Bursting the Foundations: A Bibliographical Primer on the Criticism of Culture[1]

Tom Morris
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The mushrooming of critical technologies and methodologies now stands as a sociological fact of the past two decades. During this time, "cultural criticism" itself has achieved a recognizable academic status as a relatively new and significant field of interdisciplinary studies encompassing a wide range of disciplines and materials including anthropological data, scientific inquiry, philosophy, literature, psychology, and historiography. Writers such as Michel Foucault, Hayden White, and Clifford Geertz have focused these sweeping interests around the general purpose of founding a theory of criticism responsive to the grounds and assumptions involved in our having knowledge of, as Hayden White says, "all the various dimensions of our specifically *human* being."[2] However, the institutionalization of a new field of inquiry ostensibly intended to criticize both institutions themselves and the basis of knowledge and authority which sustains them, raises some fundamental questions about the status of cultural-criticism. Too often, it seems, as a new dimension of critical activity acquires professional status, it unwittingly falls victim to or realigns itself with the forces of alienation and oppression which it initially set out to criticize and transform. The immediacy of one's personal experience grounded in felt need is then vitiated by the call for analytical rigor and technical expertise. It is in this context that Tom Morris's *Bursting the Foundations* provides a unique resource and valuable introduction to those quite varied forms of criticism which, on the one hand, resist the impress of ritualized forms of communication and mass-oriented,

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[1] This book appeared as a special double issue of the journal *Paunch* 55-56 (December, 1980). All parenthetical page references refer to this edition which for convenience in this paper I will call the *Primer*.

[2] Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), p. 23.

institutional conformity, and on the other, champion the "necessarily self-critical and freer movements of thought."

The kind of self-criticism advocated here begins with the particular. In a sketch of one of his childhood experiences of growing up in the capitalized, patriarchal reality of a California suburb, Morris describes his private moments of access to worlds beyond the suburban order and plasticity of desire, moments, or "fissures" into the natural world where he could be in "the here-and-now and something beyond, son and dreamer, love and compliance and freedom. Anyone who grows up thus will possess a second nature whose best companion is nature itself. The trees and sparrows don't overlay their beauty with the language of guilt" (p. 13). The experiential roots of this "second nature" become for Morris the source and primary motive for cultural criticism as he envisions (or "re-visions") it in the *Primer.* Out of the felt dissatisfaction of growing up in a culture where the shapes of authority and power seem to depend on "the absence of vital, human-to-human feeling which is the only feeling the child knows," arises the need and desire to regain and reconstitute the "residue of human quality beyond reach of cultural control."[3]

Morris's study of this reconstructive act of the critical imagination directly confronts and goes beyond the limitations which inhere in more conventional modes of thought. Indeed, the major accomplishment of the *Primer* is that it goes a good bit beyond its own more modestly stated intentions in the Preface: "to provide a practical, introductory guide to the critical literature on culture." In the act of synthesizing a vast range of material (both theoretical and practical) on the study of culture, Morris presses forward and clarifies the grounds upon which we can begin the activity of criticism. What is perhaps most unique about this study is that Morris fully acknowledges the inadequacies of any "one-dimensional"[4] mode of rational thought to encompass a subject which necessarily ranges from the sensuous quality of lived experience to the highest levels of abstract thought. Indeed, Morris is most insistent about the need to avoid "the anti-experiential rule of self-effacement and self-forgetfulness" which so often characterizes "the verbal and formal polish of public expression." In contrast, Morris engages his subject in several different but closely related ways ranging from personal anecdote to theoretical explanation to annotated bibliography. He thereby opens up dimensions of critical thought rarely seen in more conventional forms of

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[3] The final quote in this paragraph is actually from Lionel Trilling's *Beyond Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1968) which Morris quotes on p. 52 of the *Primer.*

[4] This term was actually coined by Herbert Marcuse and is the title of one of his books: *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). In his annotation of this text, Morris explains the basis of Marcuse's critique of prevailing, one-dimensional thought: it leads to "the collapse of aesthetic (subversive) culture into conformist mass culture, and in the manipulation of human needs and instincts on behalf of illusory freedom." (p. 135 of the *Primer.*)

academic presentations.

By locating theory in the "needful desire to know self-constituted truths about oneself and to act on the basis of those truths," Morris's slim book offers a far more bold challenge to "burst the foundations" of all those cultural structures which prevent the fulfillment of our own deepest selves. One of the purposes of the *Primer* is to locate the contemporaneous strands ·of a tradition of resistance to the cultural microphysics of power which ·perpetuates itself through the manipulation of "civilized" games of domination and subordination. The nearly two hundred books and articles annotated in the bibliography attest to the range and diversity of this tradition which Morris describes as "readings in a critical, experiential, historical, romantic, and libertarian anthropology." He carefully distinguishes his use of the word "libertarian" from a "liberal" interest in projects of social reform; instead, he defines "libertarian anthropology" as "a call for the transformation of culture so that, at the very least, every form of economic, political, and egoistic bullying becomes impractical and experienced as repulsive" (p. 7).

Nowhere does Morris gloss the real disagreements which exist between the writers which appear in the bibliography. Indeed, the "unresolved controversies suggest correctly that the whole project remains incomplete, in progress, and impatient with conventional demands for tidy systematizing and comprehensiveness." The sense of a tradition which Morris draws upon reaches at least as far back as Rousseau, Shelley, Blake, and others, but Morris focuses on the modern, twentieth-century voices which carry on the concerns of a libertarian cultural criticism: "the *Primer* speaks to history mediated by modern concerns." The bibliography includes works by Freud, Reich, Dewey, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Marcuse, Lionel Trilling, Paul Goodman, Noam Chomsky, Raymond Williams, Stanley Diamond, and many others. The annotations range from a few sentences to a full page: Morris's own voice often joins with and clarifies that which he seeks to introduce. He offers insightful evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of individual works and useful explanations of the traditions in which such work arose as well as cross references to other and similar work in the bibliography. They are arranged alphabetically so that while it is possible to read straight through, I found myself more often referring to the annotations in the process of reading the introduction where Morris often parenthetically refers to those authors closely associated with any given idea or formulation.

The resources of the bibliography may thus serve an ancillary function to the introduction itself which is divided into two parts: 1) sketches for an intellectual autobiography, and 2) a more expressly theoretical account of Morris's understanding of the grounds and activity involved in cultural criticism. Part I, entitled "Memories of Generation," consists of a series of personal sketches which illuminates the roots of Morris's own need and desire for critical awareness of who and what he is in his given culture. The

passages range from lyrically beautiful renderings of events and experiences where "memory becomes eventless, plotless emotion merging tale and body and language and love" to vivid explanations of those more external (although too often painfully internalized), pervasive, and confusing forces which victimize the body into rituals of compulsive behavior, moments of mystification and loss when "self takes on the task of trying incomprehensibly to comprehend the world of denial and irrational rationality that is not acknowledged anywhere outside the self" (p. 24). The culture in which Morris's experience may seem only too paradigmatic of our own is one where sensitivity and desire stand irrevocably condemned as wasteful and "unreasonable." More specifically, his father's authoritarian absence from the son's experience is countered by his mother's tender, quiet, but insistent unmaking of the practical, businessman/son. Here we find a fissure into the natural world of nourishment and rebirth—the route that is to dreams, hope, beauty, and desire. Following Laing,[5] we experience (or re-experience) with Morris the effects of that official "boardroom" language which operates in a patriarchal power structure where "speech functions so as to smother the passionate and the uncertain and, ultimately, the rage bursting out of smothered life." The voices, intellectual and personal, which burst the foundations of this impersonal masking were for Morris many and varied and the bibliography provides ample documentation of this journey towards becoming critical and recovering that which had been too nearly lost.

Indeed, it is not hard to be convinced by the authenticity of Morris's own voice as he locates the many "voices from persons and texts and distant acts which permitted the impeded voices within [himself] to speak and begin to create their own meaning" (p. 28). Shattering the mystifications of a culture in turmoil in the 1960s were the sounds of Bob Dylan, anti-Vietnam war demonstrators, Allan Ginsberg, the free speech movement. Within this socio-historical context, Morris relates his early intellectual encounters with Freud, Laing, Marcuse, and some of the other writers appearing in the bibliography and belonging to the tradition of cultural protest. Part I consists of Morris's attempt to render into language the quality of those particularized moments of liberation in his own life, those intense "fissures" when "the floodgates between sensuous memory and awareness begin to burst." Insofar as Part I succeeds in grounding the critical act in Morris's own experience, we have thereby been prepared to expand those grounds in the more expressly theoretical second part: "The Criticism of Culture."

Here Morris defines cultural criticism as an activity of the understanding

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[5] R. D. Laing describes the effect of what he calls "boardroom" language in *The Politics of Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967). Morris describes this book as a "polemic against the processes whereby individual experience is mystified and/or made fraudulent by interpersonal and social encounters involving the State, cultural media, modern institutions (e.g. psychotherapy), and the family." (p. 128 of the *Primer.*)

attuned both to the core of desire seeking fulfillment and to the contrary experience of a felt dissatisfaction which is conceived of as fundamentally unnecessary. The "*telos* or purposive end" of this activity "is the clarification of the possibilities for and barriers to extending conditions which would foster an existence of mutual fulfillment among wo/men and between wo/men and nature" (p. 31). Such criticism begins with the positive judgment that life is worth living and that there are specific ways of realizing such ameliorative possibilities for human life, and asks the most difficult questions concerning the possibilities and potentialities for human fulfillment. As Morris is quick to point out, this purpose links the primer to a long tradition of thought and practice ranging from Rousseau through the early Marx, Hardy, Tolstoy, Flaubert, William Morris to the contemporary writers represented in the bibliography. Morris's own intellectual roots are most closely tied in with the Frankfurt school of theorists,[6] chiefly Herbert Marcuse, T. W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Erich Fromm, all of whom rejected a naively materialistic Marxism and sought to distinguish the repressive and destructive uses of reason as a tool of civilized domination from the more "liberating and critical forms of reason." Altogether, however, the *Primer* serves as a unique resource text which articulates the areas of compatibility between these diverse movements of modern thought. In Morris's words, the common ground resides in the desire "to disclose and subvert forms of culture and consciousness which turn desire against happiness. . . . Eros against civilization, life against death, sensuous and expressive life and death against the smothering of both" (pp. 31-32).

Morris fuels the more polemical dimensions of this project with the rigor of his own critical sensibilities. He begins, therefore, in Part II of the introduction with an historical view of the two terms themselves: culture and criticism. Here he draws on the work of Raymond Williams[7] whose analysis of the historically changing meanings of the term "culture" reveals "a good deal about the schisms in meaning and experience haunting modern Western civilization." We can thus trace the earliest 15th century uses of the term "culture" as a noun for the caring and tending of crops (agri*culture*) to its metaphorical use beginning in the 16th century as a term for "the cultivation of the self" (human minds needed culture as much as animals and plants), to its status as an often-used term in the 19th century by critics and writers of all sorts, to its contemporary uses in such diverse contexts as "counter culture," "Ministries of Culture," or mass "culture." Morris, however, focuses on two divergent sets of meaning: 1) culture as the entire aggregate of ideas, taboos,

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[6] See: Martin Jay. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research: 1923-1950* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973). Morris annotates this book in the *Primer.*)

[7] See especially *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958); also *Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976).

material modes of production, and patterns of behavior of a particular
people, period, or group; and 2) culture as a more value-laden process of
refinement, especially in the practices of intellectual and artistic activity
which is sometimes either arrogantly or disparagingly referred to as "high
culture."

Morris criticizes the anthropological and scientific use of the first meaning
insofar as individual experience is subsumed by collective patterns, struc-
tural totalities which lend themselves to impersonal analysis and rarefied
systematics. In order to regain the experiential quality of actual human
beings amid and beyond the world of institutions, Morris clarifies the
Romantic notion of authentic refinement as a quest for fulfillment and a
promise for "an actual whole way of living." In this context, however, Morris
resists slipping into a conception of the "whole" as merely the structural
coherence of institutions, codes, and patterns of behavior. Indeed, it is the
very "tendency to center qualitative questions in a culture's structural coher-
ence" which eventuates in a loss of the qualitative sense of the genuine in
favor of a coherent "sense of the formal inner irrationality of a culture's
official patterning of experience." In contrast, Morris wishes to use the term
"culture" as indicating the entire "given and taught way of life as it pertains to
a definable body of people or coding of reality." Culture, according to this
definition, is not synonymous with "experiential wholeness, but rather indi-
cates the coded field." The important qualifying words "given and taught"
avoid the anthropological tendency to reduce all life to the coded systems
and allows for an understanding of the criticism of culture as an activity
attuned to the experiential core of individual human beings in their particu-
lar life situations. Morris further distinguishes the term "civilization" as a
particular "Western manifestation of culture," which allows him to criticize
the alienating characteristics of civilization without disabling his more gen-
eral concept of culture.

There are several significant consequences to these formulations, and at
the risk of glossing a very complex problem, it may be helpful to provide a
sketch of the key issues here. First, since the particularized forms of cultural
codings may or may not fulfill an individual's needs, Morris avoids any
assertion of a metaphysical duality between the human/cultural and the
natural. The challenge here is a great one indeed and encompasses the trend
of such major thinkers as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and others whose concep-
tions of the fundamental disjunction between human nature and cultural
forms derives from the basic assumption "that primitive man's existence
must have been inherently flawed."[8] As Hayden White observes, each of
these thinkers "argues that man's 'fall' into society was necessary, the result of

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[8] White, *Tropics,* p. 136.

a crucial scarcity (in goods, women, or power, as the case may have been."[9] Cultural oppression is therefore seen as "ultimately providential" and necessary, but only according to the negatively conceived definition of human nature. This conceptualization presupposes that human nature is essentially beastly and must be tamed in the cultural transformation of a chaotic eros into a socialized reality. Indeed, the purpose of psychoanalysis for Freud was a gaining of rational controls over those necessary defenses from the otherwise uncontrollable blasts of the unconscious libido. The point is that Morris's re-visioning of cultural possibilities does not necessarily call for such negative assumptions regarding human nature. Moreover, his revision seems compatible with recent anthropological understanding about the cultural origins of the species. As Clifford Geertz points out, the strongest anthropological evidence suggests that there was no "magical moment" when biological man passed over into cultural man: the traditional stratigraphic view of the initial development of the biological followed by the later "falling into" the cultural is itself a false notion. In Geertz's words: "culture, rather than being added on, so to speak, to a finished or virtually finished animal, was ingredient, and centrally ingredient, in the production of that animal itself."[10] It follows, then, that since the giving and teaching of cultural codes is intrinsic to human nature (i.e., any vision of the "uncultured" wild man is pure mystification), the important questions for a cultural critic arise from his/her evaluation of the qualitative dimension: fulfillment becomes a question of experiential quality rather than rational coherence.

It is possible, moreover, to construe any assertion of a metaphysical duality between culture and nature (or an unbridgeable gap between cultural institutions and individual needs) as a manifestation of a deeper need to justify our own alienated consciousness rather than a manifestation of an inherently human condition. In contrast, Morris's sense of dualism is functional rather than metaphysical, absolute, or innate: a given culture's codings and teachings may function either to satisfy or to frustrate basic human needs. Cultural criticism attuned both to the individual experiential core as well as to the collective cultural codes can begin to construct models of fulfillment of vital human need within the imagined possibility of cultural forms "which counsel life while keeping life open or flexibly expressive from its individuated centers." In short, culture need not be repressive by definition, although civilized culture too often seems to be little more than that.

The question which we have thus far assumed and now needs to be made explicit has to do with what we mean by the "core" of human response beyond cultural control. The immediate answer is that "libertarian anthropology" recognizes the value and significance of the body insofar as it

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[9] Ibid, pp. 179-180.
[10] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), p. 47.

grounds critical judgment and resists the endless circumlocutions of disembodied reason. By "core" we refer in a limited sense to biology and in a wider sense to the full range of feelings, intuitions, and sensuous awareness. It is here, in the dynamic and functional sense of biological urgency, that we must ground any life-enhancing normative view of human nature. In Morris's own words:

> Criticism needs to be attuned more than ever before to this stubborn core, in its biologically expressive and defensive functioning, because far too much psycho-therapeutic evidence says that Western culture is drawing on the body's deeply ungratified, 'irrational' energies for history's violence, obedience, and obsessional fears. And it needs to be in touch with biological 'necessity' because forms of critique which see the body as now being 'entirely' subsumed in culture open the way for further tampering, further reconditioning on behalf of even the best intentioned programs. (p. 53)

Such well-intentioned programs as Morris has in mind range from Plato's Republic to Fourier's socialist Utopia to the structuralist hegemony over contemporary critical discourse. The dangers of idealism in these activities can be seen in their wish to organize lives according to abstract models or theoretical ideals without regard for the quality of bodily experience. Morris, in contrast, clarifies the need for criticism attuned to the resisting core of bodily energy and desire.

To sum up, what Morris offers us in the *Primer* is a recognition of the doubleness of the critical act. In simple terms, this means that we begin with a sense of what's wrong and proceed to a sense of how things can be made better. The initial, negative function of criticism resides in the negation of that which we see to be destructive and repressive of basic human needs — any "abridgment of human and *vital* response" provokes the need for criticism. The positive function of criticism is to constitute those conditions that we imagine and find to be ameliorative. The negative function of criticism thereby serves to "break the hold on the present," contingent reality and the constraints of immediate and pressing circumstances; the positive function seeks a wider framework which reinstates to criticism "the possibility of developing life-enhancing normative concepts as they pertain to human nature." Without such concepts, we may be hard pressed to make qualitative distinctions between the totalitarian characteristics of the modern state which have shaped our "civilized" selves and the moments of personal truth which seek to obliterate the oppressive weight of all those civilized monuments to technological progress and political power. Rooted in what Wilhelm Reich called the "life-positive" capacities in the species, Morris's *Primer* directs us to the kind of criticism which seeks the recovery and fulfillment of the denied and forgotten richness of being human.