

study of the effects of computerization on contemporary culture, Jean-François Lyotard argued that the information revolution, like Revel's counterculture, had rendered obsolete all the previous "metanarratives" through which Westerners had tried to make sense of their history. At the same time, Philippe Sollers claimed that the United States was "on the edge of the new reason" (*The Kristeva Reader*, 16), and Julia Kristeva wondered whether American society was not "the perfect closure . . . , social finality reached" once and for all: "Is completed capitalism," she asked in *Polylogue*, "opening up a new historical cycle?" (514). Postmodernism, the name for the new frontier, the new reason, the new time-space of the conquest of knowledge, was to become, in the eyes of many French intellectuals, a synonym of America just as modernity and its discontents had been in a previous era.

## (RUNNING) OUT OF HISTORY



Our age—whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or through Nietzsche—is attempting to flee Hegel. But truly to escape Hegel . . . assumes that we are aware of the extent to which Hegel, insidiously perhaps, is close to us. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us. *Michel Foucault*

Santayana was entirely free of the instinctive American conviction that the westering of the spirit ends here—that whatever the ages have labored to bring forth will emerge between Massachusetts and California, that our philosophers have only to express our national genius for the human spirit to fulfill itself . . . Santayana saw us as one more great empire in the long parade. *Richard Rorty*

Rather than ask why Americans lack a "sense of history," we can now as well ask why Europeans have the particular sense of it that they do. *Myra Fehlen*

The changes in aesthetic and political mood now labeled "postmodernism" have led to a renewed interest in American culture, once again seen, in a much more positive light this time, as the herald of things to come. In the early 1960s, the few voices from the French liberal Right or from Christian Democratic quarters that rose in defense of American democracy, voices such as Raymond Aron's, were drowned in the concert of violent protests and demonstrations against U.S. imperialism. Within a few years, however, one witnessed political realignments and ideological reversals of stunning magnitude and perplexing character. The diffusion of the American counterculture and the waning of "dogmatic" Marxism as the legitimate theoretical horizon of the intellectual Left gave rise, almost overnight, to a new brand of pro-Americanism, often within the same *cénacles* that had so vehemently criticized the "system" and its alienating mass culture a few years earlier. Favorable accounts of American society, such as those I dis-

cussed in the previous chapter, celebrated the social and cultural diversity of the United States, especially in California, and described it as the only alternative to bureaucratic socialism and Western European decadence.

Meanwhile, the growing skepticism of the cultural Left for *le socialisme réel* in Paris and Stockholm as well as in Moscow and Beijing, made room for the return of previously repressed, or silenced, ideologies and intellectual traditions: pre-Marxist and anti-Marxist discourses surfaced again in fashionable Parisian intellectual reviews. Kant, Tocqueville, and Aron replaced Marx, Nietzsche, and Sartre as legitimate *maîtres-penseurs*. While some praised economic liberalism and "the Reagan revolution" in neoconservative rhetoric, others took another long look at the Tocquevillian paradigm, adapting it to the new social and cultural developments in Western democracies.<sup>1</sup>

These ideological developments were accompanied by dramatic changes in aesthetics and theories of representation. As Fredric Jameson pointed out, postmodernism is characterized by a form of aesthetic populism, based on an intense fascination for the very forms of mass culture that were so vehemently rejected twenty years ago as *société du spectacle* or *one-dimensional society*. Jean Baudrillard's recent book on the United States (*America*), as well as Gilles Lipovetsky's celebration of consumerism, the media, advertising, and fashion as truly democratic phenomena, underscore the new status of mass consumption for some contemporary French theorists. Lipovetsky contends that "the process of personalization constantly reinforces the demand for freedom, choice, pluralism and creates an individual who is relaxed, tolerant and open to differences" (*L'Ere du vide*, 145). The development of narcissism goes hand in hand with democracy, the two processes harmoniously reinforcing each other: "As narcissism develops, democratic legitimacy wins over, even if it is in a cool mode; democratic regimes with their plurality of parties, their elections, their right to opposition and information are more and more closely linked to the personalized society of self-service, testing and combinatory freedom" (145).

Numerous recent French interpretations of contemporary America have been marked by what Jameson has described as "an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc.)" (53). In that respect, the notion of the "end of history," central to many French philosophical and literary versions of our present cultural situation, from Kojève and Blanchot to Bataille and Klossowski, seems a

very useful tool for the understanding of postmodern readings of American culture.<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, commenting on George Bataille's work, wondered in *L'Entretien infini*:

Should not we say that, as of now, history is coming to an end? Which does not mean that nothing will ever happen, or that man will not have to bear the pain and ignorance of the future; but man as universal has already mastered all the categories of knowledge, he can do everything and has an answer for everything. For everyone, in one form or another, history is running out (in all but the outcome). (quoted in Descombes, 113)

Similar considerations on the end of history can be found in many French studies of contemporary life in the United States, although these interpretations often disagree over the moral or political evaluation of America's alleged flight from history.

### Neo-Hegelianism: The Animalization of Man

In his influential commentary on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Alexandre Kojève referred to the United States as a posthistorical society. Recent studies of the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* stress the importance of the notion of the end of history in Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. For Vincent Descombes, "The 'end of history' is none other than the translation into figural and narrative language of what in the language of philosophy is known as absolute knowledge" (27). Absolute knowledge, understood as the "science of the *identity* of subject and object" (Descombes, 27) is possible only because history, the temporal process through which the Hegelian idea gradually became conscious of itself, has reached an end. "The historical condition for writing the System of science," as the Hegel scholar Barry Cooper remarks, "was that all human potentialities had been fulfilled, that history was over" (77). The reconciliation of spirit and history gives rise to a posthistorical regime, the "universal and homogeneous state," which Hegel, as we know, identified with the Napoleonic state. In such a regime, the contradictions and the conflicts that were the engine of European history are forever overcome. To quote Descombes again, "The end of history would be the end of adversity, the term which adequately translates Hegel's *Gegenständlichkeit*" (28).

In Kojève's view, the contradiction between man and nature as well as the opposition between man and man are overcome in the posthistorical regime. Absolute knowledge, according to Kojève, "is possible only (1) within a *homogeneous* and *universal* State where no man is *exterior* to an-

other, where there is no social *opposition* which is not suppressed, and (2) in the midst of a Nature that has been *tamed* by the labour of Man, and which, no longer *opposing* Man, ceases to be alien to him" (quoted in Descombes 28). "Man," deprived of his purely human, that is, historical, characteristics, which have now become useless, returns to animality, to the organic eternity of the state of nature. The disappearance of man at the end of history, however, constitutes neither a "cosmic catastrophe" (since "the natural world remains what it has been from all eternity") nor a biological one ("Man remains alive as animal in *harmony* with Nature or given Being"). Kojève remarks that "what disappears is Man properly so-called—that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or in general, the subject *opposed* to the object. Practically, this means: the disappearance of . . . *Philosophy*; for since Man himself no longer changes essentially, there is no longer any reason to change the (true) principles which are at the basis of his understanding of the world and of himself. But all the rest can be preserved indefinitely; art, love, play, etc., etc.; in short, everything that makes man *happy*" (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 158–59). In the end of history, then, there is nothing left to do. Man as negativity, negation of the given by way of thought (philosophy) and action, has lost his *raison d'être*, since there is nothing left to negate. Only the positive reconciliation of being with itself remains, an eternity of play, desire, and, as in the Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of happiness. "Nature survives time" (Kojève, 158).

Is there any concrete, empirical evidence of the death of man as subject of history and of the coming of the rational state? Which social formations, political regimes, or economic systems can be said to actualize the end of history? The *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, although a meditation *on* history, is obviously not a work *of* history. Even if Kojève's purpose was to define the essence and "self-understanding" of modernity (Cooper), he gave us very little in the way of empirical evidence of the posthistorical regime. In a footnote to the second edition of the *Introduction*, written in the early 1960s, Kojève alluded to the return to animality in the end of history. He self-critically questioned his previous assertion that "art, love, play, etc." will survive the annihilation of the historical (i.e., cultural) subject. "Such a view," he acknowledged, "is self-contradictory," since these practices and behaviors are themselves products of human culture:

If Man becomes an animal again, his arts, his loves, and his play must also become purely "natural" again. Hence it would have to be admitted that after the end of History, men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their

webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts. But one cannot say that all this "makes Man happy." One would have to say that post-historical animals of the species *Homo sapiens* (which will live amidst abundance and complete security) will be *content* as a result of their artistic, erotic and playful behavior, inasmuch as, by definition, they will be contented with it. (159)

The return to animality also implies the disappearance of "discourse" or "logos," that is, of human language and signification, which will be replaced by a system of "vocal signals or sign language" similar to the "language of bees." Such a possibility, far from being the construct of pure philosophical speculation, already existed, for Kojève, in contemporary America. This note from the second edition shows the evolution of Kojève's thought on the universal and homogeneous state. In 1946 the return to animality appeared only as "a prospect for the future (more or less near)." Kojève understood soon after (in 1948) that "the Hegelian-Marxist end of History was not yet to come, but was already present, here and now . . . in the North American extensions of Europe. One can even say that, from a certain point of view, the United States has already attained the final stage of Marxist 'communism,' seeing that, practically, all the members of a 'classless society' can from now on appropriate for themselves everything that seems good to them, without thereby working any more than their heart dictates" (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 160). These considerations of America as the true embodiment of Marx's classless society are a forerunner of subsequent French writings on the "affluent society" or its counterculture as the only revolutionary alternatives to communism (Revel, Morin).

In Kojève's understanding, communist and Third World societies no longer constitute viable alternatives to the "animalization" of the human world. They are only "backward civilizations of the peripheral provinces" and "anachronistic sequels of a pre-revolutionary past," on their way to the unavoidable end of history. "If the Americans give the appearance of rich Sino-Soviets, it is because the Russians and the Chinese are only Americans who are still poor but are rapidly proceeding to get richer" (160). Having traveled extensively in America and the Soviet Union during the 1950s, Kojève had come to the conclusion that the "American way of life" is "the type of life specific to the post-historical period, the actual presence of the United States in the World prefiguring the 'eternal present' future of all humanity. Thus, Man's return to animality appeared no longer as a

possibility that was yet to come, but as a certainty that was already present" (161).

As late as 1958, Kojève thought that American society was the striking confirmation of the truth of Hegelian philosophy. The observation of contemporary social formations and the study of history had led him to believe that the battle of Jena (1806), which marked for Hegel the beginning of the end, was indeed the turning point of human history and the founding event of our modernity. "In and by this battle the vanguard of humanity virtually attained the limit and the aim, that is, the *end*, of Man's historical evolution. What has happened since then was but an extension in space of the universal revolutionary force actualized in France by Robespierre-Napoleon" (160). In such a perspective, the various events of modernity—world wars and revolutions, communism or national socialism—cannot make up a *history*. They are not oriented toward any future, they do not create anything new. They are nothing but the unfolding of absolute knowledge, the enactment of the necessary "elimination of the numerous more or less anachronistic sequels of [Europe's] pre-revolutionary past" (160). Thus, the time-space of (post)modernity is duration without becoming, allowing archaic societies and cultures to catch up with America, conceived as the paradigm of posthistorical regimes.<sup>3</sup>

Kojève did not say much about the empirical conditions of the death of man as signifying historical subject. What sort of relations, certainly no longer "social," exist between "the post-historical animals of the species *Homo Sapiens*"? What are the consequences of the disappearance of "any discursive understanding of the World and of self"? If the utopia of a world rid of meaning and war already exists, what are the concrete signs of its existence? What is the moral and philosophical status of the becoming-animal of humanity? Are we to revel in it and celebrate, armed with such a "gay science," the advent of nihilism and the end of belief? Or are we to lament it and consider the type of society where people can "appropriate for themselves everything that seems good to them" as the supreme alienation of humanity, a nightmare akin to that of "repressive desublimation"? Kojève never answered these questions and eventually renounced his original perception of American society as the unfolding of the end of history.

After a trip to Japan in 1959, he had, he wrote, "a radical change of opinion on this point" (161). The Japanese "post-historical way" based on the institutionalization of *snobbery*, far from being, like the American way, a return to animality, struck him on the contrary as a particular form of the negation of nature, although devoid of any meaningful content. Japanese snobbery, by way of "disciplines negating the 'natural' or 'animal' given,"

such as the No theater, the tea ceremony, or the "gratuitous" suicide of the samurai, were said to generate "totally *formalized* values," devoid of any "human," namely historical, content. The human being of the Japanese posthistory is neither the for-itself of prerevolutionary history nor the "animal of the species *Homo Sapiens*" of the American version of the end of history: the snob remains human, that is, a negating freedom, but his/her negativity only creates empty, meaningless, morally indifferent forms, which can receive any value and accept any content:

As I said in the above Note, an "animal that is in *harmony* with Nature or given Being" is a *living* being that is in no way human. To remain human, Man must remain a "Subject *opposed* to the Object," even if "Action negating the given and Error" disappear. This means that, while henceforth speaking in an *adequate* fashion of everything that is given to him, post-historical Man must continue to *detach* "form" from "content," doing so no longer in order actively to transform the latter, but so that he may *oppose* himself as a pure "form" to himself and to others taken as "content" of any sort. (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 162)

Such an extreme aesthetic formalization of self, pure (gratuitous) opposition to the "given," is, in the Kojevian perception of postmodernity, the only cultural practice now available to human beings, since history, as transformation of the world and moral activity, is totally finished. "Detachment" (of form and content) is the last chance to save man as subject of history, the only alternative to the (American) return to animality, now seen as negative, undesirable, and barbaric, when opposed to the Japanese model of posthistoricity. Luckily, we are headed in that direction. The duration without becoming, which constitutes our present, will make posthistorical human beings out of us, snobs saved by aestheticism. "The recently begun interaction between Japan and the Western World will finally lead not to a rebarbarization of the Japanese but to a "japanization" of the Westerners, including the Russians" (162).

The end of history, whether it is a becoming-snob or a becoming-animal of the human species is, in any case, an ambiguous event. Kojève's conception of America as a classless affluent society should not be confused with the apology of the "free world" or of "the end of ideologies" by contemporary liberal heirs to the optimistic, rationalistic side of Hegelianism. The Kojevian version of the end of history is more reminiscent of the apocalypse. It is a strange tribute to Western (and Christian) history to say that it finds its final meaning and salvation in the most aestheticized of all the cultures of the Orient. Is not the "Japanized" Westerner's aristocratic

formalism a paradoxical outcome of the unfolding of absolute reason through history? Kojève's reading leads to a disenchanted and ambiguous Hegelianism, at odds with the triumphant, prophetic vision of the sage (himself the incarnation of the spirit), who wrote of the universal and homogeneous state that "it is the march of God through the world, its ground is the power of reason realizing itself as will. . . . The state must be regarded as a great architectonic edifice, a hieroglyph of reason, manifesting itself in reality" (Hegel, *Selections*, 443, 450). Michel Foucault once observed that "our age—whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or Nietzsche—is attempting to flee Hegel" ("Orders of Discourse," 28). One thing is certain: we cannot read Hegel today as his contemporaries read him, after Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, two world wars, Stalin's state socialism, and the Third Reich. As Vincent Descombes has remarked, the notion of the end of history leads to two antagonistic and incompatible interpretations of our present situation:

The end of history is indeed the triumph of meaning, as Hegelians believe. It may be final reconciliation, universal recognition or even, in certain versions, a generalized embrace (or simply the embrace of the real by the thinker alone); in any case, a higher synthesis, the annihilation of the negative in a victorious negation of the negation, the presence of truth and the truth of presence. However, it is also the apogee of non-meaning. For there is nothing left to be done (therefore all action is absurd), nor anything left to be said (therefore all speech is insignificant). At the end of history, the human species enters into an irremediable idleness, an aimlessness without end. (*Modern French Philosophy*, 21)

The second interpretation leads to nihilism, to the disappearance of philosophy and of human culture, replaced by something like "the language of bees" or by the value-free formalism of aesthetic snobbery. Hence the influence of Kojève's philosophy on Nietzsche's French readers, from Bataille and Blanchot to Klossowski.<sup>4</sup> Because of its ambivalence, Kojève's reading of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, after contributing to the Hegelian turn of French philosophy in the 1950s (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Hypolite), outlived the anti-Hegelian stance of the 1960s and inspired the subsequent debates on the "death of man" and the "postmodern condition." In his preface to the English edition of the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Allan Bloom, remarking on the decidedly Nietzschean flavor of Kojève's posthistorical universe, wrote that "one wonders whether the citizen of the universal homogeneous state is not identical to Nietzsche's Last Man, and whether Hegel's historicism does not by an inevitable dialectic

force us to a more somber and more radical historicism which rejects reason. . . . We are led to a confrontation between Hegel and Nietzsche" (xi-xii).

### *Zarathustra Revisited: The Land of the Last Man*

The reference to Nietzsche, and especially to Zarathustra's "last man" as the ultimate product of nihilism, is a constant in the Right's depiction of the United States. For example, in their essay on America published in *Nouvelle École*, Herte and Nigra refer to the often quoted passage from the prologue of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as an illustration of America's materialistic, egalitarian, and antiauthoritarian culture:

"We have discovered happiness"—say the last men, and blink thereby. They have left the regions where it is hard to live; for they need warmth. . . . One still worketh, for work is a pastime. But one is careful lest the pastime should hurt one. One no longer becometh poor or rich; both are too burdensome. Who still wanteth to rule? Who still wanteth to obey? Both are too burdensome. No shepherd, and one herd! Everyone wanteth the same; everyone is equal: he who hath other sentiments goeth voluntarily into the madhouse. . . . "We have discovered happiness," say the last men, and blink thereby. (Herte and Nigra, 12)

European right-wing critics of American democracy have never had difficulty with the paradoxical nature of post-Hegelian philosophy. That the optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment has given way to the nihilism of the "one-dimensional" society is no wonder to them. What they see as the present decadence of American society is the normal consequence of the precedence of bourgeois utilitarian values over the aristocratic ideals of predemocratic times. They are naturally led to emphasize the differences between the cultures of Europe and America, the latter being seen as a radical departure from aristocratic values and representations. "America was born out of the refusal of Europe, the hatred of Europe, a desire for revenge over Europe" (Herte and Nigra, 10). Ironically, the French radical Right's emphasis on discontinuity and distance between Europe and America mirrors the American national ideology expressed at the time of the American Revolution. In his *First Inaugural Address* (1801), Jefferson congratulated the citizens of the new nation for "having banished from our land the religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered" and for being "kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe" (333). Philip Freneau expressed the same relief in a more poetic manner:

By persecution wronged,  
 And sacerdotal rage, our fathers came  
 From Europe's hostile shores to these abodes,  
 Here to enjoy a liberty and faith,  
 Secure from tyranny and base control.  
 For this they left their country and their friends  
 And dared the Atlantic wave in quest of peace. (61)

In total agreement as to the essential difference between both cultures, the two nationalistic discourses differ absolutely, of course, as to their evaluation. While the American patriots applied the diagnosis of corruption and inhumanity to the feudal tyranny of Europe, the right-wing ideologues, heirs to an antidemocratic tradition that extends, in France, from Bossuet and Maistre to Charles Maurras, attribute all the symptoms of decadence to the egalitarianism of the children of the "Rousseauian and Jeffersonian rabble." The reference is, here again, to Nietzsche, and specifically to his contemptuous criticism of English culture and philosophy in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

They are not a philosophical race—the English: Bacon represents an *attack* on the philosophical spirit generally, Hobbes, Hume, and Locke, an abasement, and a depreciation of the idea of a "philosopher" for more than a century. It was *against* Hume that Kant uprose and raised himself; it was Locke of whom Schelling *rightly* said, "*Je méprise Locke*"; in the struggle against the English mechanical multification of the world, Hegel and Schopenhauer (along with Goethe) were of one accord. . . . What is lacking in England, and has always been lacking, that half-actor and rhetorician knew well enough, the absurd muddle-head, Carlyle, who sought to conceal under passionate grimaces what he knew about himself: namely what was *lacking* in Carlyle—real *power* of intellect, real *depth* of intellectual perception, in short, philosophy. (188)

One of the most common European perceptions of American society is that "Americans do not have a past." The story of the millionaire who bought a bridge in London and had it rebuilt stone by stone in the Arizona desert is often quoted as evidence of the Americans' yearning for history, as well as of their capitalistic ability to turn the most sacred monuments of the past into mere commodities. The relationship of American culture to time and history is one of its most distinctive elements. In the European conservative tradition, the aristocratic ethos, based on an acute awareness of continuity in time, rests on the superiority of tradition over progress,

values old age, experience, and the sacred, and sees race, ethnicity (*Volk*), and community as the foundation of social order: quality is what endures. On the contrary, American positivistic materialism favors quantity over quality, idealizes youth and novelty, and equates freedom with the rejection of the past.

This set of values is precisely what distinguishes a mere *culture* from a genuine *civilization*: "Optimism and the belief in progress give rise to the idea of *instant consumption*. Since yesterday can never be as good as today, and today never as good as tomorrow, the American is *indifferent to the past*, for the past, with its traditions, its culture, its roots, etc., has no meaning for him; it is wordless. (To admit that the past could be superior to the present is contradictory to the idea of progress. . . . The predilection for instant consumption, without any regard for the perspective which includes it (for the heritage one has received, for example, and that one is in charge of transmitting), explains why historicist modes of thought have never taken hold in the United States" (Herte and Nigra, 65). American culture is unable to put time in perspective, reducing, for Alain de Benoist, the tri-dimensionality of time to one-dimensionality, "making all men coincide as best as possible within the same dimension of simultaneity. . . . The American unconscious . . . rests on a mystique of space (the idea that, behind *the frontier*, there always is more space to *exploit*), as opposed to a mystique of time" (*Vu de droite*, 398).

The inability to think in historical terms (and to produce philosophies of history) is here clearly related to the materialistic ethos of a capitalist society based on the instant gratification of mass consumption. The American denial of the past as history is also perceived as a refusal of history as future, as time to come:

The Americans do not want to have a past. . . . They do not want either to give the future any *form* which could create for them something like a *destiny*. They only want a present, a succession of present instants, which they can enjoy now, in accordance with the Declaration of Independence which guarantees their "right" to the "pursuit of happiness." Hence this idea of horizontal happiness which Nietzsche attributes to the "last men." (Herte and Nigra, 65).

Friedrich Sieburg used to say: "Politics is destiny." America does not want to have a destiny. It does not have any will to power, it only has a will to end history. (45)

The inability to think in historical terms is also an incapacity to act in history, to pursue a historical project. At first glance, such a claim seems to run counter to most European criticisms of American imperialism and the

doctrine of Manifest Destiny. For the essayists of *Nouvelle École*, however, the American mission, because it is conceived in *moral* terms, is the exact opposite of realpolitik and, therefore, doomed to failure: "Since *historical politics* of any kind require a project, the United States, having no such project, aspire to be (and already are) the *least historical* nation in the world" (84). To support their argument, our authors quote André Malraux, de Gaulle's minister of culture, thereby referring to another important component of French nationalism, namely the Gaullist tradition:

During an interview published in *L'Appel* (January–February 1975), M. André Malraux . . . could not help but comment on such an "absence of American historical politics." "If America had a political project," he said, "it should normally be to conquer the world. In fact, this is not the case. The United States find themselves in the strange situation of a country which has become the most powerful in the world without having really wanted to be so. All in all, they wanted to sell sewing machines. . . . Historical willpower in the old sense of the word, would be, for the Americans, to think the American problem in terms of the whole world. Alexander the Great, Richelieu, Frederic II did just that, although confronted with much smaller worlds. The difference is obvious. (84)

In *Discours de la décadence* (1978), his most violently anti-American pamphlet, the French writer and polemicist Jean Cau, who was Sartre's secretary in the 1950s before espousing more conservative views, also relies on Gaullist principles to denounce America's exile from history: "The United States has no sense of History. No vision haunts this huge soft young body, no mission capable of entering the souls of the other peoples of the West, scarred by the past, by miseries, hopes, memories and—in a word—by History. The United States [is] a 'thing' without a past and hence without a future, a mass floating above the 20th century" (156–157). Ironically enough, the only "white" nation still capable of reversing the decadence of the West and of remaining, through an act of political will, "master of history," is the Soviet Union, protected by socialism from the fatal contamination of liberal capitalism: "Here is the fundamental question: what is [the Americans'] vision of the world? The answer is that, if they have any, it leads to a form of *mondialisme* [globalism] which will destroy us all while Russian *mondialisme* does not exclude *what seems to me to be essential for our salvation*: a form of nationalism. . . . Europe no longer makes history. . . . Russian nationalism is the last barrier against American *mondialisme*" (176).

The outcome of the Vietnam War was for Alain de Benoist (in 1975) the latest illustration of America's lack of historical willpower. "America

never wanted to win . . . and what would have been the *meaning* of a victory, when there was no goal? The Russians, today, know what they want. The Chinese, today, know what they want. The Europeans barely know what they do not want. The Americans do not want anything" (*Les Idées à l'endroit*, 264). The problem is not that the United States is imperialistic (as left-wing critics of American foreign policy would argue) but that theirs is the wrong kind of imperialism, economic rather than political (and ideological). Always fond of references to ancient times, Alain de Benoist sees the United States not as the new Rome, but as the new Carthage: "They talk a lot about 'imperialism' these days. But there are no longer any empires. *Imperium* is will, first and foremost. The Soviet Union, most of all America, derive their strength less from any kind of will as from their sheer *weight*. To be the distant subjects—even the mercenaries—of a new Rome, that would not be so bad. But America is not a new Rome. It is a new Carthage. As for us, *Graeculi* that we are, for want of a European Fichte, we are expecting a Cato" (271).

The internationalization of capitalistic modes of production and exchange facilitates the worldwide diffusion of American material culture and hastens the death of genuine Western (i.e., European) civilization. *Mondialisme*, as a process of relentless standardization of all cultures and traditions, is the latest version of the *philosophes'* ideals of universality. The inevitable outcome of the internationalization of American ways is the end of history: Cau says, "*Mondialisme*—in which our highest achievement . . . i.e., History affirmed and lived as will, would perish—is the only horizon conceivable for the United States. Not as History (by definition *mondialisme* is antihistorical) but as fatality" (*Discours de la décadence*, 165). The Nietzschean overtones of this gloomy prophecy, centered on the definition of history as will, are obvious. But the antidemocratic interpretation of American decadence can also lead to a Hegelian reading of postmodernity in many ways similar to Kojève's posthistorical universe.

The homogenization of thoughts, tastes, and behaviors by mass production and mass consumption leads to a systematic erasure of all differences between individuals and cultures: *mondialisme* becomes a form of totality by way of the reduction of multiplicity to the one. "The Americans do not consider their country as a nation similar to the other nations (in fact it is not even a nation at all), but as the model of a universal and cosmopolitan republic, called to *actualize*, in the spirit of the biblical virtues of 'justice' and 'peace' and according to the pattern of the American way of life, *the reduction of the world to unity*" (Herte and Nigra, 94). The combined ideals of the melting pot and of Manifest Destiny are seen as aiming at the

gradual expulsion of the Other, of forms of thought or behavior which stand outside (or beyond) universal rationality, in the same way as Kojève's Hegelian universal and homogeneous state reconciled, by overcoming them, all differences and all contradictions in the atemporal truth of absolute knowledge. According to Herte and Nigra, "At the same time as he professes his isolationism, the American feels compelled to propagate in the world the great principles of the *American way of life*. The society in which he lives seems so excellent to him that he cannot conceive one could go *beyond*. He does not only believe in universal judgment, he also believes in paradise on earth. Without knowing it, he is somewhat Hegelian: to him, *stars and stripes* America is the completion, the 'splendid' end of history" (44).

The fact that it is not a nation (that is "not the country of any people," as Alain de Benoist puts it) constitutes the major flaw of the United States in the eyes of French nationalists. The French are often characterized by their ability to perceive a historical continuity in the political and cultural expressions of their national identity, continuity ensured primarily through the time-honored odyssey of the French (literary) language. National politics are inseparable from a politics of the language (*une politique de la langue*) embodied in institutions such as the Académie Française, the Panthéon (where prominent literary prophets are buried alongside with heads of state), or the Ministry of Culture. In Alain de Benoist's words "a nation sanctions a people's homogeneity. America, cosmopolitan by calling, is the living negation of *all* specificities, insofar as it aspired from the start to prefigure the future universal Republic" (*Les Idées à l'endroit*, 268).

We are reminded here of the distinction Norbert Elias makes between (French and English) civilization and (German) culture in *The Civilizing Process*: "The notion of civilization expresses the self-assurance of peoples whose national boundaries and national identity have been so fully established that they have ceased to be the subject of any particular discussion, peoples who have long expanded outside their borders and colonized beyond them. . . . The concept of *Kultur* mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation which had constantly to seek out and constitute its boundaries anew, in a political as well as in a spiritual sense, and again and again to ask itself: 'What is our real identity?'" (6). What is true of Germany is a fortiori true of the United States—it is a federal republic made up of historically rival regional entities and peopled by races and ethnic groups from every corner of the globe.

For the right-wing critics, American intellectual and political elites, contrary to their French or British counterparts, cannot turn to an ances-

tral, homogeneous cultural tradition to assert their national identity. Nothing, Alain de Benoist argues, can unify Americans "in the superior sense" of the term, since they have nothing in common other than a deep contempt for the historical European nations they chose to secede from. The lowest common denominator of American identity can only be reached in the material level, in the form of a "technomorphy" which destroys the diversity of the world. "What can the *newcomers* of the American nation have in common besides the Bible, the Constitution, a taste for the dollar and the worship of *standing*?" (264). "In a country where the Constitution sets as a goal for society 'the pursuit of happiness,' the people can only long for the end of history through the coming of 'prosperous communism'" (268).

The cosmopolitanism of American society (which in the writings of the new Right, conjures up memories of another culture reviled for its alleged cosmopolitanism, the Jewish one) can also work as a *positive* trait in the eyes of all the modernist admirers of a country that they insist in still viewing as a successful melting pot, open to worldwide diversity and the spearhead of a multinational liberal revolution. Not all French critics of the United States, however, buy into this idea of the fundamental cosmopolitan character of American culture, whether viewed positively or not. They are quick to point out, as does Régis Debray, for example, the difficulty in stressing the lack of "nationalism" of a country in which "every morning, schoolchildren swear allegiance to the stars-and-stripes while singing God Bless America, with one hand on their hearts," a country which "at the slightest opportunity bedecks its streets and houses with giant flags, and turns a parodic ethnocentrism into the measure of everything" (*Les Empires contre L'Europe*, 130). Debray goes on to qualify American patriotism as "the most powerful national egotism which the world has ever known" (130).

The divergent views of the French intelligentsia on the question of the national or transnational character of American society stems, once again, from the paradoxical, and highly specific, relationship Americans have with their past. Almost forty years ago, Daniel Boorstin argued in *The Genius of American Politics* that Americans tend to view their beliefs and values as always already "given" to them by their physical circumstances and history and, accordingly, in no need of justification or correction by theoretical and ideological abstractions. This explains both the pragmatism with which the culture regards its achievements (viewed as the product of "experience") and the high idealism with which it worships its sacred political and geographical origins, that is, the Constitution and "the land"

(seen as unchallengeable and transhistorical). At the same time, however, Americans are acutely aware of the fact that, unlike Asians or Europeans, whose civilizations go back to the dawn of time, their national "experience" starts at a specific historical, and not mythical, moment in duration.

The paradox is that history is only important inasmuch as it serves to highlight the ahistorical, transcendent value of the first principles of political and social life, as "codified" by the Pilgrims and the Founding Fathers. "While the temper of much of our thought has been antihistorical," Boorstin remarks, "it is nevertheless true that we have leaned heavily on history to clarify our image of ourselves" (11). Boorstin challenges the European perception that Americans have no tradition of cultural continuity. On the contrary, he claims, they share a strong belief in the homogeneity of their history. "It is the quality of our experience which makes us see our national past as an uninterrupted continuum of similar events, so that our past merges undistinguishably with our present" (10). That is why Americans insist on seeing the Founding Fathers as their contemporaries, thereby collapsing historicity into the very "simultaneity" Alain de Benoist finds so offending. This also explains why they see no wrong with recreating life in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries in perfect replicas of the past sold in theme parks and "historic" villages for tourists.

Turning the tables on the Europeans, Boorstin counters that it is *their* history which is profoundly *discontinuous*, made up of a succession of social arrangements and political regimes born of revolution and conquest. Nationalism in European countries is always the product of a political decision, of an ideological fiat, which constructs the succession of differences and foreign influences into a commonly assumed past, read through traditionalist or progressivist lenses. Europeans, consequently, fail to perceive that American patriotism, unable to root itself in the nonexistent common cultural past of immigrant groups from all continents of the globe, rests on the commonality of space, the sharing of the "givenness" of the blessings of the land. Aldous Huxley shrewdly perceived this fundamental difference between the two types of national identification when he wrote that "the greatest charm of foreign travel is the very high ratio of European history to European geography. Conversely, for the European, who has come to feel the oppressive weight of a doubtless splendid, but often fatal past, the greatest charm of travel in the New World is the high ratio of its geography to its history" (quoted in Boorstin, 31).

American national identity is rooted in the American way of life, which, in turn, can be interpreted as the domination of religion (over historically specific religions), or of materialism, as in Alain de Benoist's view,

or conformity, or whatever. Boorstin's point, however, is that this way of life is seen as springing from the very soil, the physical environment where the historical unfolding took place. In truth, both elements are inseparable: the nation is both land and law, united by lived experience. "If American ideals are not in books or in the blood but in the air," the reasoning goes, "then they are readily acquired; actually, it is almost impossible for an immigrant to avoid acquiring them. He is not required to learn a philosophy so much as to rid his lungs of the air of Europe" (*The Genius of American Politics*, 28).

In the ideologically charged period of the mid-1950s, when hunting down un-American activities at home and exporting the American model of democracy abroad were the talk of the day, Boorstin claimed that the specificity of the American experience explained both why it had worked in the New World and why it was impossible to adapt it, as such, to the rest of the planet. Manifest Destiny was a one-time accomplishment, linked to a particular place, and a specific set of historical circumstances. Accordingly, Americans should not try to "show that we are the perfect embodiment of the European ideal of political institutions and culture. That we certainly are not. The European concept of a political community is of a group oriented toward fulfilling an explicit philosophy; political life there is the world of ends and absolutes" (184). Rather than accept the terms of an intellectual debate posed by Russia or Europe that Americans are sure to lose, says Boorstin, Americans should "discover that our virtues like our ills, are actually peculiar to ourselves; that what seem to be inadequacies of our culture, if measured by European standards, are nothing but our differences and may even be virtues" (184).

Richard Rorty has remarked, in a totally different context, on the Hegelian overtones of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. In an essay devoted in part to George Santayana's views on philosophy in the United States, Rorty praises the Spanish-born philosopher for having been "entirely free of the instinctive American conviction that the westering of the spirit ends here—that whatever the ages have labored to bring forth will emerge between Massachusetts and California, that our philosophers have only to express our national genius for the human spirit to fulfill itself" (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, 60). Near the end of his essay, Rorty turns back to Santayana again, stressing his ability to avoid what he calls the mild chauvinism according to which America "is what history has been leading up to" (69). Refusing for his part to identify American society with the final resting place of the spirit, Rorty remarks that "there is no reason to think that the promise of American democracy will find its final fulfill-

ment in America any more than Roman law reached its fulfillment in the Roman Empire or literary culture its fulfillment in Alexandria" (70).

The ideologues of the French *nouvelle droite*, of course, do not share Rorty's positive vision of the promise of America and offer a different version of its flight from history. Since, in a materialistic culture, they contend, all differences are only quantitative and can, by definition, be reduced to a common denominator, time itself is subject to the same process of unification and totalization. As mentioned earlier, the difference between past and future gives way to the eternity of the present moment. American society, standing as it does outside history, is nothing but "the crystallization of a moment of European history, the moment of prerevolutionary *Aufklärung* which is the source of the revolutions of 1776 and 1789" (Herte and Nigra, 92).

Here, the model of continuity with Europe takes precedence over the paradigm of absolute difference, which the same authors used earlier to stress the cultural rift between the two continents. America is indeed heir to Europe, but heir only to its most aberrant cultural product, the radical negation of genuine European values: the Enlightenment. The political and religious elites of the new nation took the worst elements of European culture and proceeded to make them the founding principles of the American Republic. American society is then doomed to gravitate endlessly in the orbit of *Aufklärung*, subject to the eternal recurrence of the same, that is, the universal rational values of Lockean liberalism.

The American concept of time is closer to the cyclical recurrence of primitive cultures than to the linear unfolding of historical time. The end of history is seen once again as a return to a prehistorical, prepolitical order reminiscent of Kojève's return to animality: America as Eden and utopia, a world before Europe. In the words of Herte and Nigra, "as a member of a 'cold society' (anti-historical) *par excellence*, the American is the Lévi-Straussian Bororo of modern times. Maybe this is the reason why American anthropology studies with such voluptuous predilection the most archaic of Indian civilizations: it finds in these fixed societies, all things considered, the cultural pattern of American society, the model it wishes to emulate" (93).

### Escape from History: How Can One Be European?

Jean Baudrillard also characterizes the United States as "the only remaining primitive society" (*America*, 7). Although his interpretation of postmodern America reaches opposite conclusions, one may find in it many themes common to the neo-Hegelian and antidemocratic traditions.

As a matter of fact, as one examines recent French readings of contemporary America, a common pattern of interpretations and representations begins to emerge. While they generally agree on the description of the United States today, these analyses differ greatly on the evaluation of contemporary American culture.

In a way, Baudrillard addresses some of the questions Kojève, who died in June 1968, left unanswered: the question of the concrete unfolding of what Kojève described as a becoming-animal (or, on the other hand, becoming-snob) of humanity, the question of the value and meaning (or lack thereof) of the posthistorical condition, the question of the evaluation of the disappearance of meaning. Baudrillard's answers, however, based as they are on a critique of Hegelianism and, generally, of European philosophies of history, differ greatly from Kojève's interpretation of posthistorical times. Baudrillard's America has indeed gone out of history (or run out of history, as a car runs out of gas), just like Kojève's, but this did not occur during the French Revolution or after the battle of Jena. The exile from history happened earlier, with the crossing of the Atlantic ocean, a symbol of the ever-widening cultural gap between the two continents:

Whereas [European societies] were caught up in the revolutions of the nineteenth century, the Americans kept intact—preserved as it was by a breadth of ocean that created something akin to temporal insularity—the utopian and moral perspective of the men of the eighteenth century, or even of the Puritan sects of the seventeenth, transplanted and kept alive, safely sheltered from the vicissitudes of history. This Puritan and moral hysteresis is that of exile, that of utopia. (*America*, 90)

It is no longer the post-Napoleonic rational state that survives overseas in the eternity of the end of time, but an earlier utopia, closer to Rousseau's views than it is to Hegel's. "The spatial and mental break of the migration" across the Atlantic prevented America from being contaminated by the European "transcendental and historical *Weltanschauung*" which, according to Baudrillard, will always baffle the American mind. "The social and philosophical nineteenth century did not cross the Atlantic" (90).

This perception of the absolute difference of American history (and of the American conception of history) is far from being limited to Baudrillard's writings. Philippe Sollers, for one, has expressed similar views on the subject, in the course of a debate on American history published in *Tel Quel* in 1976 to commemorate the bicentennial of the American Revolution:

"The United States is 1776, something that doesn't belong to the Jacobin model of the French revolution" (*The Kristeva Reader*, 279). European intellectuals, because they are fascinated by the Jacobin model, and because they have defined themselves politically as either in favor of or in opposition to it, have "lost a great deal of time considering problems about world revolution, the unification of thought relative to this revolution, and in our interminable debates on socialism," have been unable to conceive that "a completely different planet can exist on the basis of the underground, non-philosophic, non-Greek history which was grafted there" (284). Earlier in the discussion in *Tel Quel*, Julia Kristeva had described this nonspeculative, nonmetaphysical history as a questioning of the "linearity of our contemporary history":

European societies obviously have an evolutionary perspective. . . . We've had the bourgeoisie, now it's the turn of "socialism" and "progress." . . . Well, I think that American time short-circuits this evolutionist vision because it entails a *split history*: on the one hand, there is in fact the evolutionism dictated by the development of the links between production and reproduction; but on the other hand, this evolutionism has as its underlying base a conjunction of several temporalities. Since this country is made up of emigrants (Jews, English, French, Central Europeans, Blacks, Indians, etc.), various individual ways of experiencing time and history intersect. (*The Kristeva Reader*, 276)

For Kristeva, the plural and pluralistic character of American history successfully holds in check the teleological versions that many radical intellectuals in the United States have inherited from Hegelian and Marxist influences: "This linear rationality, with its over-dogmatic Marxism, is confined to a limited context, thanks to the split American temporality I have mentioned. The cultural, technical and religious base is so riotous and multi-faceted that the non-truth that may obtain in a linearizing evolutionism or in the gratifying populism of dogmatic Marxism doesn't seem to be able to increase its influence" (277). The political implications of such a redescription of American difference are obvious, and candidly stated by the *Tel Quel* theoreticians at a time when they were abandoning their former Marxist-Leninist credo. Their insistence on the divorce between two visions of history is reminiscent, once again, of American cultural nationalism in the first decades of the new nation's existence, which led to what Oliver Wendell Holmes called a "declaration of intellectual independence." At the time, Emerson wrote in "The American Scholar"

that his fellow Americans had "listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe."

In both cases, the emphasis on discontinuity between the two cultures clearly fulfills an ideological function: the literary and philosophical nationalism of the transcendentalists, an essential part of their strategy for recognition as legitimate intellectuals by their countrymen *and* their peers abroad, implied a distancing from the European tradition in spite of their acknowledged debt to Carlyle or Swedenborg. The same strategy, all things considered, allows Baudrillard, in a statement congruent with Sollers and Kristeva, to disqualify and delegitimize "the issue of history, of the State and the disappearance of the State which America never addresses," that is, Hegelian thought, and beyond, Marxism:

Many American intellectuals envy us and would like to fashion a set of ideal values and a history for themselves, and relive the philosophical or Marxist delights of old Europe. . . . When I see Americans, particularly American intellectuals, casting a nostalgic eye towards Europe, its history, its metaphysics, its cuisine, I tell myself that this is just a case of unhappy transference. History and Marxism are like fine wines and haute cuisine: they do not really cross the ocean, in spite of the many impressive attempts that have been made to adapt them to new surroundings. (*America*, 79)

European categories of thought do not only prevent many foreign analysts from understanding American reality, they also condemn Europeans to "miss" the true meaning of modernity, which is the outcome of an irreducible difference. In that sense, it is as meaningless to fear the modernization of French society as it is to wish for it: "The confrontation between America and Europe reveals not so much a coming together as a distortion, an unbridgeable rift. There is not just a gap between us, but a whole chasm of modernity. You are born modern, you do not become so. And we have never become so" (*America*, 73). Let us note in passing that this (traditionally American) perception of America as absolute utopia, dawn of a new world, radical beginning of an other history, forever cleansed of European violence and contradictions, is in total opposition to models of continuity that describe American society as the most elaborate form of European rationalism or nihilism, as Cau writes, "the rude, horrendously *misbehaved* offspring of Europe, an overblown former colony of Europe" (*Pourquoi la France*, 53-54).

For Baudrillard, however, the American utopia is not the realm of absolute good. The loneliness and inhumanity of American inner cities re-

veals "a world completely rotten with wealth, power, senility, indifference, puritanism and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aimless violence" (*America*, 23). The horrified fascination for American hubris is, after all, a characteristic feature of most European, and especially French, accounts of the United States.

What sets Baudrillard's analysis apart from those of Sartre, Georges Duhamel, or Jean Cau, is his refusal to condemn: fascination wins in the end. "And yet I cannot help but feel [America] has about it something of the dawning of the universe. Perhaps because the entire world continues to dream of New York, even as New York dominates and exploits it" (23). Neither absolute good nor evil decadence, the "American utopia" is beyond good and evil, as it were, beyond the *concepts* of decadence or nihilism, since the end of history means precisely the disappearance of meaning and concept. In the same way, the traditional opposition between nature and culture, the material world and human activity, upon which the Enlightenment's idea of civilization rested, does not make any sense in the postmodern universe. There is no such thing as a raw, elemental reality out of which humanity could carve a meaningful destiny. There is no "nature," physical or mental, to be overcome and transfigured through history, just as there is no longer, in the "hyperreal" simulation of the media, a referent of signs and discourses.

As in Herte and Nigra's analysis, via the same reference to Lévi-Strauss, contemporary American culture is said to be closer to primitive thought than to the historical *Weltanschauung* of Europe. "In 'the savage mind,' too, there is no natural universe, no transcendence of either man and nature, or of history. Culture is everything, or nothing, depending on how you look at it" (*America*, 100). We are back, in a way, to Kojève's vision of posthistory as return to animality. For Baudrillard also, man's renaturalization brings about a world in which there is nothing left to do, because there is nothing left to desire. The Californian Eden is an eternity of pleasure to which death has already come:

On the aromatic hillsides of Santa Barbara, the villas are all like funeral homes. Between the gardenias and the eucalyptus trees, among the profusion of plant genres and the monotony of the human species, lies the tragedy of a utopian dream made reality. In the very heartland of wealth and liberation, you always hear the same question: "What are you doing after the orgy?" What do you do when everything is available—sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America's problem and, through America, it has become the whole world's problem. (*America*, 30)

No referentiality, no moral depth, no representation, no critique, not the shadow of a thought, everything is there, immediately given: "The United States is the only primitive society remaining."

Fredric Jameson, in one of his essays on postmodernism, finds at the heart of contemporary culture "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (60). In the world of theory, this means the disappearance of the "critical distance" that was the hallmark of the modernist movement. Jameson lists five of the "depth models" that contemporary culture has caused to collapse: the hermeneutic model of inside and outside, the dialectical [model] of essence and appearance, the Freudian model of latent and manifest or of repression, the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity and, finally, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified. These various "depth models" have been replaced "for the most part by a new conception of practices, discourses and textual play. . . . Depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)" (62). For Jameson the cult of depthlessness "finds its prolongation . . . in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum," defined, in Plato's sense, as "the identical copy for which no original has ever existed."<sup>5</sup> The proliferation of images (through, e.g., "the transformation of older realities into television images") weakens postmodern man's sense of historicity: this is one of the meanings of the end of history. Conversely, we live in a culture "increasingly dominated by space" and "the spatial logic of the simulacrum." In the new space of contemporary urban architecture, "we are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distancing" (Jameson, 81).

Baudrillard's celebration of American superficiality illustrates Jameson's interplay between ahistoricity, depthlessness, and the spatial logic of the simulacrum. For Baudrillard, American culture, having stepped out of history, stands outside time. The timeless spatiality of contemporary America finds its most powerful symbol in the desolation of the great southwestern desert. For in the desert, as within Jameson's Bonaventura Hotel (80–83), there are no more bearings, no more "spatial coordinates," no more cultural landmarks on which to rest our gaze and anchor our collective memories. In the desert, one is adrift in the space of meaninglessness. "Everything here still bears the marks of a primitive society: technologies, the media, total simulation (bio-, socio-, stereo-, video-) are developing in a wild state, in their original state. Insignificance exists on a

grand scale and the desert remains the primal scene, even in the big cities. Inordinate space, a simplicity of language and character" (*America*, 63).

The consummation of meaning brings humanity back to its origin, to a world before history and language, to the timeless silence of the wilderness:

Why is L.A., why are the deserts so fascinating? It is because you are delivered from all depth there—a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference-points. . . . American culture is heir to the deserts, but the deserts here are not part of a Nature by contrast with the town. Rather they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as a mirage and as the perpetuity of the simulacrum. . . . In California . . . culture itself is a desert. (*America*, 124, 63, 126)

The "stellar indifference" of the American desert becomes the spatial metaphor of the cultural barrenness of a nonnaturalistic, posthistorical universe, which Europeans find so hard to comprehend and accept. "What is new in America is the clash of the first level (primitive and wild) and the 'third kind' (the absolute simulacrum). There is no second level. This is a situation we find hard to grasp, since this is the one we have always privileged: the self-reflexive, self-mirroring level, the level of unhappy consciousness" (*America*, 104). The "extermination" of nature, meaning, and culture, the omnipresence of simulacra, the generalized diffusion of signs without referents (forms without contents) mirror Kojève's second version of posthistory, that is, snobbery and the aesthetics of meaninglessness. "The mirror phase has given way to the video phase. . . . What develops around the video and stereo culture is not a narcissistic imaginary, but an effect of frantic self-referentiality, a short-circuit which immediately hooks up like with like. . . . This is the special effect of our times. America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements" (37, 29).

American culture is described elsewhere as pure fiction, which is not to say, warns Baudrillard, that it is imaginary. Here again, the visitor from Europe is in danger of projecting on contemporary America the categories of his own cultural tradition, and the classic opposition between real and imaginary. To do so would be to miss the radical originality of the American utopia, its fictional character. "Now, fiction is not imagination. It is

what anticipates imagination by giving it the form of reality. This is quite opposite to our own natural tendency which is to anticipate reality by imagining it, or to flee from it by idealizing it. That is why we shall never inhabit true fiction; we are condemned to the imaginary and to nostalgia for the future" (*America*, 95).

Baudrillard's analysis submits both the Hegelian and Nietzschean readings of America to a double twist. He agrees with the neo-Hegelians that postmodern America is the consummation of historical time through the resolution of the contradictions between nature and man (technology) as well as between man and man (the disappearance of all meaningful conflicts, the end of ideologies). But the universal expansion of techniques and the standardization of life-styles generate new class differences and new social exclusions. The "universal and homogeneous state" is not a classless society. The end of history does not mean the erasure of difference, but rather the generalization of indifference. "The world is almost entirely liberated; there is nothing left to fight for. And yet at the same time entire social groups are being laid waste from the inside (individuals too). Society has forgotten them, and now they are forgetting themselves. . . . This is the Fourth World" (*America*, 112).

As for the Nietzscheans, Baudrillard would agree with them that contemporary America is the apex of nihilism, the realm of insignificance rather than absolute knowledge. The end of history as the coming of reason has turned into the end of time, the apocalyptic empire of irrationality, immorality, and monstrosity:

The microwave, the waste disposal, the orgasmic elasticity of the carpets: this soft, resort-style civilization irresistibly evokes the end of the world. . . . Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on a beach, swathed in the sounds of his walkman, cocooned in the solitary sacrifice of his energy. . . . The thousands of lone men, each running on their own account, with no thought for others, with a stereophonic fluid in their heads that oozes through into their eyes, that is the world of *Blade Runner*, the post-catastrophe world. (*America*, 31, 38)

But for all the prophecies of doom that fill his narrative of America, Baudrillard departs from the desperate pessimism of those who lament the decadence of the West. Fredric Jameson detects in the postmodern sensibility the emergence of a "new type of emotional ground tone," based on "the high, the intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity," and in total opposition to the angst of the modern artist (146). Baudrillard seems to share "the peculiar kind of euphoria"; the endless proliferation of simulacra and

the growing equivalency of values and lifestyles leads to a form of *gay science*, and gives rise to a sort of postnihilistic, or supernihilistic, exhilaration: "We fanatics of aesthetics and meaning, of culture, of flavor and seduction . . . We who are unfailingly attached to the wonders of critical sense and transcendence find it a mental shock and a unique release to discover the fascination of nonsense. . . . To discover that one can exult in the liquidation of all culture and rejoice in the consecration of in-difference" (*America*, 123).

Are we witnessing here a postmodern form of Nietzsche's *amor fati*, another joyful "yes saying" to the inevitable? Perhaps, although Baudrillard's acceptance of our fin de siècle does not imply the advent of the Superman or the ultimate triumph of Gilles Deleuze's "active forces." For today's Eternal Return is not "the exaltation of a will, nor the sovereign affirmation of an event, nor its consecration by an immutable sign, such as Nietzsche sought, but the viral recurrence of microprocesses" (72). It is both a more modest and more disturbing process, the reoccurrence of "the infinitely small, the fractal, the obsessive repetition of things on a microscopic and inhuman scale" (72). Baudrillard's double (dialectical?) *dépassement* of neo-Hegelian and neo-Nietzschean readings of postmodernity reaches here its final stage. In the end, Hegel refutes Nietzsche (American culture is not decadence, it is overcoming the contradictions of European history and thought) and Nietzsche forever disproves Hegelianism (this overcoming is the triumph of insignificance, not of rationality).

It is precisely because they owe too much to the nineteenth century and "its approach of history, the State and the disappearance of the State" that most European, all too European, readings of America cannot grasp its radical "eccentricity." In order to understand, one must displace oneself and go beyond the boundaries of European philosophical and political thought in the same way Americans stepped out of history when they left the Old World. But does not such a model of absolute discontinuity rob all European discourses on America, including Baudrillard's, of any credibility? For if American reality is unthinkable in terms of European categories, what is the point of trying to account for the absolute Other? In truth, the paradigm of absolute difference is untenable. Baudrillard's account of American postmodernity first and foremost criticizes French and European fin de siècle, just as Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* celebrated English freedom in order to better undermine the ideological underpinnings of French absolutism. Baudrillard's analysis of America's inconceivable modernity, enables him to stress, on the contrary, what he perceives to be the cultural archaism of Europe, hopelessly mired in the nineteenth century:

"We shall never be able to excentre or decentre ourselves in the same way [as the Americans]. We shall therefore never be modern in the proper sense of the term. And we shall never enjoy the same freedom" (*America*, 81).

Paradoxically, not only does the analysis of America enable Europeans to better understand Europe, but Europeans may be the only ones who can truly grasp its significance, precisely because they will never reach American modernity. It is possible therefore, that "the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum—that of the immanence and material transcription of all values" (*America*, 28). Americans, on the other hand, are necessarily blind to the truth of their own culture. Not only are they totally immersed in it, but they are deprived of the very conceptual tools that would enable them to transcend the "immanence of all values." In fact, the natives have "no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model. As a result, they are the ideal material for an analysis of all the possible variants of the modern world" (28).

Fascinated as he is by the death of his own culture, which is occurring *somewhere else*, the European observer is endowed with the paradoxical power to speak of the silence of the desert and to produce meaningful sentences on what is deprived of any meaning. Baudrillard himself cannot resist the "prestige of criticism and transcendence" which are in his eyes the hallmark (and the disease) of European culture. The European critic becomes a postmodern version of Pascal's thinking reed: he alone can make sense of a world in which his own culture has no place.

The postulate of the absolute difference of American culture gives way to another narrative, which says that America has achieved what Europe, after having conceived of its possibility, proved unable to do. This achievement is not the dream of the Enlightenment, as in the liberal tradition, but its very opposite, the nightmare of an irrational and nihilistic anti-utopia. America has actualized the theoretical program of the 1960s. The death of man, of philosophy, and of the subject took place on the very shores of the Pacific Ocean. Europeans have been content with conceptualizing the end of history; Americans experience it everyday:

Everything we have dreamed in the radical name of anticulture, the subversion of meaning, the destruction of reason and the end of representation, that whole anti-utopia which unleashed so many theoretical and political, aesthetic and social convulsions in Europe, without ever actually becoming a reality (May '68 is one of the last

examples), all has been achieved here in America, in the simplest, most radical way. *Utopia has been achieved here and anti-utopia is being achieved*: the anti-utopia of unreason, of deterritorialization, of the indeterminacy of the subject and of language, of the neutralization of all values, of the death of culture. . . . We philosophize on the end of lots of things, but it is here that they actually come to an end. It is here, therefore, that we should look for the ideal type of the end of our culture. (*America*, 97-98)

In that sense, contemporary America is no longer the absolute Other, but rather the unrepeatable, and fascinating, occurrence of the disappearance of the Same.

### Postmodern Tocqueville

I wrote that Baudrillard's variations on postmodern themes were in many respects a way of settling an account with European historicism. But his take on the United States is not only a negative critique of European social and political thought: its explicit reference to and agreement with Tocqueville's analysis of the dialectics of freedom and equality places it within what I have called the tradition of French interpretations of American reality. The central tenet of Tocqueville's argument is well known: American society is the ideal object for a study of the democratic age, because the trend toward equality (the driving force behind the transformation of European societies) has unfolded practically without check in America in the absence of feudal structures. Tocqueville noted that America had "attained the consequences of the democratic revolution which we are undergoing without having experienced the revolution itself" (*Democracy in America*, 1:13). American culture and society are therefore radically different from their European counterparts.

Hannah Arendt's opposition between the French and American revolutions owes much to Tocqueville's model of the "exceptionalism" of American political culture. As we know, Arendt saw in the "prerevolutionary prosperity" of the United States the unique complex of historical conditions having made possible the realization of the dream of the Enlightenment, that is, the eradication of poverty and famine. In *On Revolution*, Arendt writes, "America had become the symbol of a society without poverty long before the modern age in its unique technological development had actually discovered the means to abolish that abject misery of sheer want which had always been held to be eternal." Furthermore, the representation of America as the first "affluent society" in human history "made it possible for the social question and the rebellion of the poor . . . to play

a truly revolutionary role" in Europe (15). Although American prosperity spurred the revolutionary fervor of the European poor, the American model played little role in European politics after 1789. The American specificity, first perceived as a difference from the ancien régime, had now become alien to the new regime as well, in a process of rupture within the rupture that further accentuated the gap between the two continents: "If there was a single event that shattered the bonds between the New World and the countries of the old Continent, it was the French Revolution" (*On Revolution*, 217).

Tocqueville's paradigm of rupture, so central to Arendt's thought, also influenced most of the subsequent French analyses of American society, whether sympathetic (the liberal tradition) or hostile (the Marxist and Sartrean interpretations). As for Baudrillard's view of contemporary America as the non-Hegelian society par excellence, it is clearly cast in a Tocquevillean mold:

We criticize [the Americans] for this: why did the revolution not take place here, in this new country, this land of freedom and advanced bastion of capitalism? Why do the "social" and the "political," our favored categories, have such little purchase here? The answer is that the social and philosophical 19th century did not cross the Atlantic and here the driving forces are utopia and morality, the concrete idea of happiness and mores, all of which political ideology, with Marx at its head, liquidated in Europe in favor of an "objective" conception of historical transformation. (*America*, 90)

Despite his admiration for the American political system, Tocqueville was wary of the oppressive conformism that inevitably followed the generalization of equality. He saw the institutional protection of individual liberties and properties as the only way to prevent egalitarianism from turning liberal democracy into the tyranny of public opinion. "The nations of our time," he warned at the end of *Democracy in America*, "cannot prevent the conditions of men from becoming equal; but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or to wretchedness" (2:348). Re-examining Tocqueville's analysis of the tension between freedom and equality in the light of a century and a half of democratic developments, Baudrillard concedes the final victory to the latter:

Freedom understood as public action, as the collective discourse of a society on its own undertakings and values, has in fact disappeared in the individual liberation of mores and in agitation (agitation, as is

well known, is one of the Americans' main activities). It is, therefore, equality and its consequences that have been more instrumental in the creation of power. . . . It is this equality, the modern equalization of statuses and values, the uniformity of features and characters, which gives birth to power. (*America*, 89)

The question of the dynamics of equality, of the passage from a liberal (and ascetic) definition of individualism based on the necessary subordination of individual rights to the common good of the body politic (the individual's duties towards the collectivity) to the contemporary hedonistic conception of individualism as the absolute and unrestrained satisfaction of individual psychic and physical needs, is central to the present debate on the cultural evolution of Western democracies. Even the harshest critics of contemporary relativism acknowledge that it did not spring from the subversive minds of a few Nietzschean nihilists. Allan Bloom concedes that "from the earliest beginnings of liberal thought there was a tendency in the direction of indiscriminate freedom" (28). The growth of this "radicalized democratic theory" has led to the establishment of a form of "liberalism without natural rights" (J. S. Mill, Dewey), and finally to the present degeneration of freedom into licentiousness.

Daniel Bell also acknowledges that the various consequences of individualism, such as liberalism, libertinism, and libertarianism, were already present within Enlightenment culture. Bell's thesis is that capitalism itself has undermined, through the development of consumption, its own puritanical value system. Bourgeois society has a double source, and a "double fate." The contradiction within American culture between a Puritan, Whig capitalism "in which the emphasis was not just on economic activity but on the formation of *character* [and] a secular Hobbesianism, a radical individualism . . . which was restrained in politics by a sovereign but ran free in economics and culture" (80) led to the gradual undermining of the Protestant ethic, "not by modernism but by capitalism itself" (21). In this perspective "the greatest single engine in the destruction of the Protestant ethic was the invention of the installment plan, or instant credit," which demonstrated the capacity of the system to create "new wants and new ways of gratifying those wants" (21).

Ultimately, Bell reaches the same conclusions as Bloom: radical individualism undermines the very foundation of Western democracy. Ironically enough, the Frankfurt school Marxists had also come to similar conclusions; Horkheimer and Adorno told us a now-familiar story in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the process of rationalization implicit in eighteenth century social thought has undermined the beliefs in rationality,

natural rights, and human nature that has been central to Enlightenment philosophy. "Ultimately," they wrote, "the Enlightenment consumed not just the symbols [of social union] but their successors, universal concepts, and spared no remnant of metaphysics. . . . The situation of concepts in the face of the Enlightenment is like that of men of private means in regard to industrial trusts: none can feel safe" (quoted in Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 56). For the German philosophers, the most perfected (and hence frightening) outcome of this dialectical process of self-destruction was the American mass culture of their day.

Bell's and Adorno's positions coincide with Hannah Arendt's moralistic views on the corruption of the ideals of the Founding Fathers by the materialistic greed of the (European) immigrant masses. For Arendt, the quest for "abundance and endless consumption" (the American dream) is incompatible with the ethical asceticism that is the only true foundation of a free society, for it turns the "citizen" of the Enlightenment into the "individual" of contemporary consumer society:

The trouble was that the struggle to abolish poverty, under the impact of a continual mass immigration from Europe, fell more and more under the sway of the poor themselves, and hence came under the guidance of the ideals born out of poverty, as distinguished from those principles which had inspired the foundation of freedom. . . . The hidden wish of poor men is not "To each according to his needs," but "To each according to his desires." And while it is true that freedom can come only to those whose needs have been fulfilled, it is equally true that it will escape those who are bent upon living for their desires. (*On Revolution*, 135-36)

The question of the moral and political consequences of radical individualism has also divided French intellectual circles for the past few years. Alain Finkielkraut's *La Défaite de la pensée* (The surrender of thought) is an attack on contemporary cultural relativism and a passionate advocacy of the universalist values of the Enlightenment tradition. In Finkielkraut's eyes, the postmodern apologists of "anything goes" individualism confuse the fundamental concept of liberalism, that is, the autonomy of the subject, with the egotistic quest for total self-gratification. The denunciation of totalitarian regimes and of the use and abuse of monological reason "would deserve unreserved applause if . . . it did not confuse egoism (or, to use a phrase totally devoid of any moral connotation: the pursuit by everyone of one's private interests) with autonomy" (164). This fateful confusion has led the apologists of postmodern freedom to assume that "the limitation of authority" guarantees "the autonomy of judgment and will." In fact,

Finkelkraut contends, "the disappearance of constraints inherited from the past is not enough to insure freedom of the spirit: one needs also to be enlightened, as they used to say in the eighteenth century" (165).

In other words, what is happening to "Western civilization" is, to quote French political philosophers Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, that the (Kantian) autonomous subject "is dying with the advent of the individual" (*La Pensée* 68, 100). Finkelkraut agrees with Condorcet, who wrote that "as long as there will be men who do not obey reason alone, who will receive their opinions from an outside opinion, all the chains will have been broken in vain" (165). He also contends, like Jürgen Habermas, that the project of the Enlightenment has been left incomplete:

The *Philosophes* fought in the same breath for the extension of culture to everyone and for the removal of the individual sphere from the power of the state or the hold of collectivity. They wanted men to be at once free to reach their particular goals and able to carry their thoughts beyond this narrow domain. One can clearly see today that they have won half of the fight: despotism was vanquished, but not obscurantism. (Finkelkraut, 165)

Jean-Marie Benoist devotes a good part of his criticism of American influence in contemporary European culture to the contradiction between economic and political liberalisms, a contradiction summed up in the opposition between the freedom of human beings and that of the market. In Benoist's views, American culture has inherited from the Hobbesian side of the British Enlightenment a propensity to emphasize the nature of things (the objective mechanisms of the market) to the detriment of the Rousseauian conception of the nature of men. The intellectual, and political, conflict between the two worldviews stems from "the major difference between the two types of social contract on which these two ideologies rest. The first, which exalts the notion of competition, derives from the Hobbesian state of war. . . . The second, on the other hand, is akin to the pluralist ideas of a Montesquieu, a Locke, with his theory of the brotherhood and harmony in the state of nature" (139).

In America, the Hobbesian side of British culture is seen as having overwhelmed the Lockean one, opening the door to the absolute domination of economic principles over political considerations. Benoist's own brand of Gaullism attracts him to "continental" theories of the political which, like those of Rousseau or Machiavelli, oppose the power of the sovereign, or of the state, to the "liberal" hegemony of market forces. Benoist sees the gradual ascendancy of the media and technocracy over parliamen-

tary democracy and party politics as a passage from "a society structured by Rousseau's social contract to a society to which Locke's social contract is the key" (145).

Jean Baudrillard, as I have already pointed out, does not share the moralistic pessimism of the advocates of ancient or Enlightenment conceptions of the *polis*. He believes that the absolute specificity of American culture removes it from the ideological categories in which such debates are framed. For there is a radical difference in the *meaning* of freedom and equality in Europe and the United States. American equality, as a historical given, cannot be equated with egalitarianism, which is the product of decadence. The specificity of American democracy lies for Baudrillard in the fact that equality was already present at the birth of the republic: "That is the difference between egalitarianism and democracy: democracy presupposes equality at the outset, egalitarianism presupposes it at the end" (*America*, 94).

"The shock of the [French] Revolution," the French historian Pierre Moreau wrote, "by opening a gap between two neighboring centuries, by making nineteenth century people feel foreign to eighteenth century men, gave the former a genuine sense of history" (quoted in d'Hondt, 12). Baudrillard would probably agree with such a view of European intellectual history. But his point, precisely, is that the American people did not develop "a genuine sense of history," simply because, as Tocqueville remarked, they did not experience the "shock of the Revolution."

Thirty five years ago, in his *Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz picked up where Tocqueville had left off and showed how the absence of feudalism and revolution made liberalism the natural ideology of American society. Hartz also emphasized the egalitarian character of American society at the onset: "One of the central characteristics of a nonfeudal society is that it lacks a genuine revolutionary tradition, the tradition which in Europe has been linked with the Puritan and French revolutions—it is 'born equal,' as Tocqueville said." The "tyrannical force of Lockean sentiment," as Hartz puts it, in American culture made it impossible for Marxism and the socialist movement to really gain foot in the New World. "It is not accidental that America which has uniquely lacked a feudal tradition has uniquely lacked also a socialist tradition. The hidden origin of socialist thought everywhere in the West is to be found in the feudal ethos. The *ancien régime* inspires Rousseau; both inspire Marx" (Hartz, 6).

Baudrillard undoubtedly shares the same perception of an absolute break between cultural developments in continental Europe and (Britain and) America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He never-

theless seems to hesitate over the moment when the two cultures radically parted ways: "The Americans kept intact—preserved as it was by a breadth of ocean that created something akin to temporal insularity—the utopian and moral perspective of the men of the eighteenth century, *or even* of the Puritan sects of the seventeenth, transplanted and kept alive, safely sheltered from the vicissitudes of history" (*America*, 90; emphasis added). Baudrillard's hesitation as to the true "historical" origins of American specificity, that is, the moment in (European) history when America is supposed to have stepped out of history, may be another instance of the postmodernist's derealized and problematic relationship to the past. The question of the occurrence of such an event is, in this respect, a moot one. It involves more than historical scholarship or epistemology, though: it points to different modes of cultural (self-)perceptions. While most Americans usually perceive themselves as reasonable heirs to the English Revolution and to Lockean liberalism, many Europeans (and specifically the French) tend to see them as still sharing the naively optimistic faith in the essential goodness of human nature characteristic of the Rousseauian side of the French Enlightenment.

The meaning of "or even," the linguistic marker of Baudrillard's indecisiveness, is in itself ambiguous. It cannot have here, I am certain, a connotation of equivalency, as if the referents of "eighteenth-century men" and "seventeenth-century sects" were interchangeable. For if ideological forces in both "centuries" did indeed prepare the advent of the democratic age, distinctions must be made between the pessimistic austerity of the age of Jansenism, *moralisme*, and the Puritan Revolution ("the seventeenth century") and the careless and refined brilliance of the enlightened courts of Europe where Voltaire and Diderot prophesied a world forever free of superstition, ignorance, and bigotry ("the eighteenth century"). Let it suffice to remark that Baudrillard does not make the distinction. Glossing over the difference between puritanism and liberalism as competing cultural forces in American history, a difference which points to the complexity of what we call "the modern times," he is content with stressing the specificity of American culture vis-à-vis Europe, regardless of the complex historical genesis of this specificity.

The emphasis on the radical difference of American culture, however, raises another important question that is critical to the understanding of our historical moment. So far, American culture has been described negatively, in terms of what it does *not* imply (the European metaphysical tradition, Hegel, modernist criticism, socialism, etc.). Assuming that all this is a valid characterization of America, assuming that it did step out of the

European nineteenth century, then what happened to *its* nineteenth century? If the absence of feudalism and the overwhelming influence of Lockean ideas made an American version of Hegel and Robespierre, Goethe and Jaurès, Marx and de Maistre, the Jacobins, the Fabians, and the Bolsheviks, historically impossible, then what type of social and political philosophy did America produce during all those years when Europeans were busy fighting over the type of culture and society with which to replace the ancien régime?

### The Pragmatization of the West

Pragmatism, to quote Louis Hartz, is "interestingly enough America's great contribution to the philosophic tradition." In his *Liberal Tradition in America*, Hartz demonstrated how this most American of philosophies was inextricably linked to what he called "the irrational, mass Lockeanism" of the larger culture: "It is only when you take your ethics for granted that all problems emerge as problems of technique" (10). In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel Bell also equated pragmatism with what he called "the liberal temper, which redefines all existential questions into 'problems' and looks for 'solutions' to problems" (28). Sidney Hook, one of Dewey's most prominent disciples, has called pragmatism the first "distinctively American philosophy" (3) and, more recently, Richard Rorty, while remarking that it is "a vague, ambiguous and overworked word," nevertheless sees in pragmatism "the chief glory of our country's intellectual tradition" (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, 160).

As a narrative of Western intellectual history and as a program for social progress, the pragmatic project, beyond its narrower, more technical aspects, appears indeed as *the* philosophical version of the American liberal-democratic ethos, that unreflective, spontaneous mass Lockeanism that Louis Hartz saw as the underlying matrix of political culture in the United States. The American appropriation of British liberalism and empiricism implied that political ideals should be divorced from useless and cumbersome metaphysical claims. Freedom, as Rorty recently put it, *must* come before truth: "When we look for regulative ideals, we [should] stick to freedom and forget about truth and rationality. . . . If we take care of political and cultural freedom, truth and rationality will take care of themselves" ("On Truth, Freedom, and Politics," 634). John Dewey's own brand of cultural history stresses the intellectual and political filiation between pragmatism and the tradition of Baconian practical experimentalism. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Reconstruction in Philosophy*: "When Henry James called Pragmatism a New Name for an Old Way of

itself" (*L'Ordre*, 4). In her essay *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt commented on the historical consequences of what she called "the 'American' aversion from conceptual thought":

However, if it is indisputable that book-learning and thinking in concepts, indeed of a very high caliber, erected the framework of the American republic, it is no less true that this interest in political thought dried up almost immediately after the task had been achieved. As I indicated earlier, I think this loss of an allegedly purely theoretical interest in political issues has not been the "genius" of American history but, on the contrary, the chief reason the American Revolution has remained sterile in terms of world politics. (46)

These various judgments on American pragmatism replicate the canonical opposition between "Anglo-American" empiricism and "Continental" metaphysics which has structured the field of post-Cartesian European philosophy, an institutional and theoretical dualism which the pragmatists have repeatedly tried to leave behind by showing that it is pointless.

Jacques Maritain, despite his admiration for the American experience, warned in his *Reflections on America* of the dangers of empiricism gone awry. He praised what he called the American "modesty before life and reality," a humility rooted in "a sense of the complexity of things, of the fluidity of life which escapes our concepts" (96). This is the "experiential approach, in which it is necessary to get all factual data, all points of view and all possible opinions before making a judgment—itself tentative" (97). This healthy suspicion of ideologies nevertheless runs the risk of turning into an outright "general and systematic Fear of ideas" and intellectual intuition, which would, in turn, damage intellectual creativity. This kind of nativistic know-nothingism could open the gate to a no-holds-barred form of relativism, thereby undermining the rational basis of democratic consensus:

The deep-rooted intellectual convictions, rationally founded, which man needs for the conduct of his life . . . in particular, the moral tenets of a free people—justice; freedom; equality; human rights—would risk becoming a matter of feeling and national tradition, or adjustment to the environment, instead of being held as objective values, justifiable in reason. Then, on the one hand, these moral tenets would lose their inner vigor in each individual. They would become more or less relativized, subjectivized. And on the other hand, they would lose their intelligible universality, and communicability,

their impacts on the minds of other peoples, that persuasive, illuminating, *apostolic* power which is peculiar to ideas. (*Reflections on America*, 98)

Recent pessimistic accounts of contemporary culture by American critics such as Christopher Lasch, Robert Bellah, or Allan Bloom imply that the present situation has largely born out Maritain's forebodings. Although they differ in many respects, these analyses agree on the devastating effects of contemporary relativism and subjectivism on the Americans' sense of belonging to a historical tradition. Radical historicism has ironically dissolved all sense of historical continuity. In his *Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch contends that the failure of American liberalism is particularly visible in the contemporary "collapse of the historical faith, which formerly surrounded the record of public events with an aura of moral dignity, patriotism and political optimism" (19). Bloom, for his part, argues in *The Closing of the American Mind* that the belief in the relativity of truth has become for most American students "a moral postulate, the condition of a free society . . . the only virtue . . . the great insight of our times" (25–26). A proper historical attitude, on the other hand, Bloom says, "would lead one to doubt the truth of historicism (the view that all thought is essentially related to and cannot transcend its own time) and treat it as a peculiarity of contemporary history" (40). The authors of *Habits of the Heart* also stress the connection between the hedonistic individualism of our times and the dissolution of all links with the past. They see the main antidote to the dehistoricizing effects of radical liberalism in what they call "communities of memory," that is, groups of socially committed individuals (often political activists or civic-minded volunteers) involved in retelling a constitutive narrative, the stories of "the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community" through time (153).

Another possible consequence of pragmatism for Jacques Maritain is a kind of philosophical and political isolationism, a rejection of the universalist claims that have made America one of the beacons of freedom and democracy throughout the world, and the adoption of the kind of ethnocentrism advocated by Richard Rorty, who describes himself and his colleagues as "bourgeois liberals who have gone postmodern." "The citizens of my liberal utopia would be people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their conscience, and thus of their community" (*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 61).<sup>6</sup> Anticipating some of the criticisms presently leveled at the resurgence of antifoundationalism in American philosophical and literary circles, Maritain

warned that "the distrust of ideas, the too great ideological modesty of which I am speaking, involves a serious risk: the risk of intellectual isolation, the risk of making American reality, and the greatest human and social achievements of the American people, noncommunicable to other nations . . . as long as ideology or philosophy remains far behind real and actual behavior" (*Reflections on America*, 99). Maritain also linked America's ideological modesty with the rise of the experts, the ascendancy of "the notion (imported from Germany) that only specialists have a right to think—and that each one of them . . . is all the more competent in his own field, and all the more reliable, as he shuns knowing anything outside the field in question" (99).

In this context, Jean-François Lyotard's celebration of "social pragmatics" appears to be in total opposition to the French intellectuals' traditional criticism of the practical and empirical ethos of American culture. Lyotard sees the proliferation of autonomous and heterogeneous universes of discourse and behavior separated, and protected, by incommensurable differences as the social and political counterpart to the generalized disbelief in what he calls the "grand narratives" of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European philosophy. This heterogeneity of discourses and practices is said to be the only alternative to the "terror" of computerized society and technocratic consensus and the only basis for a new conception of justice: "We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus. A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language-games is a first step in that direction. This obviously implies a renunciation of terror, which assumes that they are isomorphic and tries to make them so" (*The Postmodern Condition*, 66).

Lyotard cites changes in social relations as empirical evidence of such an evolution toward "social pragmatics" in postmodern society. "The temporary contract is in practice supplanting permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family and international domains, as well as in political affairs" (66). A pragmatic culture demands pragmatic politics, namely, the establishment of local, autonomous types of political and social consensus ("temporary contracts"), aimed at solving local, autonomous, temporary types of social and political problems. Lyotard contends that "any consensus on the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on it by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation" (66).

The insistence on (ever-changing) contexts rather than intrinsic properties of things or events is central to the pragmatic approach. Lyotard's conception of social pragmatics is presented as the only way to escape the

reign of terror which all cultures based on the quest for unity and totality inevitably impose on human beings. Which brings us back, of course, to Hegel, whose "transcendental illusion," says Lyotard, hoped to "totalize [language games] into a real unity" (81). Having established the obsolescence of the grand narratives and, consequently, of their authors, Lyotard cannot help but reappropriate in the end, even in his characteristically minimalist fashion, the traditional voice of the prophetic thinker, as if it were the one identity that intellectuals, as professionals of speech and thought, cannot renounce without renouncing themselves:

But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. . . . The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. (*The Postmodern Condition*, 80–81)

The repudiation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, equated with the hegemony of Hegelian thought, echoes Baudrillard's rejection of European "transcendental metaphysics," and signals a total reversal of the traditional view of American culture in European intellectual circles. The critique of humanism and ontotheology leads to the present celebration of the very antimetaphysical consequences of American pragmatism that humanists and Marxists alike rejected yesterday. It is almost as if the "Americanization of the world," which European and Third World left-wing intellectuals so strongly opposed twenty years ago, was taking today, in the realm of high culture, the form of the sweeping colonization of philosophical minds by this most "Anglo-Saxon" mode of thinking, pragmatism. Such an ironic twist of intellectual fate is exemplified by Lyotard's present interest in pragmatics and language games.

Other prominent French poststructuralists exhibit forms of thinking closely related to American pragmatism, often because of their own debt to Nietzsche. Deleuze and Guattari exhort their readers to see philosophical and literary writing as experimentation rather than as interpretation,<sup>7</sup> while Michel Foucault was fond of describing his books not as conceptual systems, but as tool boxes, a metaphor dear to a long line of American pragmatists. It is as though the pragmatization of Western culture were the latest stage in the secularization process which, for Nietzsche, led to the advent of "European nihilism." The effects of this development, which