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Culture and Democracy

We live in an era of democratic contradiction. As the Cold War recedes into history and the apparent triumph of liberal democracy spreads around the globe, the domestic state of democracy within the United States continues to erode. Rather than a nation where citizens feel empowered in their common governance, the United States has become a land where the vast majority of citizens hate their leaders yet never vote. Massive anti-incumbency sentiments and resentment toward representative government parallel the rise of grass roots militia movements and media demagogues. Clearly, something has gone wrong with democracy in the United States—or more precisely with the way democracy is understood and exercised.

Nowhere are these difficulties more pronounced than in battles over cultural issues. Debates about canonical values, revisionist curricula, artistic censorship, and freedom of expression have moved from the margins of public debate to its center. Increasingly, people across the political spectrum recognize the strategic role of the arts and humanities in shaping human identities and influencing politics. At a historical moment lacking in superpower conflicts, ideological debate has become internalized, as it did in the 1950s. Once again, battles that were waged with guns and bullets are now fought with ideas and symbols. And once again access to the debate is a crucial issue, as attempts are made to exclude voices that would contest the status quo.

This book is premised on the regrettable fact that the United States has nothing even approaching an egalitarian realm of public communication and civic ritual. Although identity politics and the so-called "culture wars" have done much to expand the national conversation about pluralism and values, these issues have also induced heightened levels of divisiveness and antagonism. As television and computers have made more information available to people than ever before, the electorate finds itself increasingly uninformed and confused.

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And while democracy is a word that politicians and media personalities bandy about with great alacrity, its usefulness has become all but exhausted by divergent interests it has come to serve.

Given this crisis of democratic meaning, the purpose of *Cultural Democracy: Politics/Media/New Technology* is twofold. The first is explanatory and historical, describing how various cultural institutions and communications technologies have evolved in the United States within education, entertainment, art, and the media. I explain how deeply entrenched ideological attitudes often frustrate a meaningful national conversation about cultural issues, as discussions about abortion, multiculturalism, gay rights, or school prayer become reduced to polemical, all-or-nothing debates. Rigid divisions between left- and right-wing positions yield little room for the understandings that can grow from genuine dialogue. In part, this results from a philosophical legacy that splits every issue into a binary opposition. In part, this is caused by patterns in public communication that reduce discussion to superficial soundbites and overheated rhetoric. A cultural democracy requires more than this.

The second purpose of this book is prescriptive. People stick with old-style party politics in the United States because other models don't seem viable. This is largely due to the self-marginalizing character of most alternatives. Yet as recent events have demonstrated, public dissatisfaction with "mainstream" institutions stands at an all-time high. Diverse communities seem willing as never before to reach for new answers to old problems. *Cultural Democracy: Politics/ Media/New Technology* suggests that these new answers are not as far away as one might think. The roots of these solutions lie in the very democratic principles upon which the United States was founded, although many of those principles need to be brought up to date and radicalized.

Following the work of a range of public intellectuals like Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Chantal Mouffe, and Cornel West, I want to argue for a "radical democracy" capable of subverting traditional divisions of left and right.[1] This is not to be confused with a call for a centrist compromise or with a romantic appeal to pre-industrial communitarianism.[2] Rather than asking people to surrender their identities in the interest of a national consensus, radical democracy stresses the primacy of cultural difference. Its theoretical program recognizes that people are not simple creatures of Republican or Democratic ideology, but comprised of complex histories, needs, cultures, and values. To these ends, radical democracy would reconcile current tensions between national and local governance by reorganizing political constituencies in ways typically considered off-limits to politics. By necessity this will entail the creation of what

Chantal Mouffe has termed "new political spaces" that fall outside traditional definitions of government, civil society, and the family. It will take a good deal of work to put these ideas into practice. Yet the time seems right to spell out some of the ways radical democracy might be applied.

Beyond Liberalism and Conservatism

It is becoming increasingly apparent that old oppositional categories of political analysis are no longer adequate for addressing the complexity of the contemporary world. The 1980s were largely defined in "us versus them" terms. Presidents Reagan and Bush sought to construct a world of good and evil, in which the noble forces of free enterprise struggled against the red menace of communism. Of course, this simple opposition was more than a tool for foreign policy analysis. The model was applied to all manner of issues involving education, work, religion, the family, and culture to produce convenient all-or-nothing answers for difficult social questions.

To a great extent this polarizing impulse derived from the split between *orthodox* and *progressive* philosophies that emerged during the early Enlightenment. René Descartes's seventeenth-century formulation of a separation of mind and body gave form to a broader opposition between idealized abstraction and everyday actuality. For this reason, groups in the orthodox tradition—while varying considerably in style and motivation—generally support a faith in timeless truths to be learned and obeyed. They see a fundamental correctness in existing arrangements, but fear that society's enabling values are eroding. Progressives, a similarly diverse and contradictory category, embrace an evolving concept of truth. The rules of social organization are hardly static or universal, and thus merit continual revision. Orthodox and progressive positions yield radically different views of moral authority, resulting in conflicting attitudes toward the way people should act. Most typically, these philosophies find contemporary form in mutually exclusive views of the political right and left.[3]

Groups on the right tend to put their emphasis on *behavior*, attributing human success or failure to attitudes people bring to their exercise of free agency. Great importance is afforded to cultural issues, as manifest in recent controversies over literary canons, artistic censorship, and the labelling of records and video games. Minimizing the significance of economic inequity, conservatives make assertions that job discrimination, sexual harassment, and unfair housing practices really aren't that much of a problem and the government programs to

rectify them provide inegalitarian preferences upon which "minority" groups become dependent. Rarely is any consideration given to the corrupting influence of a market that emphasizes competition, greed, and wealth as measures of human worth.

Most often, the left focuses on issues of economic *structure* and argues that government should intervene in correcting the inevitable inequities produced by the market. In contrast to the right, leftist ideology is often critical of a society it claims emphasizes greed and competition instead of social justice. Rather than emphasizing cultural programs that might influence human behaviors, the left more strongly favors a fundamental redistribution of wealth through such measures as welfare programs, government subsidies, and progressive tax legislation. Arguments that some people might lack motivation or require forms of moral education are rejected as biased. This fundamentally redistributive program has made leftists vulnerable to the charge that they simply want to throw resources at problems. As Molly Ivins jokingly has stated, "this may sound simple, but the *real* problem with poor people is that they don't have enough money."[4]

In their postures of mutual exclusion both right and left camps hold part, but not all, of the means to address social problems. The inadequacy of such polarized thinking became particularly apparent in the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the election of moderate Democrat Bill Clinton. The extremist black-and-white logic of the 1980s needs to be replaced with a political imaginary to account for what some have termed the new "gray times."[5] Approaches to politics that would issues economic structure from cultural behavior no longer seem viable. As Cornel West has commented:

> We must acknowledge that structure and behavior are inseparable, that institutions and values go hand in hand. How people act and live are shaped—though in no way dictated or determined—by larger circumstances in which they find themselves. These circumstances can be changed, their limits attenuated, by positive actions to elevate living conditions. . . . We should reject the idea that structures are primarily economic and political creatures—an idea that sees culture as an ephemeral set of behavioral attitudes and values. Culture is as much a structure as the economy or politics; it is rooted in institutions such as families, schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and communication industries (television, radio, video, music).[6]

As the 1996 presidential elections demonstrated, these cultural answers to material questions hold enormous public appeal. Exit polls indicated that the majority of voters had been motivated more by "values" than any other interest. In response,

the rhetoric of both Democrats and Republicans is increasingly driven by a vocabulary of cultural concern. Yet despite these changes in the political climate, the polarized character of the debate remains intact.

Models of Democracy in Context

To clarify the principles of radical democracy, it is helpful to examine the doctrines of liberal, socialist, and pluralist practice from which it emerged. First of all, one should understand that in the context of democracy the word "liberal" is applied in the classical sense to designate an emphasis on individual freedom, rather than the term's more contemporary association with progressive reform. Liberal (or "representative") democracy evolved in direct response to the perceived encroachment of the state on personal liberty. At the center of the liberal democratic ethos lies the Western notion of the autonomous subject, capable of free choice and motivated by capitalistic self-interest. Most important is the separability of existence into public and private domains. The public comprises the arena of laws, legislatures, and other civic structures, whose ultimate logic is reducible to an apolitical ideal of the common good.[7] As with orthodox and progressive impulses, the formation of a disinterested and distinct public sphere can be traced to the uniquely Western belief in Cartesian epistemology—a belief in the possibility of a knowable independent ground apart from humanity's base instincts. The transcendental universalism of the public sphere is the antithesis of the self-interested specificity of the private realm of personal interests and market competition.

The unifying element for many liberal democratic theorists is belief that individual interest can be enhanced by mutual cooperation. As John Locke put it, "the great and chief end therefore of men uniting into commonwealths and putting themselves under government . . . is the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which shall call by the general name property."[8] This impulse for accumulation is both enabled and limited by the state. Hence, liberal democracy assumes a two-stroke function as a justification and limit for the exercise of state authority. Regular elections serve the philosophical goal of obliging the public to clarify public issues while assuring that no government or set of public officials may remain in office forever.

Opinions differ among liberal democrats over how much the general consensus should apply to all citizens. This is both the rationale for local government and the reasoning behind various pluralist versions of liberal democracy.

Pluralists agree that different groups deserve different degrees of influence over various matters according to the proportion of their interest in them. Within the liberal logic of self-interest, people are more likely to exercise their agency as citizens over matters that affect them most directly.

This principle has led some liberals to advocate a strengthening of the civil society as a means of decentralizing democracy and lessening the role of the state. The civil society argument, occasionally termed the "associationalist" view, asserts that the goals of social justice and human welfare are best served by voluntary and self-governing private bodies, such as unions, political parties, religious organizations, schools, neighborhood groups, clubs, and societies.[9] This position gained popularity in the Western world during the nineteenth century, but was squeezed out of existence with the growing dominance of collectivist and individualist politics. Although similar to liberal democracy, this view differs in according voluntary bodies a primary role in organizing social life, rather that an ancillary function to government. These smaller private entities, which may or may not be governed by democratic principles, are viewed as more flexible and responsive to community needs. Representative government assumes a regulatory function as guarantor of services, rather than acting as their provider. Limited to this oversight role, government bureaucracy is lessened and its efficiency enhanced as a consequence.

If democracy is conceptualized as a series of compromises between individual and collective interest, socialist democracy clearly leans in the latter direction. Critical of the liberal emphasis on competition, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels viewed material inequities not merely as byproducts of such a model, but as necessary components of it. To create winners in the game of acquisition, a system must also generate losers. The much-ballyhooed "opportunities" for liberty offered by liberal capitalism mean little if they are not universally accessible. The inequities produced by capital in turn spoil the very functioning of democracy, as the state becomes little more than the tool of the privileged. In this scheme, the very idea of a separation between private and public is thrown into question. Rather than serving as an idealized and apolitical mediator of the common good, government is perverted by the ability of some citizens to exert more control over it than others.

Like liberal democracy, the principles of socialist democracies have suffered somewhat in practical application. As demonstrated by the Soviet Union and other nations of the Eastern European bloc, difficulties emerged in the capacities of single-party bureaucracies to remain responsive to local constituencies. This anti-democratic drive to single-party agreement and conformity was worsened

by the development over time of a managerial class of party bureaucrats and gov-
ernment officials. Moreover, the structure of state ownership of property has the
effect of denying resources to oppositional groups. The ability to mount political
alternatives to the state, while not completely foreclosed by a socialist system, is
significantly hampered.

The post-World War II atmosphere of growing Cold War tension eventually
produced a range of efforts to ameliorate antagonisms between liberal and
socialist democrats.[10] Not surprisingly, these hybrid democracies differ consider-
ably. One of the most significant distinctions lies in the degree to which these
hybrids emphasize material or cultural matters. The materialist camp is exempli-
fied by the work of John Dunn, Samuel Bowles, and Herbert Gintis, who focus on
the system inequities of capitalism in their calls for economic democracy (what
Bowles and Gintis term "postliberal" democracy).[11] These authors argue that
democracy emerges from the participatory management of property and pro-
duction. Unlike traditional socialists who advocate the centralized organization
of this authority, economic democrats typically favor more heterogeneous sites
of power, where decisions can be made by constituencies identified by rights
claims.

The culturalist solution to the liberalism/socialism divide can be seen as an
important precursor to the radical democracy movement. In contrast to economic
democracy, the culturalist hybrid line argues that capitalism will be undone by
enhanced civic participation itself. Once people understand the potentials of
equality in one sphere, they will attempt to extend it into every other area of life.
This approach to politics was codified by Norberto Bobbio, who was strongly
influenced by the populist sentiments of Antonio Gramsci. Although critical of
the inequities inherent in liberal capitalism, Bobbio saw the modernist assertion
of individual agency as a social force that was too powerful to be undone. To
accommodate the values of freedom and equality Bobbio proposed a strongly
constitutional democracy, in which competitive parties would represent con-
stituent interests. The importance of the party stemmed from a perception of a
society too diverse to achieve a single "common sense. " Setting this form of poli-
tics apart from typical representative democracies would be a series of compacts
designed to block what Bobbio termed the "invisible powers" of industry and
finance from exerting undue influence. To achieve this, citizens would be given
not simply equal "political rights," but also equal "social rights" to assure that
their political rights would not suffer interference.

Central to Bobbio's thinking was a reorientation of the conventional distinc-
tion between "public" and "private" realms. Loosely speaking, these terms sepa-

rate human activity into categories of general and particular concern—with the latter typically considered "off limits" to political discussion. As Bobbio and others subsequently came to believe, this separation has created a dangerous trade-off, as so-called public decision making increasingly takes on a life of its own and becomes distanced from the daily lives of the citizenry. To remedy the situation, the means of political representation need to be spread further into the basic fabric of daily life: work, education, leisure, and the home. As Bobbio explained in a famous quotation, the problem of democracy is no longer "who votes," but "where one votes."[12] As is probably evident, the discussions in this book derive in large part from Bobbio's thinking in this area.

In the contemporary United States, this distancing of the general from the particular has become manifest in a broad-based suspicion among voters of public officials and the anti-incumbency sentiments that led to massive congressional overhaul in the 1994 elections. In that circumstance, opportunistic conservatives successfully exacerbated public anxieties about a federal government grown too large and intrusive. As in other instances the conventional solution to the public/private dilemma has been to place increased emphasis on local ballots, in which communities need not acquiesce to general social mandates. Regrettably, this solution has proven ineffective in serving the needs of diverse groups—such as those defined by age, gender, occupation, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—within and across geographical communities. This dilemma has led certain theorists to advocate an enhanced emphasis on pluralism, with approaches ranging from a reassertion of the civil society to more radical prescriptions.

Twentieth-century pluralist arguments in the West can be traced to the liberal discontent with state centrism, exacerbated by the increasing social diversification and class stratification brought on by industrialization. Groups in Europe and the United States began to argue that the liberal dyad of individual and state insufficiently represented the complexity of civil subjectivity. Needed was a way of accounting for the more complex differentiation of individuals into groups and identities. The emphasis on locating a "middle ground" between state authority and individual autonomy was further tempered by an antagonism toward what C. Wright Mills termed "the power elite"—a hegemonic class of business interests perceived to dominate capitalist society. Despite this apparent awareness of the tendency of private interests to impinge upon and influence the public functions of government, most U.S. pluralist thinking of this period did little to question conventional demarcations between the two. In other words, although postwar pluralism failed to recognize the permeability of the categories pubic and private, it failed to see this as more than a structural problem. Instead,

it sought to promote the interests of diverse groups by pushing private interests back in their place as equal competitors, hence rebuttressing the public/private divide.

To subsequent poststructuralist theorists this move did little more than resinscribe the notion of the modernist subject. Not only did the postwar U.S. pluralists reinforce conventional public/private categories, but they also were incapable of recognizing the subjects of politics as anything other then members of discrete groups. Postwar pluralism marked a significant advance over unreconstructed liberalism in carving out a larger role and a more complex arena for citizens to act politically, but it did so only within existing understandings of citizens roles. Theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe proposed what they termed a "radical democratic" reconceptualization of the citizen unencumbered by essentialist categories of modernist subjectivity. Far from a unified and autonomous member of a particular constituency, within this formulation each person belongs to numerous overlapping groups and multiple intersecting identities. As Mouffe explains, "it is not a matter of establishing a mere alliance between given interests but of actually modifying their identity to bring about a new political identity."[13] As this group-identification model ties its subjects irrevocably to the social, individuality is also maintained because of the relatively unique mix of association within each person.

This radical democratic model of the subject has profound implications for political organization, for it shatters convenient distinctions between public and private. As speculated by Kirstie McClure, this formulation could imply a reinscription of the "subject of rights," which implies not so much an escape from the state, nor an "abdication from political participation more conventionally understood, but rather a potential refusal of a unitary construct of citizenship as exhaustive of the political tasks of the present."[14] This reformulation of the subject need not be understood as a simple collapse of formerly private concerns into the public arena, or vice versa. According to Laclau and Mouffe, this should be seen instead as an opportunity for the creation of "new political spaces."[15] In the expanded view of the multiple subject, the very definition of the political becomes broadened to a new range of sites beyond the conventional jurisdiction of state institutions into the far more dynamic domain of cultural representations and social practices.

In such a context, this poststructuralist approach to pluralism does not negate subjective agency, as it is often accused of doing. Instead, by opening new territory for scrutiny the model gives new vitality to the impetus for democratic principles. The politicization of formerly social spaces formerly considered neu-

tral makes apparent the often unacknowledged power relations in everyday activities. In this way such "off-limits" territories as culture, education, and the family become sites of critical investigation and emancipatory contestation. Rather than diminishing a sense of political agency by negating essential notions of the subject, the principles of radical democracy have the potential of reinvigorating the subject within new domains of influence. Just as importantly, in arguing against the notion of a fixed or universal subject, the project of a radical democracy is by definition never complete.[16]

Populism and Elitism

Within the contemporary United States the task ahead obviously is far from easy. In recent years, left and right have replicated their oppositional logic in a battle to claim the political center as their own (see chapter 2, "What's in a Name? Beyond the Politics of Left and Right"). This is encouraged by an electoral process that produces a totalizing rhetoric of "mandates" and landslides" from narrow margins of the vote. Our current winner-take-all process yields little understanding of the important relationship between minority and majority stockholders in the participatory government.[17] This encourages a strange denial of oppositional possibility.

Essential to the majoritarian visions of both Democrats and Republicans is a devaluation of human diversity. Within this seemingly contradictory reasoning, differences are viewed as obstacles to be suppressed in favor of a broader consensus.[18] Put another way, groups identified as "special interests" are constructed as antithetical the standard of the social "mainstream." But what are the epistemological grounds on which such notions are based? Although this imaginary mainstream purportedly includes a majority of people, in fact it excludes everyone. Instead of functioning as a marker of the civil middle ground, it works as a mechanism to naturalize social hierarchies. When stripped of its mystifying pretensions, the mainstream can be seen as an abstract representation that at best describes a rather small minority of people.

This is how vague appeals to populism can really represent an elitism of their own—not far from the primary referents of male, European heterosexuality around which Western law and culture have always been organized. This structural hegemony converts efforts to contest, infiltrate, or subvert it into acknowledgments of its dominance. In this manner the relation of margin to center has been maintained. To achieve these monolithic visions of national identity both

left and right have assaulted—in admittedly different ways—as divisive the proponents of multiculturalism or identity politics. Ignoring historically entrenched power asymmetries among social groups, they have argued that such "separatist" and "ethnocentric" views subvert the potential of a national accord.[19] Promoted instead is a monolithic definition of citizenship, which dismisses the specificity of human variety as either irrelevant or selfish.

The promotion of this pseudo-populism has paralleled a widening of the gap between rich and poor in the United States. This covert reconsolidation of race and class divisions has been chronicled in recent years by a diverse spectrum of writers. Christopher Lasch describes what he terms the "revolt of the elites" within both political parties against the very middle class they purport to represent. Jerry Adler identifies the "rise of the overclass" as the consolidation of yuppie smugness and power. As Adler puts it, "if the overclass is hard to define, it's because it is a state of mind and a slice of the income curve." Lani Guinier resurrects Alexis de Tocqueville's expression the "tyranny of the majority" in her analysis of a permanent bipartisan ruling order, that uses its political leverage to exclude the interests of the disenfranchised.[20]

The anti-democratic implications of this pseudo-populism become apparent in the way extreme political attitudes become naturalized in partisan discourses. Take education for example. Republicans and Democrats seem incapable of reconciling their political appeal to a mainstream identity and a cultural appeal to idealized notions of "the best" of Western culture. Implicit in recent school reform plans from both Bush and Clinton—with their programs of universal testing, their implication of a national curriculum, and their invitation to business interests to manage public education—is the belief that the nation has spent too much time pursuing educational equity and too little time advancing rarefied standards of "world class" excellence.[21] These attitudes have helped produce an atmosphere in which many of today's young people feel powerless, alienated, and angry.

In the art and entertainment worlds these debates have taken a similarly vicious turn, as the rhetoric of political extremists once again heats up in Congress. Again, both right and left seem bent on eliminating dissenting opinion with a more directed assault on democracy that fails to consider any aspect of an opposing position. The parameters of the debate as seen by the conservative camp are well framed by the late National Endowment for the Arts council member Samuel Lippman, who wrote that "culture and democracy cannot co-exist, for democracy by its very nature represents the many, and culture, by its nature, is created for the few."[22] With these words, Lippman articulated what many peo-

ple perceive to be a primary contradiction in public life: the inherent distance between objects of aesthetic worth and the popular universe in which they exist. Rather than grappling with the complex political implications of this apparent paradox, for most legislators the solution is to get government out of the picture.

Contrary to common assumptions, this problematic stratification of high and low culture implicit in Lippmann's remarks is not promoted by only the right. This high-minded idealism has long characterized leftist cultural practice as well. Certainly recent attacks on public broadcasting and the NEA hardly would have been so successful if those entities had ever cultivated a genuine constituency. The NEA and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting have continued to make a strategic error in basing their existence on the need for "balance" in programming (that is, compensation for what the marketplace provides). In this way public media and culture themselves have remained exclusionary and to a certain extent unrepresentative.

Who Will Tell the People?

Discussions of media and entertainment have become similarly polarized and exclusionary. Tune in nearly any talk radio program and you'll hear complaints about a leftist "cultural elite" promoting bias in the news and ideological imbalance in other programming. Conservatives argue that Hollywood liberals are brainwashing the public with increasingly politicized media content (chapter 3, "Movies, Histories, and the Politics of Utopia"). Meanwhile, from the left one hears similar claims. The corporate media, so that argument goes, systematically exclude dissenting opinion from cultural institutions and the airwaves, thus creating a nation of clueless converts. Browse through the shelves of any college library and you'll find title after title decrying the ownership of the media by a right-wing monopoly. Certainly within academic circles, decades of residual Frankfurt School social theory have supported contentions that commercial media irrevocably serve the interests of the conservative "consciousness industry."[23] A figure like Rush Limbaugh purportedly achieves popularity because oppositional voices never get to speak.

The flaw in both arguments is that the United States is just too big to be sold a line of propaganda so easily (chapter 4, "Video Culture and National Identity"). Production entities and reception contexts are too diverse for the situation to be so simply explained. For one thing, most commercial media outlets are far more concerned with profits than with ideology. Partisan programming exists because

someone is willing to pay for it. Similarly, there must be a demand for what the self-proclaimed radio "doctor of democracy " is offering. Conservative demagogues like Limbaugh are popular because they sanction their audience's anger over its economic frustrations and social fears. They tell citizens that it is okay to demand what they have worked hard to achieve.

What are the consequences of this elite versus populist war of positions? For one thing, it encourages the ambivalence and confusion people feel toward government. While varying considerably in philosophy and style, both left and right have painted a picture of a federal bureaucracy out of control in its spending and inefficiency. Taken to an extreme, these sentiments foster the type of anti-government paranoia behind the militia movement and such atrocities and the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Ironically, if you ask people about the things government does—like building highways, helping the poor, and cleaning up the environment—they express resounding support. In this light, the alienation citizens feel from their common institutions is partly one of perception.

The Phantom Public Sphere

How did this public disaffection come about? The gradual collapse of civic accords, and the growth of political alienation, has a long history. To many analysts these problems are attributable to a contemporary decline in the quality of common discourse—to a deterioration of political debate itself. Before the existence of modern telecommunications, the print era afforded citizens unrelated by physical geography, native ethnicity, or religious tradition an enhanced experience of a mutual culture and shared a perception of nationality. The resulting respect for published forums prompted the framers of the U.S. Constitution and the French Declaration of Rights to legislate journalistic freedom. As James Madison wrote, "the People shall not be deprived or abridged of their Right to speak, to write, or to publish their sentiments; and the Freedom of the Press, as one of the great Bulwarks of Liberty, shall be inviolable."[24]

This desire for a free press developed from a number of quite specific historical conditions. Politically, these convictions emerged from fears that an all-powerful state might exert influence over the precious medium of print. Philosophically, early free speech arguments grew from the Enlightenment belief (shared by many contemporary anti-censorship advocates) that individuals could resist external influence in making autonomous personal judgments.

Socially, free speech was premised on the faith that existing communications media could adequately convey the views of all citizens.

The idealized space in which this "free and open" communication would occur has been labeled by Jürgen Habermas the "bourgeois public sphere."[25] According to Habermas,

> By "public sphere" we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. They are then acting neither as business or professional people conducting their private affairs, nor as legal associates subject to the legal regulations of state bureaucracy and obligated to obedience. Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely; and express and publicize there opinions freely.[26]

It's important to stress that the pubic sphere was never an achievable fact but an idealized horizon. To Habermas, a key analytical question of contemporary social analysis has become one of accounting for the growing discrepancy between the conceptual frame of the public sphere and actual social relations.

In historical actuality, while certain venues occasionally offered relatively open spaces for the common exchange of views and the testing of civic arguments, they couldn't provide a perfect incubator for democracy. No public medium has ever provided a completely unmediated conduit of civic discourse. Nor has any public sphere been capable of compensating for the differing backgrounds, perceptions, and social locations of those entering it. Moreover, despite assertions of "universal rights" by its early proponents, the public sphere never did much for those kept out—which in the Enlightenment era meant women, slaves, and immigrant communities.

Democracy and Modern Communications

The horizon of a public sphere receded further into the distance near the end of the nineteenth century, as the democratic aspirations of liberal philosophy became subverted by advanced capitalism. Technology played an important role. Emergent forms of audio and visual communication helped create a myriad of new delivery contexts, each with its own reception characteristics. Such develop-

ments were accompanied by shifting approaches to commerce based on advertising and public relations, which further complicated the style and function of mass communication. Some analysts attribute to these changes a corresponding loss of agency within the population at large, as citizens began to see themselves less as participants in the ongoing drama of democracy than as observers of its effects.[27] Others see media technologies as enhancements to democracy that provide more opportunities for viewers to exchange messages and engage in common decision making.[28]

Either way, within this technological transition the growth of electronic media produced the most profound consequences. With the declining readership of the newspaper—what Walter Lippman called the "bible of democracy"—radio and television stations became the principle means through which political discourse flowed to the general public.[29] Although primarily owned by commercial interests, during the 1930s and 1940s the airwaves carried a relatively broad range of opinion because so much of network time remained unsponsored.

With the gradual rise of commercial advertising in the 1950s and 1960s, the potential to influence programming increased. Yet regulatory protections helped insulate this electronic discourse from direct manipulation until decades later. This was largely due to governmental efforts—notably through the Federal Communication Commission—to maintain this public sphere as a civic "trust." When the Reagan administration assumed power, it effected historic shifts in the democratic function of media through a series of deregulatory measures that aided network consolidation of ownership, increased the role of advertisers and corporate sponsors, and loosened rules of public accountability. With the economic downturns of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the role of market forces grew with budget cutbacks in broadcast journalism, as well as the concomitant rise of government spokespeople and corporate publicists. More recently, the Republican majority in Congress has extended deregulation into the cable and telephone industries, a move that will have a devastating effect on the democratic potential of the information superhighway.[30]

Radical Potentials

Not that this marks the end of the story. Numerous studies have demonstrated the inability of media outlets to exert anything like a uniform regime of control over audiences, for the simple reason that different people consume the same messages in different ways.[31] To proponents of the new media literacy movement,

this suggests that viewers possess capacities to make critical assessments of what they see—capacities that can be improved with education. It also bears acknowledging that the entertainment industries are not monolithic structures. If anything, Hollywood has become more heterogeneous in recent decades as the hegemony of the studio system has diminished and "independent" production has increased. Indeed, even many market advocates are quick to point out that the same mechanisms that limit production access for some also remove barriers for others. As John Keane contends,

> Critical theories of media which obscure the *self-paralyzing tendencies* or *internal limits* of commodified systems of communication are inadequate. They fail to see that the production and distribution of opinion according to market criteria is possible only within narrow limits. Market-based-media are not seamless and trouble-free.[32]

This permeability of corporate culture is further advanced by the restructuring of segments of the capitalist enterprise along "post-Fordist" lines. Unlike the days of early industrialism—with giant factories pouring out goods for masses of consumers—new financial structures and communications technologies permit highly decentralized means of production aimed at tiny segments of consumer markets. Although still subject to familiar hierarchies of management and control, the resultant micro-economies offer enhanced opportunities for localized subversion.

In a similar fashion, the dynamic character of technological change continues to offer possibilities for diversity and democratic intervention in small-format video production, digital broadcasting, and telecommunications via the internet (chapter 5, "Fantasies of Power on the Information Superhighway").[33] This is not to suggest technology alone will yield the sort of utopian "global village" envisioned by Marshall McLuhan.[34] In fact, there is increasing evidence of potential problems raised by an unrepresentative and reactionary "cyberdemocracy."[35] But I do want to make the more modest suggestion that a communications environment has begun to develop in which it becomes difficult for a single message to be manipulated for the entire nation.

These economic and technological changes are paralleled by cultural and political shifts. Postmodern and postcolonial critiques of centralized power have lent support to an expanding range of social movements around such issues as gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, age, and disability. Not so coincidentally, these identity-based movements are emerging at a time when the

authority of the bureaucratic state is increasingly under siege.[36] Nancy Fraser has pointed out that rather than one gigantic public arena, one should envision the nation in terms of numerous conversations among different groups and around different issues.[37] This critique of a single public holds significance as well because it undermines any rigid notions of what the "public" means.

Needed are new kinds of organizations and new kinds of practices to take advantage of this new technology. In theoretical terms, such issues of structure can be addressed through what writers from Louis Althusser to Michel Foucault have identified as the capillary conduits of ideology and power. By addressing the way power emanates through the "social technologies" of the school, the workplace, and the courthouse, one can begin to analyze the way the dominant social order reproduces itself in personal identities, cultural practices, disciplinary structures, and attitudes toward authority (chapter 6, "Problem Youth: Pedagogies of Representation"). Hence, any effort to reform the workings of social technology needs to be supported in the contextual frames that utilize media. This also means creating (or rebuilding) the type of "free" spaces where democratic dialogue can again begin to grow outside such institutions.[38] Finally, it entails attention to the economic, political, and cultural factors that limit the potential of any such endeavor.

Establishing these conditions will take more than utopian vision and good will. It will require concerted political organization to carve out the economic and social theaters for such activity (chapter 7, "From Victim Aesthetics to Postmodern Citizenship"). Unfortunately, great flaws exist in the current communication policy promoted by both the right and the left. At issue are the fundamentally anti-democratic principles that lie at the heart of either approach.

Conservatives advocate the purportedly unparalleled capacity of the marketplace to produce egalitarian opportunity and to stimulate quality through competition. But the commercial sector's tendency toward consolidated ownership and the elimination of unprofitable voices contradicts these utopian claims. In contrast, the left favored governmentally sponsored media and cultural programs as an antidote to the market, arguing that equality can only result from a compensating system. Supposedly this non-commercial sector encourages the development of quality programs that the commercial sector won't support. Yet as recent funding controversies have demonstrated, the totality of projects supported by tax dollars do indeed ignore the interests of many citizens.

These absences call for novel approaches to cultural democracy that do not succumb to either exclusionary impulse (chapter 8, "Toward a Radical Cultural Democracy"). Unlike today's subsidized or commercial media, this new cultural

infrastructure would be developed according to radical democratic principles to represent the diverse interests of many citizen groups. Legislative measures and public funding might be required to insulate this new media sector from undue state or corporate pressure. Finally, this cultural radical democracy would be organized in transnational terms to reflect the global character of media, capital, and society.

The chapters that follow will provide a more detailed account of this scenario. My fundamental premise is that great flaws exist in left, liberal, and conservative approaches to cultural democracy—flaws that can be traced to specific historical sources. But rather than dwelling on the problems radical democrats have inherited—or lamenting recent skirmishes between left and right—the time has come to begin formulating a new agenda rooted in egalitarian principles. A partial framework for the infrastructure of a renewed "public conversation"—to use Guinier's term— exists in models from the past.[39] These original sites are finding novel extensions in the emerging technological environment. They also make possible new forms of cultural pedagogy to extend the critical capabilities of citizens and activists in ways that foreground alternative definitions of citizenship. The old town square has reappeared in the e-mail networks and electronic conferences of the information superhighway. These new political spaces call out to be claimed.