes for an immense difference in the things we think and say.

Now theoretical understanding is related to rationality, since the beginning of our intellectual culture. The Greek word we translate as 'reason' is of course *logos*, which has a large range of related meanings, including 'word', 'speech', 'account' as well as 'reason'. Reason is taken by both Plato and Aristotle as a condition of really knowing something.

For Plato in the *Republic*, to have real knowledge of something

(*epistēmē*) is to be able to 'give an account' of it (*logon didōnai*). This seems to involve being able to say clearly what the matter in question is. Rational understanding is linked to articulation.

This offers a possible interpretation of 'rational' which we might see as very important in our tradition: we have a rational grasp of something when we can *articulate* it, that means, distinguish and lay out the different features of the matter in perspicuous order. This is involved when we try to formulate things in language, which is why the Greek philosophical vocabulary marks this inner connection between speech and reason, even though at the time not very much was made of language itself as an object of philosophical enquiry.

But if this is so, then theory and rationality are connected. The best articulation of something is what lays it out in the most perspicuous order. But for those matters amenable to theoretical understanding, the most perspicuous order will be that from the disengaged perspective. This offers a broader, more comprehensive grasp on things. Thus one might say: the demands of rationality are to go for theoretical understanding where this is possible.

We have to add this last rider, because not everything may be amenable to theory. For instance, Aristotle thought that moral matters were not, in which he saw himself as disagreeing with Plato. But it may be possible to be more or less rational in these matters as well, as indeed Aristotle believed we could be. There may be a kind of perspicuous articulation which cannot be theoretical, for example because disengagement does not make sense here as a demand, but attaining which constitutes being rational.

But the connection between rational and theoretical is none the less close, if theoretical understanding is the most rational kind in its field, even if it is not the whole of rationality.

I think that we who live in a theoretical culture tend to find some view of this kind plausible. And so we are tempted to judge other, atheoretical cultures as *ipso facto* less rational. This is quite a distinct question from finding them contradictory or inconsistent.

Indeed, the above understanding of rationality can show how consistency can be a key criterion, without exhausting the force of the term. To strive for rationality is to be engaged in articulation, in finding the appropriate formulations. But it is a standard intrinsic to the activity of formulating that the formulations be consistent. Nothing is clearly articulated with contradictory formulations (unless one wants to claim that being is itself subject to contradiction, a view which has well-known defenders). So consistency is plainly a necessary condition of rationality.

But within the context of our theoretical culture, there are more than these formal criteria of rationality. Someone who flagrantly violates the canons of theoretical discourse (or what are understood to be such), while claiming to talk about things and describe how things are, seems also to be sinning against rationality. Of course, if the agent concerned is a member of our culture, we can interpret this as contradictory behaviour. For we assume that one among us who opens his mouth to describe understands his own activity as falling under the appropriate canons; to violate them is to frustrate his own ends.

But the judgement of irrationality, or at least of lesser rationality, does not depend on contradiction. For we are tempted to judge as less rational members of atheoretical cultures who plainly do not accept our canons – or at least may not, for it may not be at first sight as plain as all that what canons they do accept.

This brings us back to the Azande. We cannot jump to the conclusion that they are irrational on the grounds that we have caught them in a contradiction which they persist in disregarding; but this is not because they are playing some language game in which contradiction does not matter. There may be such, but I find it hard to see how witchcraft imputation could be one. Rather it is plausible that the apparent contradictions could be ironed out if the peculiar nature of witches and witchcraft were to be given theoretical description. We already have a hint of this in the Azande sense that it all adds up somehow, which must underlie their unconcern when Evans-Pritchard points to the seeming contradictions. But of course, they are quite uninterested in working this out for Evans-Pritchard or anyone else, as might the members of some theoretical culture – the kind of thing that some of our cleverest ancestors did who went along with the witch craze of early modern Europe. (And some of the intellectual techniques are already in evidence in Zande in attempts to explain inconsistent poison oracle results.)

But their very disinterest creates an imputation of lesser rationality in our minds. From our point of view, we feel like saying of them that they are not interested in how things really are, outside how things function for them in their world of social practices. They are not interested in justifying what they say and believe from this broader perspective; from which perspective, were they to adopt it, we believe that some of their central tenets would collapse (and perhaps even from inner contradiction in some cases).

This is the imputation which Winch rejects, on the grounds, if I can put it my way, that it is wrong to judge an atheoretical culture by the standards of

a theoretical one. And wrong in the sense of being a mistake, though there is undoubtedly some arrogance involved here as well. The activities engaged in are different, and it would be wrong to assess them in the same way.

Others have argued that this thesis of incommensurable activities is wrong-headed, and that the problem of rationality cannot be side-stepped in this way. This is the issue I would like to take up. Thus Winch in the article quoted above goes on to take Alasdair MacIntyre to task for claiming to be able to apply standards of rationality cross-culturally. This would allow us to judge in certain cases that the practices of another culture were deficient in rationality relative to the analogous ones in our culture; and the practices of witchcraft would be a paradigm target for this kind of judgement.

Winch argues against this that standards of rationality may differ from culture to culture; and that we have to beware of applying our standards for a foreign practice where they may be entirely inappropriate. What lies behind the difference in standards of rationality is the difference in activities. Something quite different is probably afoot in a primitive society's practice of magic. There has been a tendency among modern Western thinkers to understand magic as a kind of proto-technology, an early attempt to get control over nature by less effective means than scientifically informed technique. The primitive practice naturally suffers from the comparison, and can even be made to look irrational in its resistance to refutation by the standards of modern science.

Sir James Frazer offers the classical formulation of a view of this kind. And although his Victorian confidence in his categories now seems to us flat-footedly ethnocentric, it is not entirely clear that we manage to avoid more sophisticated variants of the same basic error. So Winch seems to argue here: 'MacIntyre criticizes, justly, Sir James Frazer for having imposed the image of his own culture on more primitive ones; but that is exactly what MacIntyre himself is doing here.'³

We should consider more seriously the possibility that we have quite failed to understand what the point of the activity is. Zande magic may not be just 'a (misguided) technique for producing consumer goods'.⁴ Rather the rites may constitute a 'form of expression' through which the possibilities and dangers inherent in life 'may be contemplated and reflected on – and perhaps also thereby transformed and deepened'. The rites 'express an attitude to contingencies', while at the same time 'they are also fundamental to social relations'.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 319. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

The judgement of lesser rationality seems to be based on a misunderstanding. It is not just itself mistaken; it is based on an approach which will never allow us to achieve an adequate account of the foreign society studied. The very nature of human action requires that we understand it, at least initially, in its own terms; that means that we understand the descriptions that it bears for the agents. It is only because we have failed to do that that we can fall into the fatal error of assimilating foreign practices to our own familiar ones.

Now I am attracted by this Winchian argument, but I think there is something still inadequate about it as it stands. Somehow the contrast does not quite come off. It may sound convincing that the Azande are among other things 'expressing an attitude to contingencies' in their magical rites. But can we say that they are doing this *as against* trying to control certain of these contingencies? It would seem not. And Winch himself makes this point: the rites have a relation to consumption; they are undertaken to make the crops grow free of the hazards that threaten them. Winch's thesis is that they *also* have this other dimension which he stresses.

That is why the position Winch criticizes always will have a certain plausibility. We can all too easily find analogies between primitive magical practices and some of our own, because they *do* overlap. Thus a lot of what Robin Horton says in his 'African traditional thought and Western science'⁵ concerning the analogies between African religious thinking and Western scientific theory is very convincing: both bring unity out of diversity, place things in a wider causal context, and so on.

But this is beside the point which is really at issue. Only if the claim were that primitive religion and magic comprised a set of activities clearly distinct from and contrasted to those involved in modern science would the very useful and illuminating points of the kind made by Horton constitute a valid objection. Sometimes people who inveigh against ethnocentric interpretations sound as though they are making a claim of this kind. For instance, J. Beattie ('On understanding ritual')⁶ distinguishes practical from symbolic or expressive activity, and argues that we ought to understand ritual mainly as concerned with the second.

But to make this kind of clear contrast is, paradoxically, to be insufficiently radical in our critique of ethnocentricity. For it describes the difference between the two societies in terms of a contrast between activities that makes sense to us in virtue of our form of life, but would be

⁵ In R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 131-71.

⁶ In Wilson, *Rationality*, pp. 240-68.

unintelligible to the people whose form of life we are trying to understand. It is a feature of our civilization that we have developed a practice of scientific research and its technological application from which the symbolic and expressive dimensions have been to a great extent purged. The seventeenth-century revolution in scientific thought rejected previously dominant scientific languages in which what one can call an expressive dimension had an important part. This was the case, for instance, with the language of 'correspondences', in which elements in different domains of being could be thought to correspond to each other in virtue of embodying the same principle.

We have an example of this kind of thinking in a passage like the following, which is an early-seventeenth-century 'refutation' of Galileo's discovery of the moons of Jupiter:

There are seven windows given to animals in the domicile of the head, through which the air is admitted to the tabernacle of the body, to enlighten, to warm and to nourish it. What are these parts of the microcosmos: Two nostrils, two eyes, two ears and a mouth. So in the heavens, as in a macrocosmos, there are two favourable stars, two unpropitious, two luminaries, and Mercury undecided and indifferent. From this and from many other similarities in nature, such as the seven metals, etc., which it were tedious to enumerate, we gather that the number of planets is necessarily seven.⁷

The argument seems ludicrous to us today, and we are likely to remember the scene in Berthold Brecht's *Galileo*, where the Paduan philosophers refuse to look through his telescope, preferring to show by argument from Aristotle that the moons could not be there. What could be more irrational from our point of view?

But of course the argument would make sense if we could be confident that the world order was actually put together in such a way as to embody the same set of principles in its different domains: just as when we enter an airline washroom and see 'No Smoking', 'Ne pas fumer', and some inscription in Japanese, we feel entitled to suppose that any account of how those letter marks got there would have to incorporate some reference to the speech act of instructing users to refrain from smoking.

But why should people feel confident of this? I think we can understand this if we reach back into the past of our own civilization, to which after all this kind of reasoning belongs, and note the quite different boundaries that were then drawn between activities: why must the universe exhibit some meaningful order, in terms of which the contours of the parts could be

⁷ S. Warhaft (ed.), *Francis Bacon: A Selection of his Works* (Toronto, 1965), p. 17.

explained? I think this becomes understandable if we see understanding the universe and coming into attunement with it as inseparable activities.

To see what this might involve, let us look at one of the interpretations of Plato which was extremely influential in the development of the mode of thought which underlies the above passage. Presented over-simply, we could say that it gives us a view of man as a rational animal; and rationality as the capacity to grasp the order of being. To say that man is a rational animal is to say that this is his *telos*, the goal he implicitly is directed towards by nature. To achieve it is to attain happiness and well-being. Not to have attained it, or worse, not even to be endeavouring to do so, is to be in misery and confusion. There must be confusion, because properly understood our nature can only turn us towards our proper goal. To know it is to love it; consequently, to have anything else as a goal is to have imperfect knowledge of our own nature, and hence of the order of things of which it is a part.

But then there is a close connection between understanding the order of things and being in attunement with it. We do not understand the order of things without understanding our place in it, because we are part of this order. And we cannot understand the order and our place in it without loving it, without seeing its goodness, which is what I want to call being in attunement with it. Not being in attunement with it is a sufficient condition of not understanding it, for anyone who genuinely understands must love it; and not understanding it is incompatible with being in attunement with it, since this presupposes understanding.

For anyone with this outlook there is a strong temptation to believe in a meaningful order, or at any rate an order of things such that it could be loved, seen to be good, an order with which we could be attuned. If this were not the case, then there could not be a kind of understanding inseparable from attunement; and this seems to threaten the close connection between understanding the world and the wisdom of self-knowledge and self-reconciliation. Those who see the world-order purely in terms of accident and chance are not thereby led to love it more or to be happier with themselves; and this means they must be wrong, if knowledge and wisdom are closely linked.

I am not here trying to reconstruct an *argument* of an influential pre-modern tradition of thought, let alone of Plato's. I am just trying to point to a close connection between a certain view of the universe as meaningful order and a conception of the close link between understanding and attunement, or knowledge and wisdom. These stand in a relation of mutual support. And if one stands inside an *epistēmē*, to use Foucault's term, which

links them together, it becomes not at all strained or unnatural to argue along the lines of the above passage.

I may seem to have wandered a bit far in discussing a controversy three centuries old, but all this relates closely to the main issue. For first it allows us to see how the breaking of the connection between understanding and attunement was an essential part of the modern revolution in science.⁸ The conception of the universe as meaningful order, as a possible object of attunement, was seen as a projection, a comforting illusion which stood in the way of scientific knowledge. Science could only be carried on by a kind of asceticism, where we discipline ourselves to register the way things are without regard to the meanings they might have for us.

And this discipline has become central to the norms and practice of modern science. Our civilization is full of admonitions to avoid the facile path of projecting on to the world the order of things which we find satisfying or meaningful or flattering, with criticism for those who follow this, and much self-congratulation on the part of those who believe they do not. We are given early and often the edifying stories of Darwin or Freud, who had the courage to face truths allegedly shattering to our comforting images of cosmic hierarchy and our place in it, and they are sometimes placed in a Trinity with Copernicus (or Galileo) for this reason.

So it comes quite naturally to us to distinguish sharply between scientific study of reality and its accompanying technological spin-off, on one hand, and symbolic activity in which we try to come to terms with the world on the other. This kind of contrast is one that has developed out of our form of life. But exactly for this reason, it is probably going to be unhelpful in understanding people who are very different from us. It certainly would not help to say, for instance, that ritual practices in some primitive society were to be understood simply as symbolic, that is, as being exclusively directed at attunement and not at all at practical control; or that the body of religious beliefs was merely expressive of certain attitudes to the contingencies of life, and not also concerned with giving

⁸ This is in important ways an oversimplification. It can be argued that one of the motives of the rejection of the conception of the universe as meaningful order was theological. This can be seen to some extent in Bacon's language – his talk of 'Idols' for instance – or with Mersenne. As was already evident earlier with nominalist thinkers in the later Middle Ages, some saw a conception of the universe as self-justifying order as incompatible with the sovereignty and transcendence of the creator. To see reality 'without superstition or imposture, error or confusion', in Bacon's phrase (*Novum Organum*, I. CXXIX), was to help to put oneself back in tune with *God*. But this meant dissolving the identity between scientific understanding of the world and wisdom.

an account of how things are. To this kind of position (if anyone really holds it), arguments like those of Horton are a sufficient answer.

But it is still insufficiently helpful to say something to the effect that ritual practices somehow combine the practical and the symbolic. This may not be flatly untrue, but it is putting the point in ethnocentric language. Somebody might try to combine the two in our civilization, and we could describe his attempt in these terms because we distinguish them clearly. But the point about quite different societies is that the question at least arises whether this distinction has any sense for them.

Here is where the example of the earlier phase of our civilization may help. Within the bounds of that *epistēmē* understanding and attunement cannot be separated. You cannot know the order of things without loving it, nor the other way around. The very attempt to identify separate activities here, two different goals, would have to be based on a confusion. The difference between the two phases is not that they have made different selections or combinations out of the same catalogue of activities, but that their very catalogues are different and, what is more, incommensurable.

I use this latter term to point to the fact that the activities are not just different but incompatible in principle. Two activities are incompatible in principle when as a matter of fact you could not carry on both at the same time. This is a case for football and chess, for instance. The impossibility is merely *de facto*. We could imagine some incredibly athletic genius who could be figuring out how to put his opponent in check at the same time as he feints to get around the defence man and shoots for the goal. But when we come to soccer and rugby football, we have two activities which are incompatible in principle. For the rules which partly define these games prescribe actions in contradiction to each other. Picking up the ball and running with it is against the rules of soccer.

Something like this kind of relation holds between pre- and post-Galilean science. Giving an account in terms of the correspondences just is not a valid move for modern science. Nothing has been accomplished which can be recognized as an explanation. Presented as an account of how things are, it is a 'foul', a violation of the canons of science. But plainly it was meant to be taken as just such an account. Galileo's opponents above were arguing that the moons of Jupiter could not exist on the basis of the order of things of which they would have to be a part. This would only make sense if the order explained how things are as they are. Because the order of things expressed by the correspondences is explanatory, we conclude that the number of planets *must* be seven. It is because we know what underlies and explains what is, that we know what is.

Now the difficult thing about the relation of ritual magic in primitive societies to some of the practices of our society is that it is clearly not identical with any of our practices, nor is it simply different, as other of their practices – their games, for instance – might be. Rather they are incommensurable. They are different, yet they somehow occupy the same space.

If we focus just on the second aspect, at the expense of the first, we will see the primitive practice as the same as one of ours; and then we will be tempted to judge it as inferior, perhaps irrational. And so to avoid ethnocentric arrogance, we may be tempted to seize on the first aspect and forget the second. But then we have just as false a picture, for example practitioners of magic as engaged in an exercise of pure symbolic expression, rather as we do when we sing the national anthem. And *au fond*, we will probably still be guilty of ethnocentricity, since we will be projecting on to them one of the things *we* do, which *we* have distinguished from science or technology: this kind of pure symbolic activity, which is not meant to *effect* anything, is a quintessentially modern thing.

The real challenge is to see the incommensurability, to come to understand how their range of possible activities, that is, the way in which they identify and distinguish activities, differs from ours. As Winch says, 'we do not initially have a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic';⁹ but this is not because their magic is concerned with ends quite foreign to our society, but rather because the ends defined in it cut across ours in disconcerting ways. Really overcoming ethnocentricity is being able to understand two incommensurable classifications.

What does this mean for our main issue, whether we can make judgements of rationality cross-culturally? Winch's argument seemed to be that such judgements were likely to be very dubious, because standards of rationality can differ greatly. And they differ because the activities concerned are different. But when we look at the key cases that interest us, like primitive magic, we find that the activities are not simply different, but rather that they are incommensurable. And this seems to be Winch's view too, because he is far from subscribing to the simple view that primitive magic is some purely expressive activity. If it were, we would already have a category for it, for *we* have lots of purely expressive rituals: singing anthems, striking the flag, etc.

But realizing this threatens to undermine Winch's conclusion. For incommensurable activities are rivals; their constitutive rules prescribe in

⁹ Winch, 'Understanding a primitive society', p. 319.

contradiction to each other. Only where two activities are simply different is there no question of judging one to be an inferior version of the other, and perhaps in some cases inferior in rationality. That is what is tempting to the anti-imperialist liberal conscience, wary of ethnocentrism, in a view which assimilates magic to pure symbolic activity. It takes the heat off; we no longer have to judge whose way of life is superior. Or if any judgements are to be made, pre-technological societies seem to come off better because their symbolic activity is so much richer than ours.

But incommensurable ways of life seem to raise the question insistently of who is right. It is hard to avoid this, since anyone seriously practising magic in our society would be considered to have lost his grip on reality, and if he continued impervious to counter-arguments, he would be thought less than fully rational. How do you keep this judgement from extending to the whole way of life in which magic fits?

One answer might be to argue that even though incommensurable, the activities still have their distinct internal criteria of success; that therefore each is bound to come off best by its own standards; and hence that one cannot make any non-ethnocentric judgements of relative superiority.

If I can be permitted to revert once more to my example comparing two phases of our theoretical culture, in order to cast light on comparisons between theoretical and atheoretical cultures, we can see what this would mean. The science of the High Renaissance which Galileo and others pulverized was concerned both with explaining how things are and with wisdom. The Renaissance sage had a different ideal from the modern scientific researcher's. From our point of view within this culture, we may want to argue that our science is clearly superior. We point to the tremendous technological spin-off it has generated in order to silence many doubters.

But a defender of relativism might retort that this begs the question. We are the ones who value technological control; so to us our way is clearly superior. But the sage did not value this, but rather wisdom. And this seems to be a quality we are rather short of, and very often seem shortest of in precisely those societies where technological control is at its greatest. So we still do not seem to have a reason why a Renaissance sage, should one still exist, ought to listen to us. He would still be scoring higher by *his* criteria, even as we are by ours. Each would be invulnerable to others.

Now, as a matter of fact, this argument seems historically inaccurate, since many of the figures of High Renaissance sciences, like Giordano Bruno, for instance, or John Dee, seemed to have very far-reaching ambitions of technological achievement, of which producing gold out of

baser metals is merely the most notorious. It is true that these achievements were also seen as having a spiritual dimension quite lacking in our modern goal of technological control, but that is just the standard difference between the two outlooks.

But this objection might seem of no great significance in principle, since there certainly were earlier phases of Western history in which the ideal of the sage had no close connections with that of the magus, or wonder-worker. The in-principle point about the impossibility of non-ethnocentric judgements of superiority would go through even though it might break down adventitiously in this case.

But the point in fact bites deeper. It is not just an accident that there are no more Renaissance magi among us. There is an inner connection between understanding the world and achieving technological control which rightly commands everyone's attention, and doesn't just justify our practices in our own eyes.

I realize I am running up against a widely held contemporary view. For instance, Mary Hesse in her 'Theory and value in the social sciences'¹⁰ speaks of prediction and control as 'pragmatic' criteria – as though we could have chosen to assess our sciences by other ones! But I do not see how this could be. To make a really convincing rebuttal is probably beyond my powers in any circumstances, and certainly it is in the space I have here. But let me say a few things in defence of my view.

Our ordinary, pre-scientific understanding of the world around us is inseparable from an ability to make our way around in it, and deal with the things in it. That is why so much of our pre-scientific language identifies the objects surrounding us by their standard functions and uses in our lives. This goes, for instance, for our words for most of our artefacts, and for many of the distinctions we mark among natural objects – for instance, between the edible and the non-edible, and so on.

In these circumstances, it is difficult to understand how an increase in scientific knowledge beyond pre-scientific common sense could fail to offer potential recipes for more effective practice. Once we see what properties lie behind and explain edibility, how can we fail to notice that the distinction applies also in ways we had not suspected? Once we understand the principles underlying our ability to lift heavy objects in certain stances and not in others, viz., those of leverage, how can we fail to see that we can also apply them to lift objects with other objects? And so on. The basic point is that given the kind of beings we are, embodied and active in the world, and

¹⁰ In C. Hookway and P. Pettit (eds), *Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 2.

given the way that scientific knowledge extends and supersedes our ordinary understanding of things, it is impossible to see how it could fail to yield further and more far-reaching recipes for action.

But further and more far-reaching recipes for action, when applied, are what we call increased technological control. And this means that the protagonist of modern science has an argument which the Renaissance magus must listen to. One can almost put it in the form of a *modus tollens*: there is not scientific advance without increased technological applicability; but in your case, we see no increased technological application; so you are making no advance. This is of course not a fully conclusive argument, among other reasons because we had to shift from 'applicability' to 'application' in moving from the first premise to the second. The opponent could retort that he was not concerned about these applications, unlike our degenerate consumer society, but that the recipes were being generated none the less. (Once again, I repeat that this unconcern was not in fact true of the magus, but this does not affect the argument.) But assuming that this loophole could be plugged, or at least the opponent placed under challenge to show what these recipes were, we have a *prima facie* convincing argument in favour of the superiority of modern science.

Of course, the argument could break out at another level, around in just what superiority had been proved. Certainly not in the way of life as a whole. Perhaps, after all, it is better all things considered to live as a Renaissance magus. But surely one could say that modern science represents a superior understanding of the universe, or if you like, the physical universe. Let us suppose even that the retort comes back, say from a Platonist, that the physical universe is hardly an important thing to understand, so why make all this fuss? We do not consider people who have collected a great deal of insignificant knowledge as being scientific tyros; for instance a man who knew how many flies there were in Oxfordshire. Surely we could then reply that Platonic reasons for finding this kind of knowledge without significance are themselves belied by the success of our science. The realm of the material was meant to be that of the flux; the stable reality which can be grasped in truly universal propositions was supposed to lie beyond. But the very technological success of a science of the material based on general laws shows this view to be in serious need of revision.

In short, there is a definite respect in which modern science is superior to its Renaissance predecessor; and this is evident not in spite of but because of their incommensurability. The issue can be seen in this way. One view ties understanding nature to wisdom and attunement, the other dissociates

them. In this they have incompatible norms. This is what makes the incommensurability. But precisely because they are not simply different, but are in principle incompatible, we can assess one as superior to the other. One can see, in this case, that the science which dissociates understanding and attunement achieves greater understanding at least of physical nature. And the interlocutor is forced to recognize that something has been achieved here which at least creates a presumption against him and in favour of the new science.

This is not to say that there is some common criterion by which one is proved inferior to the other, if that implies some criterion already accepted by both sides. The whole dimension of technological pay-off may have been profoundly depreciated and considered irrelevant, as it was in the Platonist tradition. But once a spectacular degree of technological control is achieved, it commands attention and demands explanation. The superiority of modern science is that it has a very simple explanation for this: that it has greatly advanced our understanding of the material world. It is not clear what traditional Platonism could say about this phenomenon, or where it could go for an explanation.

What we have here is not an antecedently accepted common criterion, but a facet of our activity – here the connection between scientific advance and technological pay-off – which remains implicit or unrecognized in earlier views, but which cannot be ignored once realized in practice. The very existence of the technological advance forces the issue. In this way, one set of practices can pose a challenge for an incommensurable interlocutor, not indeed in the language of this interlocutor, but in terms which the interlocutor cannot ignore. And out of this can arise valid transcultural judgements of superiority.

Of course, I must repeat, there is no such thing as a single argument proving *global* superiority. The dissociation of understanding of nature and attunement to the world has been very good for the former. Arguably it has been disastrous for the latter goal. Perhaps the critics are right who hold that we have been made progressively more estranged from ourselves and our world in technological civilization. Maybe this could even be shown as convincingly as the scientific superiority of moderns.¹¹

But even if it were, it would not refute this scientific superiority. It would just mean that we now had two transcultural judgements of superiority;

¹¹ And certainly the natural science model dissociating understanding and attunement has wreaked havoc in its successive misapplications in the sciences of man in the last few centuries. But this again says nothing about its validity as an approach to inanimate nature.

only unfortunately they would fall on different sides. We should be in a cruel dilemma when it came to choosing the proper human form of life. This may be really our predicament. Or it might be that we are superior in both respects. Or some third alternative might be the case. But wherever the final global verdict falls, it does not invalidate but rather depends on such transcultural judgements.

What does this mean for transcultural judgements of rationality between theoretical and atheoretical societies? It means, it seems to me, that such judgements can be made. They can arise precisely where there are incommensurabilities, such as between the set of beliefs underlying primitive magic, for instance, and modern science.

Both offer articulations, they lay out different features of the world and human action in some perspicuous order. In that, they are both involved in the kind of activity which I have argued is central to rationality. But one culture can surely lay claim to a higher, or fuller, or more effective rationality, if it is in a position to achieve a more perspicuous order than another.

It seems to me that a claim of this kind can be made by theoretical cultures against atheoretical ones. If one protests and asks why the theoretical order is more perspicuous transculturally, granted the admitted difference between the aims of the activities compared, and granted that the two cultures identify and distinguish the activities differently, the answer is that at least in some respects theoretical cultures score successes which command the attention of atheoretical ones, and in fact invariably have done so when they met. A case in point is the immense technological successes of one particular theoretical culture, our modern scientific one.

Of course, this particular superiority commands attention in a quite non-theoretical way as well. We are reminded of the ditty about nineteenth-century British colonial forces in Africa: 'Whatever happens We have got The Gatling gun, And they have not.' But as I have argued above, technological superiority also commands attention for good intellectual reasons. And it is not only through Gatling guns that theoretical cultures have impressed others in time with their superiority, and hence become diffused. They were spreading well before the explosion of modern technology.

Once again, it may be that considerations which we in theoretical cultures can no longer appreciate so outweigh the balance in favour of the pre-theoretical ones as to make them offer the overall superior form of life. But even if this were so, it would not invalidate the transcultural comparisons we do make; and in particular the claim to a higher

rationality. It would just outweigh these judgements with other more important ones which told in the other direction.

What does this argument make of Winch's plurality of standards of rationality? In a sense, I entirely agree that we must speak of a plurality of standards. The discourse in which matters are articulated in different societies can be very different; as we can see in the Azande disinterest in explaining away the paradox Evans-Pritchard put to them in witchcraft diagnosis. The standards are different, because they belong to incommensurable activities. But where I want to disagree with Winch is in claiming that plurality does not rule out judgements of superiority. I think the kind of plurality we have here, between the incommensurable, precisely opens the door to such judgements.

But does this mean that I have to say Azande are irrational? This seems a foolish as well as an arrogant thing to say. And so it is, because we naturally make the difference between someone who is in violation of the basic standards governing articulation in his own culture, and people of another culture where the standards are different, even if inferior. The terms 'irrational' we reserve for the first kind of case. That is why I argued in the first section that inconsistency lies at the basis of most of the accusations of irrationality which we trade in our society.

But the concept of rationality is richer than this. Rationality involves more than avoiding inconsistency. What more is involved comes out in the different judgements we make when we compare incommensurable cultures and activities. These judgements take us beyond merely formal criteria of rationality, and point us toward the human activities of articulation which give the value of rationality its sense.

CHAPTER SIX

FOUCAULT ON FREEDOM AND
TRUTH

Foucault disconcerts. In a number of ways, perhaps. But the way I want to examine is this: certain of Foucault's most interesting historical analyses, while they are highly original, seem to lie along already familiar lines of critical thought. That is, they seem to offer an insight into what has happened, and into what we have become, which at the same time offers a critique, and hence some notion of a good unrealized or repressed in history, which we therefore understand better how to rescue.

But Foucault himself repudiates this suggestion. He dashes the hope, if we had one, that there is some good we can *affirm*, as a result of the understanding these analyses give us. And by the same token, he seems to raise a question whether there is such a thing as a way out. This is rather paradoxical, because Foucault's analyses seem to bring *evils* to light; and yet he wants to distance himself from the suggestion which would seem inescapably to follow, that the negation or overcoming of these evils promotes a good.

More specifically, Foucault's analyses, as we shall see in greater detail, turn a great deal on power/domination, and on disguise/illusion. He lays bare a modern system of power, which is both more all-penetrating and much more insidious than previous forms. Its strength lies partly in the fact that it is not seen as power, but as science, or fulfilment, even 'liberation'. Foucault's work is thus partly an unmasking.

You would think that implicit in all this was the notion of two goods which need rescuing, and which the analyses help to rescue: freedom and truth; two goods which would be deeply linked granted the fact that the negation of one (domination) makes essential use of the negation of the other (disguise). We would be back on familiar terrain, with an old Enlightenment-inspired combination. But Foucault seems to repudiate both. The idea of a liberating truth is a profound illusion. There is no truth which can be espoused, defended, rescued *against* systems of power. On the contrary, each such system defines its own variant of

truth. And there is no escape from power into freedom, for such systems of power are co-extensive with human society. We can only step from one to another.

Or at least, this is what Foucault *seems* to be saying in passages like the following:

contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, . . . nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true . . .¹

Is there confusion/contradiction here, or a genuinely original position? The answer I want to offer cannot be put in a single phrase, but roughly, I think that there is some of both. However, the nature of the combination is not easy to understand.

I

I would like to examine this issue in connection with some of the analyses of Foucault's recent historical works, *Surveiller et punir* and *Histoire de la sexualité*.² For the sake of my discussion, I want to isolate three lines of analysis, each of which suggests, or is historically connected with, a certain line of critique, but where in each case Foucault repudiates the latter. But I have ordered these analyses so that the argument arising from them moves towards more radical repudiations. That is, at first sight, analysis 2 will seem to offer a reason for repudiating the good suggested by analysis 1; and 3 will seem to offer a reason for rejecting the good implicit in 2; only to be in turn rejected. Or so it would seem.

I

The first that I want to take up is the contrast drawn in *Surveiller et punir* between modes of punishment in the classical age and today. The book opens with a riveting description of the execution of a parricide in seventeenth-century France. The modern is appalled, horrified. We seem to be more in the world of our contemporary fanatical perpetrators of massacre, the Pol Pots, the Idi Amins, rather than in that of the orderly process of law in a civilized, well-established regime. Obviously something very

¹ *Power/Knowledge* (New York, 1980), p. 131.

² *Surveiller et punir* (Paris, 1975); *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris, 1976), vol. 1.

big has changed in our whole understanding of ourselves, of crime and punishment.

Bringing us up against this evidence of radical historical discontinuity is what Foucault does superlatively well. For our eyes, the details of the execution of Damians bespeak gratuitous cruelty, sadism. Foucault shows that they had another reason then. The punishment can be seen as a kind of 'liturgy' ('la liturgie des supplices').³ Human beings are seen as set in a cosmic order, constituted by a hierarchy of beings which is also a hierarchy of goods. They stand also in a political order, which is related to and in a sense endorsed by the cosmic one. This kind of order is hard to explain in modern terms, because it is not simply an order of things, but an order of meanings. Or to put it in other terms, the order of things which we see around us is thought to reflect or embody an order of Ideas. You can explain the coherence things have in terms of a certain kind of making sense.

Certain kinds of crime – parricide is a good example – are offences against this order, as well as against the political order. They do not just represent damage done to the interests of certain other individuals, or even of the ensemble of individuals making up the society. They represent a violation of the order, tearing things out of their place, as it were. And so punishment is not just a matter of making reparation for damage inflicted, or of removing a dangerous criminal, or of deterring others. The order must be set right. In the language of the time, the criminal must make *amenda honorabile*.

So the punishments have a meaning. I find Foucault convincing on this. The violence done to the order is restored by being visited on the wrongdoer. Moreover this restoral is made the more effective by his participation in the (to us) grisly scenario, in particular his avowal. As Foucault puts it, one of the goals was to 'instaurer le supplice comme moment de vérité'.⁴ Moreover, since the order violated includes the political order – royal power in this case – and this order is public, not in the modern Benthamian sense of touching the general interest, but in the older sense of a power which essentially manifests itself in public space, the restoral has to be enacted in public space. What to us is the additional barbarity of making a spectacle of all these gruesome goings-on was an essential part of what was being *effected* in the punishments of that age.

L'atrocité qui hante le supplice joue donc un double rôle: principe de la communication du crime avec la peine, elle est d'autre part l'exaspération du châtement par

³ *Surveiller et punir*, p. 53. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

rapport au crime. Elle assure d'un même coup l'éclat de la vérité et celui du pouvoir; elle est le rituel de l'enquête qui s'achève et la cérémonie où triomphe le souverain.⁵

It is clear that one of the things which makes us so different from the people of that epoch is that the whole background notion of order has disappeared for us. This has been connected to, is in a sense the obverse side of, the development of the modern identity, the sense we have of ourselves as free, self-defining subjects, whose understanding of their own essence or of their paradigm purposes is drawn from 'within', and no longer from a supposed cosmic order in which they are set. But this is not the whole story; it is not just that we have lost their background rationale. It is also that a new notion of the good has arisen. This is defined by what has often been called modern 'humanitarianism'. We have acquired, since the eighteenth century, a concern for the preservation of life, for the fulfilling of human need, and above all for the relief of suffering, which gives us an utterly different set of priorities from our forbears. It is this, and not just our loss of their background, which makes them seem to us so barbaric.

What lies behind this modern humanitarianism? This is a big and deep story. No one can claim to understand it fully. But I have to go into it a little, because his interpretation of it is central to Foucault's position. I think one of the important factors which underlies it is the modern sense of the significance of what I want to call 'ordinary life'. I use this as a term of art for that ensemble of activities which are concerned with the sustaining of life, with its continuation and reproduction: the activities of producing and consuming, or marriage, love and the family. While in the traditional ethics which came to us from the ancients, this had merely infra-structural significance (it was the first term in Aristotle's duo of ends: 'life and the good life' (*zên kai euzên*); a career (*bios*) concerned with it alone put us on a level with animals and slaves), in modern times, it becomes the prime locus of significance.

In traditional ethics, ordinary life is overshadowed by what are identified as higher activities – contemplation, for some, the citizen life, for others. And in medieval Catholicism something like this overshadowing of ordinary lay life occurs relative to the dedicated life of priestly or monastic celibacy. It was particularly the Protestant Reformation, with its demand for personal commitment, its refusal of the notion

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 59–60.

of first- and second-class Christians (unless it be the distinction between saved and damned), its refusal of any location of the sacred in human space, time or rite, and its insistence on the Biblical notion that life was hallowed, which brought about the reversal. This reversal continues through the various secularized philosophies. It underlies the Baconian insistence on utility, and partly in this way feeds into the mainstream humanism of the Enlightenment. It has obviously levelling, anti-aristocratic potential.

But more than this, it has come, I would claim, to inform the entirety of modern culture. Think for instance of the growth of the new understanding of the companionate marriage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the growing sense of the importance of *emotional* fulfilment in marriage – indeed, the whole modern sense that one's *feelings* are a key to the good life. This is now defined as involving certain emotional experiences. If I can use the term 'the good life' as an absolutely general, ethic-neutral term for whatever is considered good/holy/of ultimate value on any given view, then I would want to say that the Reformation theologies, with their new stress on the calling, made ordinary life the significant locus of the issues which distinguish the good life. *Euzên* now occurs within *zên*. And modern culture has continued this.

This, I believe, is an important part of the background to modern humanitarianism. Because with the ethics of ordinary life arises the notion that serving life (and with later, more subjectivist variants, avoiding suffering) is a paradigm goal in itself, while at the same time the supposed higher ends which previously trumped life – aristocratic honour, the sustaining of cosmic order, eventually even religious orthodoxy itself – are progressively discredited.

This perspective would make one envisage the change in philosophies of punishment since the seventeenth century as a gain; perhaps in other respects also a loss, but at least in this one respect as a gain. In other words, it seems to contain a critique of the older view as based on a mystification, in the name of which human beings were sacrificed, and terrible suffering was inflicted. At least that has been the Enlightenment-inspired reaction.

But Foucault doesn't take that stance at all. Ultimately, as is well-known, he wants to take a stance of neutrality. Here are just two systems of power, classical and modern. But at first blush, there seems to be a *value* reason for refusing the Enlightenment valuation. This lies in a reading of modern humanitarianism as the reflection of a new system of

domination, directed towards the maintenance and increase of 'biomass'. This is the second analysis, which I would like to look at briefly.

2

The picture is drawn, in both *Surveiller et punir* and volume 1 of *Histoire de la sexualité*, of a constellation combining modern humanitarianism, the new social sciences, and the new disciplines which develop in armies, schools, and hospitals in the eighteenth century, all seen as the formation of new modes of domination. In an immensely rich series of analyses, Foucault draws the portrait of a new form of power coming to be. Where the old power depended on the idea of public space, and of a public authority which essentially manifested itself in this space, which overawed us with its majesty, and relegated the subjects to a less visible status, the new power operates by universal surveillance. It does away with the notion of public space; power no longer appears, it is hidden, but the lives of all the subjects are now under scrutiny. This is the beginning of a world we are familiar with, in which computerized data banks are at the disposal of authorities, whose key agencies are not clearly identifiable, and whose *modus operandi* is often partly secret.⁶

The image or emblem of this new society for Foucault is Bentham's Panopticon, where a single central vantage point permits the surveillance of a host of prisoners, each of whom is isolated from all the rest, and incapable of seeing his watcher. In a striking image, he contrasts ancient to modern society through the emblematic structure of temple and panopticon. The ancients strove to make a few things visible to the many; we try to make many things visible to the few. 'Nous sommes bien moins grecs que nous ne le croyons.'⁷

The new philosophy of punishment is thus seen as inspired not by humanitarianism but by the need to control. Or rather, humanitarianism itself seems to be understood as a kind of stratagem of the new growing mode of control.⁸ The new forms of knowledge serve this end. People are

⁶ Cf. the ancient idea of tyranny as power *hiding* itself, as in the myth of Gyges.

⁷ *Surveiller et punir*, p. 219.

⁸ Thus in explaining the unplanned rise of this new form, Foucault says: 'Take the example of philanthropy in the early nineteenth century: people appear who make it their business to involve themselves in other people's lives, health, nutrition, housing: then, out of this confused set of functions there emerge certain personages, institutions, forms of knowledge: public hygiene, inspectors, social workers, psychologists' (*Power/Knowledge*, p. 62). Foucault is precisely *not* claiming that there was a plot laid by anyone. The explanatory model of history here seems to be that certain things arise for a whole host of possible reasons, and then get taken up and used by the emerging constellation. But what is clear is that the dominating thrust of the constellation which uses them is not humanitarian beneficence but control. I will discuss this understanding of historical change below.

measured, classed, examined in various ways, and thus made the better subject to a control which tends to normalization. In particular, Foucault speaks of the medical examination, and the various kinds of inspection which arose on its model, as a key instrument in this. The examination, he says, is at once 'le déploiement de la force et l'établissement de la vérité'.

Far from explaining the rise of this new technology of control in terms of the modern identity of man as an individual, Foucault wants to explain the modern notion of individuality as one of its products. This new technology brings about the modern individual as an objective of control. The being who is thus examined, measured, categorized, made the target of policies of normalization, is the one whom we have come to define as the modern individual.⁹

There is another way of contrasting modern power with the classical. Foucault touches on it in *Surveiller et punir* but sets it out more explicitly in later work.¹⁰ The classical understanding of power turned on the notions of sovereignty and law. Much of early modern thought was taken up with definitions of sovereignty and legitimacy. In part these intellectual efforts were deployed in the service of the new centralized royal governments, which built up towards their apogee in the 'absolute' monarchies of the seventeenth century. In part they were concerned with the opposite movement, a definition of the limits of rightful sovereignty, and hence the rights of resistance of the subject. At the limit, this line of thought issues in the post-Rousseauian definitions of legitimate sovereignty as essentially founded on self-rule.

But in either case, these theories present an image of power as turning on the fact that some give commands and others obey. They address this question in terms of law or right. Foucault's thesis is that, while we have not ceased talking and thinking in terms of this model, we actually live in relations of power which are quite different, and which cannot be properly described in its terms. What is wielded through the modern technologies of control is something quite different, in that (a) it is not concerned with law but with normalization. That is, it is above all concerned with bringing about a certain result, defined as health or good function, whereas relative to any such goal, law is always concerned with what Nozick calls 'side-constraints'. In fact, what has happened is a kind of infiltration of the process of law itself by this quite alien species of control. Criminals are

⁹ Cf. *Power/Knowledge*, p. 98.

¹⁰ E.g. in *ibid.*, chap. 5.

more and more treated as 'cases' to be 'rehabilitated' and brought back to normal.¹¹

This change goes along with two others. First, (b) where the old law/power was concerned with prohibitions, with instructions requiring that we in some way restrict our behaviour to conform to them, the new kind of power is *productive*. It brings about a new kind of subject and new kinds of desire and behaviour which belong to him. It is concerned to form us as modern individuals.¹² Second, (c) this power is not wielded by a *subject*. It is essential to the old model that power presupposes a location of the source of command. Even if no longer in the hands of the king, it will now be located in a sovereign assembly, or perhaps in the people who have the right to elect it. In any case, the orders start from somewhere. But the new kind of power is not wielded by specific people against others, at least not in this way. It is rather a complex form of organization in which we are all involved.¹³

We still live in the theory of the old power, understood in terms of sovereignty/obedience. But the reality we have is the new one, which must be understood in terms of domination/subjugation.¹⁴ In political theory, we still 'need to cut off the king's head'.¹⁵

Now this second analysis may remind us of another important theme of critical political theory, indeed, a central theme of Critical Theory (in capitals), that of the link between the domination of nature and the domination of man. This is set out in perhaps its clearest form, and in one of its most influential formulations, in Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1975).¹⁶ But it was taken up and continued in a variety of ways, and emerges as an explicit theme in the writings of the Frankfurt School.

The basic notion is a critique of mainstream enlightenment humanism with its exaltation of instrumental reason and an instrumental stance towards nature, both within and without us. To objectify our own nature and to try to bring it under the control of reason is to divide what should be a living unity. It introduces a master within, in Schiller's language, a relation of domination internal to the person. The proper stance of reason to nature is that of articulator. In expression – in Schiller's formulation, in beauty – nature and reason come to reconciliation.

The relation of domination within man, which is part of a stance of

¹¹ *Surveiller et punir*, p. 224. Cf. 'society of normalization', *Power/Knowledge*, p. 107.

¹² Cf. the references to Marcuse and *Power/Knowledge*, pp. 59, 120.

¹³ *Power/Knowledge*, p. 140 points out the close link between (b) and (c).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121. ¹⁶ Esp. letter 6.

domination towards nature in general, cannot help engendering a domination of man by man. What goes on within must also end up happening between men. Schiller's account of this connection is via the breakdown of a true consensual community among atomic individuals which necessitates a regime of enforced conformity to law. But Foucault seems to offer to the Schillerian perspective another connection (supplementing, not replacing the first). The objectifying and domination of inner nature comes about in fact not just through a change of attitude but through training in an interiorization of certain disciplines. The disciplines of organized bodily movement, of the employment of time, of ordered dispositions of living/working space; these are the paths by which objectification really takes place, becomes more than a philosopher's dream, or the achievement of a small elite of spiritual explorers, and takes on the dimensions of a mass phenomenon.

But the disciplines which build this new way of being are social; they are the disciplines of the barracks, the hospital, the school, the factory. By their very nature they lend themselves to the control of some by others. In these contexts, the inculcation of habits of self-discipline is often the imposition of discipline by some on others. These are the loci where forms of domination become entrenched through being interiorized.

Seen in this way, Foucault offers the Frankfurt school an account of the inner connection between the domination of nature and the domination of man which is rather more detailed and more convincing than what they came up with themselves. It is the measure of the great richness of his work that this 'gift' is not at all part of his intentions. On the contrary, Foucault will have nothing to do with this Romantic-derived view of the oppression of nature and our 'liberation' from it.

Once again, this seems ultimately to be a matter of his Nietzschean refusal of the notion of truth as having any meaning outside a given order of power. But once again, there looks to be a more immediate, value-related reason. This comes out in the third analysis, which is the subject of the *Histoire de la sexualité*.

3

Central to the Romantic notion of liberation is the notion that the nature within us must come to expression. The wrong stance of reason is that of objectification, and the application of instrumental reason: the right stance is that which brings to authentic expression what we have within us. In accordance with the whole modern rehabilitation of ordinary life, of which the Romantic movement is heir, one of the crucial aspects of this

inner nature which must be articulated is our nature as sexual beings. There is a truth of this; an authentic way for each of us to love. This is distorted by custom, or the demands of power external to us; in more modern variants, it is distorted by the demands of the capitalist work-ethic, or the disciplines of a bureaucratic society. In any case, whatever the distorting agent, it needs to be liberated, and coming to true expression is both a means and a fruit of this liberation.

Foucault aims to dismantle this whole conception, and show it to be thorough-going illusion. The idea that we have a sexual nature, and that we can get at it by speech, by avowal – perhaps with the help of experts – Foucault sees as an idea with deep roots in Christian civilization. It links together earlier practices of confession, through counter-reformation practices of self-scrutiny (and also reformed ones, naturally; but Foucault tends to be more familiar with French Catholic sources) to Freudian psychoanalysis, the 'talking cure'. We live in 'une société singulièrement avouante'.¹⁷ But this idea is not the statement of a deep, culture-independent truth about us. It is rather one of these 'truths' which are produced by a certain regime of power. And in fact, it is a product of the same regime of power through the technology of control that we have just been examining.

Foucault's idea seems to be that the notion that we have a sexual nature is itself a product of those modes of knowledge designed to make us objects of control. Our acceptance that we have such a nature makes us an object of such control. For now we have to find it, and set our lives to rights by it. And finding it requires the 'help' of experts, requires that we put ourselves in their care, be they the priests of old or the psychoanalysts or social workers of today. And part of putting ourselves in their hands is our avowal, the requirement that we go on trying to *say* what we are like, what our experience is, how things are with us.

This whole idea turns out to be a stratagem of power. It helps the cause of control partly in that it presents us as enigmas who need external help to resolve ourselves; and partly in that it has created the very idea of sex. Not, of course, the desire, the instinct, but the understanding of sexuality as the locus of a crucial fulfilment for ourselves as human beings. This self-understanding in terms of an enigmatic nature requiring expression has made us into modern sexual beings, where a key element of the good life is some kind of sexual *fulfilment*. The question of the meaning of our life is bound up with the authentic nature of our sexual longing. 'La

¹⁷ *Histoire de la sexualité*, p. 79.

question de ce que nous sommes, une certaine pente nous a conduits, en quelques siècles, à la poser au sexe. Et, non pas tellement au sexe-nature (élément du système du vivant, objet pour une biologie), mais au sexe-histoire, ou sexe-signification, au sexe-discours.¹⁸

And this makes us objects of control in all sorts of ways which we barely understand. The important thing to grasp is that we are not controlled on the old model, through certain prohibitions being laid on us. We may think we are gaining some freedom when we throw off sexual prohibitions, but in fact we are dominated by certain images of what it is to be a full, healthy, fulfilled sexual being. And these images are in fact very powerful instruments of control. We may think of the contemporary wave of sexual permissiveness as a kind of 'revolt of the sexual body'. But

What is the response on the side of power? An economic (and perhaps also ideological) exploitation of eroticisation, from sun-tan products to pornographic films. Responding precisely to the revolt of the body, we find a new mode of investment which presents itself no longer in the form of control by repression but that of control by stimulation. 'Get undressed – but be slim, be good-looking, tanned!'¹⁹

The ruse is diabolic. The whole idea that we are generally too sexually repressed, and need above all liberation; that we need to be able to talk more freely, that we need to throw off tabus and enjoy our sexual nature: this is not just another of those illusions which makes us see power always in terms of prohibitions. In fact the self experience whereby we have a sexual nature which is held down or confined by rules and tabus is itself a creation of the new kind of power/control. In going for liberation, we see ourselves as escaping a power understood on the old model. But in fact we live under a power of the new kind, and this we are not escaping; far from it, we are playing its game, we are assuming the shape it has moulded for us. It keeps us tied to the whole 'dispositif de sexualité'.²⁰

The very idea of modern sexuality thus develops as part of technologies of control. It is at the hinge where two axes of such development join.²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102. ¹⁹ *Power/Knowledge*, p. 57.

²⁰ Cf. the reference to Wilhelm Reich in *Histoire de la sexualité*, p. 173. This analysis obviously has parallels to Marcuse's about 'repressive de-sublimation', and this just underlines the point above about the possible utility of Foucault's analysis for critical theory. But the crucial difference remains, that Critical Theory stays within the notion of liberation through true expression, while Foucault denounces this. Hence the critique of Marcuse (*Power/Knowledge*, p. 59) for thinking of power still purely in terms of repression.

²¹ *Histoire de la sexualité*, p. 191.

On one hand, it is related to the disciplines of the body; on the other, to the regulation of populations. It serves the preservation and extension of life as the 'bio-mass', which is the over-riding direction of much modern policy.

II

Let me try to sum up the discussion of the three analyses of Foucault. I have been trying through them to get to the point where we can see the break in Foucault's thought, the point which disconcerts, where he adopts a Nietzschean-derived stance of neutrality between the different historical systems of power, and thus seems to neutralize the evaluations which arise out of his analyses. In analysis 1, he opposes the classical liturgical idea of punishment to the modern 'humanitarian' one. And refuses to value the second over the first. But this refusal is over-determined, in a sense. It doesn't seem to depend only on the bottom-line Nietzschean stance of neutrality, but also on his concrete reading of this 'humanitarianism', which is seen as a growing system of control.

And so we have analysis 2, which seems to give us an *evaluational* reason for refusing the evaluation which issues from analysis 1. But the evaluation on which this depends would be something akin to the Schillerian/Critical Theory notion that modern discipline has repressed our own natures and constituted systems of domination of man by man, and this evaluation is also repudiated. Once again, though, we seem to have an over-determined judgement. It is not a pure case of Nietzschean neutrality. For there is another reason to refuse this whole Romantic-inspired notion of liberation from the domination of nature within and without. And that is that the ideology of expressive liberation, particularly in connection with sexual life, is itself just a strategy of power. This is analysis 3.

And so we come to the bottom line. What about the evaluation which seems to flow from 3? This would offer us some idea of a liberation, but not via the correct or authentic expression of our natures. It would be a liberation from the whole ideology of such expression, and hence from the mechanisms of control which use this ideology. It would be a liberation which was helped by our unmasking falsehood; a liberation aided by the truth.

In short, it would be something which had certain parallels to the Romantic-originating notion. We would achieve a liberation from a system of control which operates in us largely through masks, disguises

and false pretences. It operates by inducing in us a certain self-understanding, an identity. We can help to throw it off partly by unmasking this identity and the manner of its implantation, and thus cease to be accomplices in its control and shaping of ourselves.

This would be a notion of liberation through the truth, parallel to the Romantic-derived one, but different in that it would see the very notion of ourselves as having a true identity to express as part of the *dispositif* of control, rather than as what defines our liberation.

Now the official Nietzschean stance of Foucault would refuse this value-position as well. And here, at last, we would be at the pure case, where the refusal was not over-determined, but depended purely on the Nietzschean stance. But can he do it? Does he really do it? What does it mean to do it? These are the central questions which arise about Foucault's repudiation of the goods which seem implicit in his analyses. And this is the right place to pose these questions, where no extraneous considerations, no other possible value-positions muddy the waters.

Does he really do it? Even this is not so clear. There are moments where some notion of liberation seems to peek through. It is true (?) that he repudiates the notion of liberation through the truth: 'La vérité n'est pas libre, ni l'erreur servie.'²² But later there is the hint of a possible *point d'appui* for at least a relative freeing: 'Contre le dispositif de la sexualité, le point d'appui de la contre-attaque ne doit pas être le sexe-désir, mais les corps et les plaisirs.'²³ What exactly this could mean I want to discuss later. But here, I just want to point to the implication that once one has rejected the false idea of a liberation through the truth of one's natural sexual desires (*le sexe-désir*), there remains something else it can be founded on. In this connection, we might also mention the passages where Foucault talks about the need for a kind of revolutionary practice which did not just reproduce the forms of control which exist in the structures against which they are rebelling.²⁴

But the question I would like to explore here is: can he do it? By that I mean: what can be coherently said in this domain? Just how much sense does a Nietzschean position make?

Before I do this, I want just to mention another line of critique that one could take up against Foucault, but that I do not want to pursue here. Foucault's analyses are terribly one-sided. Their strength is their

²² *Ibid.*, p. 81. ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 208. ²⁴ *Power/Knowledge*, pp. 60, 61.

insightfulness and originality, in bringing usually neglected aspects to light. The weakness is that the other aspects seem denied altogether. We can see this with the three analyses above.

I already mentioned with analysis 1 how Foucault reads the rise of humanitarianism exclusively in terms of the new technologies of control. The development of the new ethics of life is given no independent significance. This seems to me quite absurdly one-sided.

In the second analysis, the rise of the new forms of discipline is seen exclusively in its relation to domination. Once again, I think there is a mine of valuable historical insights here. Foucault has filled in, as I mentioned above, some of the background which Critical Theory always supposed, but did not adequately work out. But Foucault has missed the ambivalence of these new disciplines. The point is, they have not only served to feed a system of control. They have also taken the form of genuine self-disciplines which have made possible new kinds of collective action characterized by more egalitarian forms of participation. This is not a new discovery. It is a truism of the civic humanist tradition of political theory that free participatory institutions require some commonly accepted self-disciplines. The free citizen has the *virtu* to give willingly the contribution which otherwise the despot would coerce from him, perhaps in some other form. Without this, free institutions cannot exist. There is a tremendous difference between societies which find their cohesion through such common disciplines grounded on a public identity, and which thus permit of and call for the participatory action of equals, on one hand, and the multiplicity of kinds of society which require chains of command based on unquestionable authority on the other.

Aside from the moral differences, there are also differences in efficacy, which Machiavelli examined, particularly military. Modern history has been shaped by striking examples of the citizen military, from the New Model Army to the Israeli Defence Forces. This is really too big a phenomenon to ignore.

The point is that collective disciplines can function in both ways, as structures of domination, and as bases for equal collective action. And they can also slide over time from one to the other. It can be argued that some of the disciplines which helped to found the societies based on contract and responsible government in earlier times, which represented a great leap forward in egalitarian politics, are now serving bureaucratic modes of irresponsible power which are sapping our democracy. I think that there is a lot in this. And undoubtedly the feeling that something like this is happening adds plausibility to Foucault's analysis, at first blush.

But on reflection, we can see that Foucault's notion of modern power incapacitates us from understanding this process.

That is because we cannot understand modern bureaucratization unless we see how collective disciplines can function both for and against despotic control. The threatened degeneracy of modern mass democracies is a *slide* from one of these directions to the other. We will never see what is going on if we think of the disciplines as having their exclusive historical and social significance in forms of domination.

Foucault's attraction is partly that of a *terrible simplificateur*. His espousal of the reversal of Clausewitz's aphorism, which makes us see politics as war carried on by other means,²⁵ can open insights in certain situations. But to make this one's basic axiom for the examination of modern power as such leaves out too much. Foucault's opposition between the old model of power, based on sovereignty/obedience, and the new one based on domination/subjugation leaves out everything in Western history which has been animated by civic humanism or analogous movements.²⁶ And that means a massive amount of what is specific to our civilization. Without this in one's conceptual armoury, Western history and societies become incomprehensible, as they are for that reason to so many Russians (like Solzhenitsyn).

In the third analysis, Foucault is certainly on to something in the claim that sexual desire has been given exceptional importance in Western civilization, and that in the very attempts to control it, neutralize it and go beyond it. He is certainly right to point to the Christian roots of this. Again, we can appreciate the force of the point that we have somehow been led to place a tremendous weight of significance on our sexual lives and fulfilment in this culture, more than these can bear. But then to understand this simply in terms of technologies of control (I am not sure whether Foucault really does this; I await eagerly the second volume of *Histoire de la sexualité* to find out) leaves out its roots in the theologies/ethics of ordinary life, in the Christian concern for the quality of the will, which Foucault himself rightly sees as basic to this.²⁷ And to reduce the whole Western, post-Romantic business of trying to save

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90; see also *Histoire de la sexualité*, p. 123.

²⁶ The sovereignty model is *meant* to cope with the rebellion against despotic power and the rise of representative institutions. But in fact, it can only illuminate its Lockean aspect. The civic humanist aspect precisely cannot be put in terms of who is giving orders to whom. The concept of sovereignty cannot be integrated without strain in this form of thought.

²⁷ *London Review of Books* (21 May–3 June 1981), p. 5.

oneself to an artefact of such a technology of control approaches absurdity. That the aspiration to express one's true nature can *become* a mechanism of control is indeed true, and Foucault can offer insights on this. But just as in the case of bureaucratization above, you incapacitate yourself to understand this *becoming* if you conceive it from the beginning as essentially *being* control.

III

But I am less interested in hammering this line of critique than in seeing what can be coherently said in this area. I think Foucault's position is ultimately incoherent, but that this escapes detection because the points where it falls into contradiction are misidentified as new and deeper formulations of what many would recognize as valuable insights. I would like to explore this under three heads.

I

First, the idea of power without a subject. There are a number of interesting ideas here, of which two are especially important for this discussion. (i) Foucault is setting aside the old model, where power is a matter of one person (group) exercising sovereign control over another; where some give orders and others obey, where some impose their wills on the others. This is usually conceived as a relation alongside the others – social, economic, familial, sexual, etc. – that people stand in with each other; conditioned by and conditioning the others, but distinct from them. On the contrary, the power Foucault is interested in is internal to, intrinsic to these other relations. One could say that it is constitutive of them, that built in to the very understanding of the common activity, or goods sought, or whatever forms the substance of the micro-relation, are forms of domination.²⁸ Thus the doctor–patient relation is defined by a supposed common goal, constituted by a stance of helper on the part of the professional, and a recognition of need on the part of the patient. But this coming together in a common goal is inseparable from a relation of power, founded on the presumption that one *knows*, and that the other has an overwhelming interest in taking advice. The relation of force is integral to the common goal as defined.

This is a relation of power, but it cannot be conceived on the Hobbesian model. It is rare that a doctor can/wants to wreak his arbitrary and

²⁸ *Histoire de la sexualité*, pp. 123–4.

unrestrained will on his patient. Both parties are constrained in a sense by the common understanding, the common activity. But within this, there is a domination on the part of the doctor.

This helps us to understand another difference from the Hobbesian model: frequently, in this kind of situation, the dominated cooperate in their subordination. They often come to interiorize the norms of the common activity; they go willingly. They are utterly unaware of a relation of domination. Foucault's example is the ideology of sexual liberation, where we play along unwittingly with a technology of control, even as we are 'letting it all hang out'.

And we can see from this, also, how this kind of relationship can permit reversals. There is not necessarily a continuing identity of dominators and dominated over time. There was for instance an ensemble of father, mother, educator and doctor constituted in the nineteenth century around the control of the child's sexuality. The original relation puts the doctor on top, offering 'advice' to parents, who are in turn controlling their children. But later, the relation of psychiatrist to child is the basis on which the adult's sexuality is called into question.²⁹

(ii) But Foucault is also putting forward another thesis under this head, one about the relations of micro- to macro-contexts of power. It is not entirely clear what this thesis is, because it is stated somewhat differently in different places. But the baldest statement is perhaps this: 'que le pouvoir vient d'en bas'.³⁰ This seems to mean that we cannot hope to explain the local 'rapports de force' in terms of some global relation of dominators and dominated. This is not to say that there may not be identifiable classes or groups of those who are 'on top', or 'on the bottom' at any given time. But we have to explain this division in terms of the combinations, alignments, mutual effects, oppositions, side-effects, etc, which the micro-contexts of domination produce on each other and with each other. Or perhaps better, we have to allow for a circular relation, in which the grand alignments, which become concretized in, say, political or military institutions, both result from and have repercussions on the micro 'rapports de forces'.³¹

The grand strategies of the macro-contexts – state, ruling class, or whatever – form the context in which the micro-relations come to be, modify or reproduce themselves, while reciprocally these provide the soil and point of anchorage for the grand strategies. Thus, more than saying that power comes from the bottom, we should say that there is endless relation of reciprocal conditioning between global and micro-contexts.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 131–2.

Foucault's target in this thesis is plainly Marxism, even as he rejects the Hobbesian model with the other. It is a mistake to take the relations of opposition at one level as explanatorily *basic*. That is what Marxism does. It is the global class struggle and its exigencies which are used to explain the way people square off in the micro-contexts, of family, factory, professional association, and so on. There is a widely accepted view that we ought to explain, for example, the incarceration of the mad in the sixteenth century, or the repressive interest in infantile sexuality in the nineteenth century, in terms of the requirements of the rising bourgeois economy. Foucault rejects this. Rather the relation was that these contexts of domination developed in their own fashion, and were then taken up and used by the macro-context of domination. They 'came to be colonized and maintained by the global mechanisms and the entire state system,' in which the bourgeoisie was hegemonic.³²

So far, so clear. Indeed, we might be tempted to say: so far, so true. But now there is a third thesis under this head which Foucault also seems to be propounding. Perhaps this is a good statement of it: 'que les relations de pouvoir sont à la fois intentionnelles et non subjectives'.³³ What Foucault seems to be affirming here is that, aside from the particular conscious purpose which agents pursue in their given context, there is disconcerting a strategic logic of the context itself, but this cannot be attributed to anyone as their plan, as their conscious purpose. As he puts it in *Power/Knowledge*, talking of the kind of history he writes, 'the coherence of such a history does not derive from the revelation of a project, but from the logic of opposing strategies'.³⁴

Strategies without projects; this would be a good formula to describe Foucault's historiography. Besides the strategies of individuals, which *are* their projects, there is a strategy of the context. The whole constitution and maintenance of the modern system of control and domination is an example. Foucault speaks of its growth and self-maintenance in strategic terms. He speaks of power using certain stratagems, or certain points of purchase. Thus in describing the reversals which occur as power and the resistance to it each take up each other's instruments, he gives this example:

Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counter-attack in that same body. Do you recall the panic of the institutions of the social body, the doctors and politicians, at the idea of non-legalized cohabitation (*l'union libre*) or

³² *Power/Knowledge*, p. 99–101.

³³ *Histoire de la sexualité*, p. 124.

³⁴ *Power/Knowledge*, p. 61.

free abortion? But the impression that power weakens and vacillates here is in fact mistaken; power can retreat here, re-organize its forces, invest itself elsewhere ... and so the battle continues.³⁵

This notion of global strategies is essential to Foucault's reverse Clausewitzian thesis that we are engaged in perpetual war. This is not just the banality that there is much strife and rivalry among individuals. It is the thesis that there is a continuing struggle traversing the context in which we are all caught up. The use of the term 'strategy' in Foucault recovers its full original etymological force.

It is this third thesis which makes no sense, in Foucault's version. I stress this last phrase, because it would be quite wrong to say that no thesis of this kind makes sense. On the contrary, we can think of good examples where it makes sense to attribute a 'purposefulness without purpose' to history, or at least a logic to events without design. Let us look at some examples, in order to see what is required by this kind of explanation. (a) We can recognize a certain purposefulness in people's action where their motivation and goals are unacknowledged or perhaps unacknowledgeable. An example would be the (I think profound) Dostoyevskian analysis of modern political terrorism in terms of projected self-hatred and the response to a sense of emptiness. These purposes are not only unacknowledged, they *could not* be acknowledged without undermining the whole enterprise, which depends crucially on the notion that one is acting out of purely political-strategic considerations. But they might explain certain systematic features of terrorism better than the overly avowed goals.

(b) Then there are theories of unintended but systematic consequences, such as 'invisible hand' theories, that is, theories where the situation is so constituted that individual decisions are bound to concatenate in a certain systematic way. The best known example is the (malign) invisible hand account of capitalism by Marx. The structure of a capitalist economy is that individual decisions have to concatenate towards an ever-greater polarization, immiseration of the masses, concentration of capital, falling rate of profit and so on.

(c) There are unintended consequences theories which touch on the results of collective action, and not just the combination of individual actions. As an example, we can perhaps see a certain pattern in Leninist politics whereby the possibilities of devolution and a move towards participation are more and more restricted. This is a consequence unintended

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

by Leninist parties at the outset, but it could perhaps be shown that it follows ineluctably from their model of mass mobilization, which systematically ends up destroying the bases for devolved power. The tragedy would be that a movement aimed at liberation and radical democratization should end up destroying these more effectively than predecessor regimes.

I am citing these types and examples to illustrate my main point, which is that purposefulness without purpose requires a certain kind of explanation to be intelligible. The undesigned systematicity has to be related to the purposeful action of agents in a way that we can understand. This is a requirement which the above kinds of explanation try to fulfil. The reason for this requirement is that the text of history, which we are trying to explain, is made up of purposeful human action. Where there are patterns in this action which are not on purpose, we have to explain why action done under one description on purpose also bears this other, undesigned description. We have to show how the two descriptions relate. A strategic pattern cannot just be left hanging, unrelated to our conscious ends and projects.

It is a mistake to think that the only intelligible relation between a pattern and our conscious purposes is the direct one where the pattern is consciously willed. This is a hang-up which did come down to us from classical Cartesian-empiricist views of the mind. Foucault is right to ridicule it: 'ne cherchons pas l'état-major qui préside à sa rationalité' (sc. *du pouvoir*).³⁶ But this must not be confused with the explanatory requirement outlined above. It is certainly not the case that all patterns *issue* from conscious action, but all patterns have to be made *intelligible* in relation to conscious action.

Now Foucault not only does not meet this requirement; it is difficult to see how he could without abandoning some or other part of his declared position. We could explain the constitution of the growing system of technologies of control, if we could understand it (on model (a)) as meeting the (largely unacknowledged) purposes of some group. But this Foucault could not do without going back on his thesis (ii), that there is no priority here of explanation in terms of the interest of some dominant class. The system has to arise out of the micro-contexts in which people act and react. It would be even worse for his case if the 'group' whose interest of purposes was the motor of change was co-terminous with society at large, or at least widely distributed within it; for then the

³⁶ *Histoire de la sexualité*, p. 125.

changes would be thought of as largely self-wrought, and a problem might arise about interpreting these as relations of *domination*. The same difficulty with thesis (ii) rules out explanations on model (c), in terms of the unintended consequences of collective action (which might itself be motivated by partly unacknowledged purposes).

In order to stick by (ii) in this case, we would need some account on model (b), where micro-reactions concatenate in this systematic way. I don't say something like this cannot be found, but I am at a loss to say even where one should start looking for it. And Foucault doesn't even feel the need to start looking.

This is not to say that there is a difficulty with Foucault's thesis (ii) in principle. On the contrary, there are obviously lots of aspects of social life in which this reciprocal play of micro-practice and global structures, each producing (largely unintended) consequences for the other, is the right explanatory model. The problem arises only when one combines this with Foucault's very strong claims to systematicity, in the idea that there are pervasive *strategies* afoot which condition the battle in each micro-context, that 'power' can 'retreat' or 're-organize its forces'. These can only be combined via some account of how actions concatenate systematically some model of type (b). But Foucault doesn't even try. He leaves us with a strange kind of Schopenhauerian will, ungrounded in human action.³⁷

One of the most important reasons why Foucault doesn't feel a need to offer an account here is the confusion which has afflicted the republic of letters during these last decades about the supposed 'death of subjectivity'. This had its epicentre in Paris. Foucault took part in it.³⁸ Hacking³⁹ praises Foucault for having stepped beyond the old conception of subjectivity, which required all purposefulness in history to have a purposer.

The confusion lies in not seeing that there not only can be but *must* be something between total subjectivism, on the one hand, holding that there are no undesigned patterns in history, and the strange Schopenhauerianism-without-the-will in which Foucault leaves us. Much play is

³⁷ Hacking, *New York Review of Books* (14 May 1981), has already pointed out the Schopenhauerian overtones of the title of volume 1 of *Histoire de la sexualité, La Volonté de savoir*. But even Schopenhauer would not do as a theoretical background for Foucault, for that would give an account in our 'nature'. He has to be more evasive than this.

³⁸ This set of doctrines is sometimes called 'structuralist', or 'post-structuralist', but the aspiration to overcome subjectivity goes well beyond people who hold some structuralist model or other. Foucault is a case in point.

³⁹ *New York Review of Books*, p. 35.

made of the discovery (which structuralists did a lot to put in vogue) that any act requires a background language of practices and institutions to make sense; and that while there will be a particular goal sought in the act, those features of it which pertain to the structural background will not be objects of individual purpose. That my declarations in this paper are all made with uninflected words has nothing to do with what I have decided, and everything to do with the fact that the medium of my thought is English (and I didn't really choose *that* either).

No one can deny that this is an invaluable point to have in mind in studies of power. The utter sterility of the view popular a while ago in American political science, that one could analyse power in terms of A's ability to make B do something he otherwise would not, or some such thing, illustrates this. The approach is sterile, just because acts of power are so heterogeneous; they absolutely do not admit of being described in such a homogeneous medium of culturally neutral makings and doings. The power of the audience over the star craving approval is utterly incommensurable with the power of the general, which is incommensurable with the power of the elected minister, and that in turn with the power of the guru, and so on. Power can only be understood within a context; and this is the obverse of the point that the contexts can only in turn be understood in relation to the kind of power which constitutes them (Foucault's thesis).

But all this does not mean that there is no such thing as explaining the rise and fall of these contexts in history. On the contrary, this is one of the major tasks of historiography. And that is the issue we were talking about in connection with Foucault's system of modern technologies of control. How does it arise? *Of course*, you don't explain it by some big bad man/class *designing* it (who ever suggested anything so absurd?), but you do need to explain it nevertheless, that is relate this systematicity to the purposeful human action in which it arose and which it has come to shape. You cannot *evade* *this* question by talking of the priority of structure over element, of language over speech act. What we want to know is why a language *arises*.

Indeed, for purposes of such diachronic explanation, we can question whether we ought to speak of a priority of language over act. There is a circular relation. Structures of action or languages are only maintained by being renewed constantly in action/speech. And it is in action/speech that they also fail to be maintained, that they are altered. This is a crashing truism, but the fog emanating from Paris in recent decades makes it necessary to clutch it as a beacon in the darkness. To give an absolute

priority to the structure makes *exactly as little sense* as the equal and opposite error of subjectivism, which gave absolute priority to the action, as a kind of total beginning.

This helps explain why Foucault feels he can be evasive on this issue; but not why he feels the need to be. Here we touch the question of his motivations, which I would like to adjourn till later (if I dare take it up at all). Meanwhile, I turn to the second head under which there is incoherence.

2

'Power' without 'freedom' or 'truth': can there really be an analysis which uses the notion of power, and which leaves no place for freedom, or truth? I have already raised the question whether Foucault *really* does away with freedom (section II above). But this uncertainty of utterance is just the symptom, I believe, of a deeper problem. The Nietzschean programme on this level does not make sense.

This is because of the very nature of a notion like 'power', or 'domination'. True, they do not require that we have one agent who is imposing his will on another. There are all sorts of ways in which power can be inscribed in a situation in which both dominators and dominated are caught up. The first may see himself largely as the agent of the demands of the larger context: the second may see the demands on him as emanating from the nature of things. Nevertheless, the notion of power or domination requires some notion of constraint imposed on someone by a process in some way related to human agency. Otherwise the term loses all meaning.

'Power' in the way Foucault sees it, closely linked to 'domination', does not require a clearly demarcated perpetrator, but it requires a victim. It cannot be a 'victimless crime', so to speak. Perhaps the victims also exercise it, also victimize others. But power needs targets.⁴⁰ Something must be being imposed on someone, if there is to be domination. Perhaps that person is also helping to impose it on himself, but then there must be an element of fraud, illusion, false pretences involved in this. Otherwise, it is not clear that the imposition is in any sense an exercise of *domination*.⁴¹

But now something is only an *imposition* on me against a background

⁴⁰ *Power/Knowledge*, p. 98: '[Individuals] are not only its [sc. power's] inept or consenting target: they are also the elements of its articulation.' But this means that they *are* targets.

⁴¹ I indicated above how heedless Foucault is of this boundary, in which the self-disciplines of freedom are distinguished from the disciplines of domination. This all turns on whether and how they are *imposed*.

of desires, interests, purposes, that I have. It is only an imposition if it makes some dent in these, if it frustrates them, prevents them from fulfilment, or perhaps even from formulation. If some external situation or agency wreaks some change in me which in no way lies athwart some such desire/purpose/aspiration/interest, then there is no call to speak of an exercise of power/domination. Take the phenomenon of imprinting. In human life, it also exists after a fashion. We generally come to like the foods which have assuaged our hunger, those we are fed as children in our culture. Is this an index of the 'domination' of our culture over us? The word would lose all useful profile, would have no more distinctiveness, if we let it roam this wide.

Moreover, the desire/purposes, etc., have to be of some significance. The trivial is not relevant here. If something makes it impossible for me to act on the slight preference that I have for striped over unstriped tooth-paste, this is not a serious exercise of power. Shaping my life by 'imposition' in this respect would not figure in an analysis of power.

This is recognized by Foucault in his thesis that there is no power without 'resistances'.⁴² Indeed, Foucault is sometimes dramatically aware of the force and savagery of the imposition. Take this passage, about knowledge, but illustrating its close connection to power:

its development [sc. of knowledge] is not tied to the constitution and affirmation of a free subject: rather it creates a progressive enslavement to its instinctive violence. Where religion once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves,⁴³ calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge.

But this means that 'power' belongs in a semantic field from which 'truth' and 'freedom' cannot be excluded. Because it is linked with the notion of the imposition on our significant desires/purposes, it cannot be separated from the notion of some relative lifting of this restraint, from an unimpeded fulfilment of these desires/purposes. But this is just what is involved in a notion of freedom. There may, indeed, be all sorts of reasons why in certain situations certain impositions just cannot be lifted. There are empirical obstacles, and some very deep-lying ones in man's historical situation. But that is not Foucault's point. He wants to discredit as somehow based on a misunderstanding the very idea of liberation from power. But I am arguing that power, in his sense, *does not make sense* without at

⁴² *Histoire de la sexualité*, pp. 125-7; *Power/Knowledge*, p. 142.

⁴³ M. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Oxford, 1977), p. 163; quoted in an unpublished paper by Mark Philp.

least the idea of liberation. It may then be shown that the specific liberation, defined in a given context as the negation of the power wielded therein, is not realizable for this or that reason. But that is another, quite different issue, into which Foucault doesn't even enter.

The Foucaultian thesis involves combining the fact that any set of institutions and practices form the background to our action within them, and are in that sense unremovable while we engage in that kind of action, with the point that different forms of power are indeed constituted by different complexes of practice, to form the illegitimate conclusion that there can be no question of liberation from the power implicit in a given set of practices. Not only is there the possibility of frequently moving from one set of practices to another; but even within a given set, the level and kind of imposition can vary. Foucault implicitly discounts both these possibilities, the first because of the fundamentally Nietzschean thesis which is basic to his work: the move from one context to another cannot be seen as a liberation because there is no common measure between the impositions of the one and those of the other. I want to address this in the next discussion (section 3 below). And he discounts the second, because of his over-simple and global notion of the modern system of control and domination, which I have already touched on above.

So 'power' requires 'liberty'. But it also requires 'truth' – if we want to allow, as Foucault does, that we can collaborate in our own subjugation. Indeed, that is a crucial feature of the modern system of control, that it gets us to agree and concur in the name of truth, or liberation or our own nature. If we want to allow this, then 'truth' is an essential notion. Because the imposition proceeds here by foisting illusion on us. It proceeds by disguises and masks. It proceeds thus by falsehood.

C'est à la condition de masquer une part importante de lui-même que le pouvoir est tolérable. Sa réussite est en proportion de ce qu'il parvient à cacher de ses mécanismes. Le pouvoir serait-il accepté s'il était entièrement cynique? Le secret n'est pas pour lui de l'ordre de l'abus: il est indispensable à son fonctionnement.⁴⁴

Mask, falsehood makes no sense without a corresponding notion of truth. The truth here is subversive of power: it is on the side of the lifting of impositions, of what we have just called liberation. The Foucaultian notion of power not only requires for its sense the correlative notions of truth and liberation, but even the standard link between them, which

⁴⁴ *Histoire de la sexualité*, p. 113.

makes truth the condition of liberation. To speak of power, and to want to deny a place to 'liberation' and 'truth', as well as the link between them, is to speak coherently. That is, indeed, the reason why Foucault seems to be contradicting himself in the passages I quoted above (section II). He doesn't just slip into these formulations, which seem to allow for the possibility of a liberation, and indeed, one founded on a puncturing of illusions, a defence founded on 'les corps, les plaisirs, les savoirs, dans leur multiplicité et leur possibilité de résistance'.⁴⁵ He is *driven* into them by the contradictory position he has adopted.⁴⁶

3

In the end, the final basis of Foucault's refusal of 'truth' and 'liberation' seems to be a Nietzschean one. This is not all of Nietzsche; there is more, and not all of it compatible with this part. But at least in the *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* we have a doctrine which Foucault seems to have made his own; there is no order of human life, or way we are, or human nature, that one can appeal to in order to judge or evaluate between ways of life. There are only different orders imposed by men on primal chaos, following their will to power. Foucault espouses both the relativistic thesis from this view, that one cannot judge between forms of life/thought/valuation, and also the notion that these different forms involve the imposition of power. The idea of 'régimes of truth',⁴⁷ and of their close intrication with systems of dominance, is profoundly Nietzschean. In this relationship Foucault sees truth as subordinated to power. Let me quote that passage again more fully:

Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁴⁶ Of course, there is a question whether Foucault isn't trying to have it both ways with his notion of a resistance founded on 'les corps et les plaisirs', on something quite inarticulate, not on an *understanding* of ourselves, or an *articulation* of our desires/purposes. But does this make sense? Can we 'faire valoir contre les prises du pouvoir les corps et les plaisirs ...' (*ibid.*) without articulating them for ourselves, and affirming the truth of that articulation against the specious claims of the system of control? I don't see how. Foucault seems to be talking here out of both sides of his mouth.

⁴⁷ *Power/Knowledge*, p. 131. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

If this is so (true?) in general, it is even more emphatically so in our society:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. This is the case for every society, but I believe that in ours the relationship between power, right and truth is organized in a highly specific fashion... I would say that we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function: we *must* speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess to or discover the truth. Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth; it institutionalizes, professionalizes and rewards its pursuit. In the last analysis, we must produce truth as we must produce wealth...⁴⁹

This regime-relativity of truth means that we cannot raise the banner of truth against our own regime. There can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it be that of another. So that liberation in the name of 'truth' could only be the substitution of another system of power for this one, as indeed the modern course of history has substituted the techniques of control for the royal sovereignty which dominated the seventeenth century.

This position is easy enough to state baldly, but difficult – or impossible – actually to integrate into the logic of one's analytical discourse, as I have just been trying to show in section 2 above. The 'truth' manufactured by power also turns out to be its 'masks' or disguises and hence untruth. The idea of a manufactured or imposed 'truth' inescapably slips the word into inverted commas, and opens the space of a truth-outside-quotes, the kind of truth, for instance, which the sentences unmasking power manifest, or which the sentences expounding the general theory of regime relativity themselves manifest (a paradox).

There has to be a place for revolt/resistance aided by unmasking in a position like Foucault's, and he allows for it. But the general relativity thesis will not allow for liberation through a transformation of power relations. Because of relativity, transformation from one regime to another cannot be a *gain* in truth or freedom, because each is redefined in the new context. They are incomparable. And because of the Nietzschean notion of truth imposed by a regime of power, Foucault cannot envisage liberating transformations *within* a regime. The regime is entirely identified with its imposed truth. Unmasking can only destabilize it; we

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

cannot bring about a new, stable, freer, less mendacious form of it by this route. Foucault's Nietzschean theory can only be the basis of utterly monolithic analyses; which is what we saw above in his failure to recognize the ambivalence of modern disciplines, which are the bases both of domination and self-rule.

And so, for him, unmasking can only be the basis for a kind of local resistance within the regime. In chapter 5 of *Power/Knowledge*, he speaks of rehabilitating subjugated and local knowledges against the established dominant truth. He uses the expression 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges'.⁵⁰ The term bespeaks his basic idea: there is no question of a new form, just of a kind of resistance movement, a set of destabilizing actions, always local specific, within the dominant form. One of Foucault's historical paradigms seems to be the popular riots and uprisings which occurred in the former regimes at some of the execution scenes. Plebeian resistance is a kind of model.

No doubt it would be mistaken to conceive the plebs as the permanent ground of history, the final objective of all subjections, the ever smouldering centre of all revolts. The plebs is no doubt not a real sociological entity. But there is indeed always something in the social body, in classes, groups and individuals themselves which in some sense escapes relations of power, something which is by no means a more or less docile or reactive primal matter, but rather a centrifugal movement, an inverse energy, a discharge. There is certainly no such thing as 'the' plebs; rather there is, as it were, a certain plebeian quality or aspect. There is plebs in bodies, in souls, in individuals, in the proletariat, in the bourgeoisie, but everywhere in a diversity of forms and extensions, of energies and irreducibilities. This measure of plebs is not so much what stands outside relations of power as their limit, their underside, their counter-stroke, that which responds to every advance of power by a movement of disengagement.⁵¹

We can see at least some of the motivation for this espousal of local insurrections. Foucault is deeply suspicious of 'global, totalitarian theories'⁵² which claim to offer the overall solution to our ills. The target, as it must be in the world Foucault inhabits, is of course principally

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 137–8. This idea of political resistance without a positive new vision is parallel to the notion of resistance to the dominant sexuality based on the essentially unarticulated 'bodies and pleasures'. In both cases, the question very much arises whether Foucault can have it both ways. Is there a plebeian resistance which does not at least *point* to an alternative model, even if it may for some reasons be unrealizable in practice? Or if there is, if we can find really mindless insurrections in history, do they really offer us models for our political action?

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Marxism. And one can have a great deal of sympathy for this reaction, in face of the destruction wrought by such global revolutionary schemes. There is a great deal to be said on the Left for a politics which stays close to the local, to lived experience, to the aspirations which groups spontaneously adopt. But this by itself does not determine one to adopt the Nietzschean model of truth, with its relativism and its monolithic analyses. Just because some claims to truth are unacceptable, we do not need to blow the whole conception to pieces.

Something else drives Foucault to Nietzscheanism. I think it will come out if I try to grapple with the central issue around this position. What does this combination of relativism between forms and monolithism of forms leave out? It leaves out – or better, it blocks out – the possibility of a change of life-form which can be understood as a move towards a greater acceptance of truth – and hence also, in certain conditions, a move towards greater freedom. But in order to conceive a change in these terms we have to see the two forms as commensurable; the form before and the form after the change cannot be seen as incommensurable universes. How can this come about?

Biographically, we see examples all the time. After a long period of stress and confusion, I come to see that I really love A, or I really don't want to take that job. I now see retrospectively that the image of myself as quite free and uncommitted had a merely superficial hold on me. It did not correspond to a profound aspiration. It just stood in the way of my recognizing the depths of my commitment to A. Or, the picture of a career which that job instantiated, which seemed before so powerful, so non-gainsayable, turns out to be a model which my entourage was pressing on me, but which I cannot really endorse.

What makes these biographical changes of outlook/life possible, which seem to be steps towards the truth? Our sense of ourselves, of our *identity*, of what we are. I see this change as a discovery of what I am, of what really matters to me. And that is why I do not see this as a kind of character change, what a lobotomy might produce, for instance. Rather I see it as a step towards truth (or perhaps better put, it is a step out of error), and even in certain conditions as a kind of liberation.

Is there nothing comparable in politics/history? There is. There are changes which turn on, which are justified by, what we have become as a society, a civilization. The American revolutionaries called on their compatriots to rise in the name of the liberties which defined their way of life (ironically as Englishmen). This kind of claim is always contested (there were Tories, there were Loyalists, as is well known where I come

from). But is it by its nature unacceptable? Is it always sham? Foucault would have us believe so.

But it seems clear to me that there is a reality here. We have become certain things in Western civilization. Our humanitarianism, our notions of freedom – both personal independence and collective self-rule – have helped to define a political identity we share; and one which is deeply rooted in our more basic, seemingly infra-political understandings: of what it is to be an individual, of the person as a being with 'inner' depths – all the features which seem to us to be rock-bottom, almost biological properties of human beings, so long as we refrain from looking outside and experiencing the shock of encountering other cultures. Of course, these elements of identity are contested; they are not neatly and definitely articulated once and for all, but the subject of perpetual revisionist strife. And worse, they are not all easily compatible – the freedom of independence is hard to combine with that of self-rule, as we constantly experience – and so we fight among ourselves in the name of incompatible weightings. But they all count for us. None of them can be simply repudiated in the political struggle. We struggle over interpretation and weightings, but we cannot shrug them off. They *define* humanity, politics, for us.

This means that we can look at the kind of change Foucault described, from seventeenth-century punishments to our own, in a way which renders them partly commensurable. It is not for nothing that we are the descendants and heirs of the people who so tortured Damiens. The makings of our present stress on the significance of life were already there, in that Christian civilization. One of the important features of their world, which made them act so differently, was their sense of belonging to a cosmic order in which the polity was set. But *this* difference cannot be seen purely in a relativist light. One of the reasons why we can no longer believe in this kind of order is the advance in our civilization of a scientific understanding of the natural world, which we have every reason to believe represents a significant gain of truth. Some dimensions at least of the 'disenchantment' which helps share modern culture represent an advance in the truth. To the extent that this change is operative, we can understand our difference from them as a change that denizens of Western Christendom have undergone under the impact of a stronger dose of truth.

Of course, this is not *all*. We can also discern losses. Indeed, Foucault ought perhaps best to be interpreted as having documented some of these losses. The growth of modern control has involved in some respects a dehumanization, an inability to understand and respond to some key

this false turn into Western culture. Where the ancient 'care of the self' was preoccupied rather with purity and self-renunciation. From that moment on the self was no longer something to be made but something to be renounced and deciphered.⁵⁴

Foucault's project seems to be to return to these ancient sources, not in order to revive them – even if this were possible, he believes there is lots to criticize in ancient culture on other grounds – but as the point of departure for a different line of development. This would bring us to a conception of the good life as a kind of self-making, related in this way to the ancient 'aesthetic of existence'⁵⁵ that one would make one's own life a work of art. . . . the principal work of art one has to take care of, the main area to which one has to apply aesthetic values is oneself, one's life, one's existence.⁵⁶

It is understandable how Foucault, from the standpoint of an ethic of this kind, should want to distance himself from the banners of 'freedom' and 'truth', since these have been the key terms in the view he is repudiating, that we ought to bring to light our true nature or deep self. And the affinity with Nietzsche in the stress on self-making is very understandable also. But this in no way lessens the paradox involved in the attempt to avoid these terms altogether. Indeed, in offering us a new way of re-appropriating our history, and in rescuing us from the supposed illusion that the issues of the deep self are somehow inescapable, what is Foucault laying open for us, if not a truth which frees us for self-making?

Perhaps Foucault was moving, before his sudden and premature death, to free his position from this paradox, seemingly linked with the impossible attempt to stand nowhere. Perhaps we can see the last work⁵⁷ as a step towards and acknowledgement of his own sources, an identification of the moments when these sources were lost or obscured (the rise of Christian spirituality), and a definition of what we have to undo to rescue what needs saving. At that point, the really interesting debate can begin, on the issues which count, which Foucault's mode of expression up to now has obscured. There are two such issues, which it is worth tabling for future discussions. (1) Can we really step outside the identity we have developed in Western civilization to such a degree that we can repudiate all that comes to us from the Christian understanding of the will? Can we toss aside the whole tradition of Augustinian inwardness? (2) Granted we really can set this aside, is the resulting 'aesthetic of existence' all that admirable? These

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 248. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 251. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 245. ⁵⁷ *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris, 1984), vol. 2, *L'Usage des plaisirs*, and vol. 3, *Le Souci de soi*.

features of the human context, those which are suppressed in a stance of thoroughgoing instrumental reason. That is why there is such a malaise in our civilization: so much groaning and travelling to recover what is lost, all the way from the Romantic period down to the most recent battles over ecology. But the point is that the sense both of gain and of loss depends on comparability, on our understanding of our identity, of what we now realize more fully, or are betraying and mutilating.

Gains and losses do not tell the whole story. There are also elements of incomparability. The reality of history is mixed and messy. The problem is that Foucault tidies it up too much, makes it into a series of hermetically sealed, monolithic truth-regimes, a picture which is as far from reality as the blandest Whig perspective of smoothly broadening freedom. Monolithism and relativism are two sides of the same coin. One is as necessary as the other to create this total incomparability across the

changes of history. Foucault's monolithic relativism only seems plausible if one takes the outsider's perspective, the view from Sirius; or perhaps imagines oneself a soul in Plato's myth of Er. Do I want to be born a Sung dynasty Chinese, or a subject of Hammurabi of Babylon, or a twentieth-century American? Without a prior identity, I couldn't begin to choose. They incarnate incommensurable goods (at least prior to some deep comparative study, and conceivably even after this). But this is not my/our situation. We have already become something. Questions of truth and freedom can arise for us in the transformations we undergo or project. In short, we have a history. We live in time not just self-enclosed in the present, but essentially related to a past which has helped define our identity, and a future which puts it again in question.

And indeed, in his major works, like *Les Mots et les choses* and *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault sounds as though he believed that, as an historian, he could stand nowhere, identifying with none of the *epistémè* or structures of power whose coming and going he impartially surveys. But there are signs that this is not his last word. It would appear that Foucault is going to elaborate in forthcoming publications his own conception of a good life.

From certain indications,⁵⁸ this would seem to be based, as one would expect, on a rejection of the whole idea that we have a deep self or nature which we have to decipher. Foucault thinks that Christianity introduced

⁵⁸ See the new chapters in the second edition of Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, 1983).

questions are hard to separate, and even harder to answer. But they are among the most fundamental raised by the admirable work of Michel Foucault.

PART II

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY