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Culture's Public Face

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Can the public sphere be understood as a cultural phenomenon? Perhaps, although an approach through the social seems less circuitous. This may be due in part to Habermas's lucid formation in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* ([1962] 1989). The term "public sphere" conjures in the mind an image of place, whether we see the coffee houses, salons, and debating clubs of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, or computer stations interconnected by filamentous networks, or something hazier and more diffuse—an arena between the state and the private realm in which citizens openly debate matters of public concern. The language of place shades imperceptibly into that of institutions, whose connection to economics in turn accords them a privileged position. From its lofty perch, economics seems to underpin all cultural phenomena, as if it were itself acultural. Two approaches to the public sphere as social

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in nature can be found in this issue of *Public Culture* in the articles by Craig Calhoun and Nicholas Garnham (see pp. 267–280 and 251–265 in this issue).

I want to approach the problem from a different direction so as to gain a new perspective. As Habermas discovered, the view of the public sphere as social presupposes a faith in communicative rationality, in the access to truth that discussion and debate provide. Truth for him assumes a normative character—one must believe in communicative rationality if the public sphere project is to succeed. A cultural approach, in contrast, holds the question of truth in abeyance without definitively denying it. It sees the faith in the truth-producing process as itself investigable, part of the broader spectrum of cultural phenomena.

In this sense, the public sphere project is intrinsically cultural. It would not be so easy to see this were it not for the emergence in the 1990s of a public sphere debate *about* culture. What has been in the background—the assumption of universalizing rationality—has now come startlingly to the fore. In this article I want to plunge into that debate, but not so as to resolve it. Rather, I want to use it to illuminate public sphere processes from a cultural perspective. In doing so, I hope to throw light on the problematic of culture itself and, in particular, on the novel way in which this problematic works itself out in the modern nation-state. For change is sweeping across the communicative landscape: the contestation of public sphere rationality has become part and parcel of the public sphere process. Rather than operate silently as a presupposed background assumption, universalizing rationality is now noisily challenged with the multicultural view. And this in turn is changing the terms of the public sphere debate. Culture, in short, has become the object of manipulation by culture.

Under the rubric of multiculturalism, culture has come to be associated with local differences (the culture of blacks, gays, women, and ethnic groups) and opposed to an encompassing matrix. This matrix is viewed by some, at least, as noncultural and defined in terms of the rational laws of the marketplace, natural rights, and universal truths.[1] I want to argue that this matrix is in fact a cultural level (which can be called, for want of a better term, omega culture). This suggestion is hopelessly unoriginal, since one principal claim made by proponents of multiculturalism is that the dominant culture of modern America is just another culture. What is novel is the claim that nation-state culture is not culture in the sense of multiculturalism. It is not merely one of the cultures (which I propose to call alpha cultures) in a multicultural arena that just happens to be dominant. It is a distinct level and perhaps kind or at least facet of culture. Curiously, within the nation-state the term *culture* has been appropriated to refer to that to which nation-state-level culture is opposed, namely, alpha cultures. Consequently, from this point of view the nation-state appears to be acultural.

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[1] Use of the term multiculturalism to describe local differences within the nation-state is recent, but the general problem of how culture in the nation-state is discursively constituted as acultural has deeper roots, as will become clear subsequently.

How is this embedding accomplished? There is a strange alchemistry at work here in which culture produces its own metaculture—including the very terms *culture* and *multiculturalism*—which in turn defines part of itself as other than culture. It emphasizes certain general properties rather than others, separates out some aspects as acultural rather than cultural, and acknowledges relativity so as to claim universality and vice versa.

But it does not do so whimsically. There are in fact at least two faces to this entity. Recently, however, one of the faces has been obscured through the other's refinement, boldness, and beautification. Because of the way some of us now think about culture and concepts in the political arena, it has become difficult to see the other face for what it is. It is culture.

But it is not the culture that some proponents of multiculturalism imagine, that is, not that of ancient traditions handed down across the generations, but that of malleability, adaptation, and change; nor is it culture in the sense of homogeneously shared beliefs and practices, but rather in the sense of diffusion, differentiation, and linkage; nor again is it culture understood as purely local truths, but rather culture as potentially universal ones, capable of spreading throughout humanity. It is a culture that is distinguished from the idea that "everyone's got it," aligning instead with the older sense of cultivation and learning. This view recognizes differentiations in the degree to which culture has been acquired. To comprehend the modern public sphere of America as a cultural phenomenon, we need, in our blindness, a tactile reconstruction of the other face of this complex beast.

Marked and Unmarked Culture

How can something be both cultural and acultural? The answer proposed here focuses on the split between the two senses of culture, a specific and a general one. Something can be acultural in the specific sense, which is the sense of alpha culture, but still be cultural in the general sense, which is what I am calling omega culture. Because there are only two senses, the broader or unmarked sense becomes associated with the negation of the specific one.[2] For example, if culture in the marked or alpha sense is associated with tradition, then culture in the unmarked or omega sense is associated with the nontraditional or antitraditional, which, in the European and American case, becomes identified with the rational.

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[2] This is a well-known phenomenon within markedness theory, on which see Trubetzkoy ([1939] 1969), Waugh (1979), and Lyons (1977).

A schematization of this hierarchical relationship is presented in figure 1. In each case, the term on the right side is the marked member of the opposition, and the term on the left is a gloss for the negation of that marked term (i.e., nontraditional = rational, nonlocal = universal, non–life-world = system-world).

Ω culture

acultural	α cultural
rational	traditional
lateral	vertical
system-world	life-world
universal	local
Culture	culture
nation-state	ethnic, racial, gender grouping
world	nation-state

Figure 1. Omega and alpha culture

It is due to a sort of optical illusion that the modern American nation-state appears as acultural in the face of multiculturalism, as if in the gestalt drawing we see only the young woman's silhouette. If we contrast one of the many cultures of multiculturalism, say, Chicano culture, with another, say, African-American culture, the contrast poses no problem. Here we are contrasting one figure with another. We can compare musical aesthetics, culinary preferences, clothing styles, or family structures. However, if we try to contrast one of these multiple cultures with American culture, the contrast fails. It is like trying to compare the figure to the ground. Chicano culture cannot be opposed to American culture because it is contained within American culture, is part of it. American culture is the backdrop against which it emerges as salient. While we can characterize Chicano music, we cannot talk about it as distinct from American music; while we can characterize African-American food, we cannot oppose it to American food. Markedness oppositions become indistinguishable from political oppositions. To talk about a contrast of this sort, that is, a contrast between a constituent subculture and the broader culture of which it is part, would be in effect to assert the political autonomy of the subculture and to fracture the political union, at least under the present discursive constitution of the nation-state.

When the nation-state is contrasted with culture in this "sub-" sense, it appears as something other than culture, something that encompasses numerous cultures, weaving them together. But this is the sense of omega culture, which can in this limited context be glossed as the culture of the nation-state distinct from the alpha cultures of its constituent ethnic and racial groups. It is a kind of culture that can be regarded as acultural. But the nation-state is only omega cultural when it is looked at from the point of view of multiculturalism. It too can be foregrounded, as if the haggard face of an old woman suddenly and unmistakably emerged from the young woman's profile. If it is understood as contrastive in relation to other nation-state cultures, for example, American culture as opposed to Brazilian culture, then American culture is alpha cultural. Nation-state culture can in turn be distinguished from global culture, which appears in this case in the omega guise. It is the background against which a distinct culture emerges, but it is not itself culture.

These two guises appear in modern America in the form of distinct metacultural claims, that is, claims about the nature of culture. The claim for omega culture, confronted with alpha cultures, is that it is universal or true or of broader scope, whereas alpha culture is only valid, at best, for the group in question. It is not universal. The corresponding claim for alpha culture is that there are no universally valid cultures, and, in particular, that omega culture is just another alpha culture with no more claim to validity than the alpha culture in question. Whether these metacultural claims are true is not at issue here. The significant point, I want to argue, is that neither the omega nor the alpha claim can be shown to be true a priori merely from an understanding of the nature of culture.

An argument from the perspective of alpha culture cannot demonstrate the inherent falseness of the claims of universality made from the perspective of omega culture; in other words, one cannot prove that omega culture is in principle just alpha culture. Attempts to do so lead to paradoxes. If we affirm that there are no universals, or, in another refraction, that "all knowledge is partial and perspectival," we make a statement that if true is itself universal and therefore part of omega culture, thereby proving what it sets out to deny. Conversely, if the statement is false, then there are some universals, which again argues for omega culture. But we need not enter into games of logic to recognize the inability of the alpha cultural position to disprove the existence of omega culture. The respect for the beliefs of other cultures that goes along with an alpha cultural perspective requires us to take seriously the metacultural beliefs held by others, including the transcendental validity claims made by proponents of omega culture. But if we take those claims seriously, then we must entertain the possibility that omega culture may be truer or better or more adaptive than alpha culture.

At the same time, the argument that something is omega cultural, and therefore universally and transcendantly valid, also fails. Acknowledging a threat from alpha cultures is acknowledging that there are different and competing beliefs and practices and that the basis for subscribing to them may not be their superior fit with the noumenal world. It may be, for example, the political and economic structures they bolster instead. But if we acknowledge these motives for support of alpha cultures, how do we know that the omega cultural beliefs and practices are not also endorsed merely for the political and economic structures they bolster? If truth does not inherently win out, then it is unclear whether it has won out in this case, or at least it is not evident just from understanding of the nature of culture.

One might conclude from this that the debate over universal claims reflects a conceptual confusion about the nature of culture, a conclusion that has some merit. But I want to argue here that the problem goes deeper, that metaculture and culture are so closely entwined, so mutually dependent, that it is unclear whether there are merely two ways of talking about culture – the alpha and omega ways – or whether there are, instead, two tendencies within culture, two forces, so to speak, that somehow conflict. Specifically, the metacultural distinction may pick up on and bring into focus an important contrast at the level of culture that exists prior to or independently of its metacultural recognition. I will return to this point without finally resolving it, since the answer must be sought in the study of different, actually occurring metacultural phenomena, and that answer will be subject in any case (once it enters the public arena) to the uncertainty posed by the alpha/omega problematic in general.

The Collective Brain and Rule by Ghosts

Max Weber's rational/traditional dichotomy, reflecting a historical-evolutionary view of society, bears an intriguing resemblance to the omega culture/alpha culture distinction.[3] In Weber's view, societies were gradually ceasing to be traditional, governed by historically received ways of acting and thinking, and becoming rational, governed by the dictates of reason. Rationality in this sense is a metacultural term, allowing us to trace the roots of the omega culture concept back to the Enlightenment. Indeed, the opposition of the Enlightenment to the Dark Ages – with the light of reason opposed to the darkness of tradition – has the simultaneously descriptive and evaluative resonances of the rational/traditional dichotomy, and the evaluative character of rationality, once it enters the public arena as a metacultural term, acts also as a powerful motivator and rallying cry.

What is the relationship of the rational/traditional dichotomy to the problematic of culture? From an anthropological perspective, the distinguishing diacritic of culture has been its social transmissibility, and in this the concept is opposed to a notion of biological or genetic determination. The critical idea is that human beings learn not only from the environment but also from others so that knowledge and prior environmental learning are socially transmitted, thereby eliminating the need that each new generation learn everything from scratch. Implicit in the concept is the notion that learning comes from the past. Consequently, with respect to the rational/traditional dichotomy, the culture concept appears to be aligned with tradition. A traditional society is one in which action and thought are governed by historical patterns. Indeed, anthropologists have often emphasized the role of continuity and the maintenance of tradition within their analyses of social life. This face of culture is hazy and ghostlike, bearing the traces of its ancient and mysterious past.

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[3] Weber's mediating third term was "charismatic" (Weber [1922] 1978).

However, tradition is not the whole of the culture concept, only one of its refractions. Social transmission necessarily implies the anteriority of what is transmitted, but the concept of tradition rigidifies anteriority, making it appear to determine present existence to the exclusion of contemporary learning. The patterns are handed down across the generations without regard for the developments that take place within a generation. But a crucial aspect of culture is not only that it can be learned but also that it can be *unlearned.* The original concept, in setting itself up in opposition to biological or racial determination, did not imply only the tyranny of the ancestors. On the contrary, it indicated also a strong degree of malleability that biological determination lacked, the possibility of rebellion against ancestors. In this sense, the concept was the opposite of rigid determination by the past, which could be seen as identified with biological determination. Cultures reacted quickly to changing situations, responding within short time frames lasting a single generation or even years or less. In this sense, culture was not only a holding environment for received wisdom. It was also a responsive, adaptive, self-organizing entity, a kind of collective brain greater than the individual brains of which it was composed. In this second sense, culture was also rational and, hence, identifiable with omega culture. This face is cerebral, and in it we can glimpse the brain in action with calculations and projections and visions of alternative futures.

Although the culture concept originally had both of these faces, in metacultural discourse of the contemporary public debate culture has become identified with only one of them—tradition. It is seen as ruled by ghosts, although not until recently by white European male ghosts. Within the national/traditional scheme, tradition was what other societies had, and anthropologists tended to study these other societies, typically those as remote as possible from modern western societies. Such societies could be labeled "traditional" within this scheme. They were dominated by the past, and that past was an obstacle to their modernization, to their rationalization. At the same time, they were inevitably, if languidly, and sometimes in violent paroxysms, moving toward rationality. It was only the fetters of the past that kept them from getting there, that kept them from being just like western societies, that is, rational.

If anthropologists applied the term culture to those societies that were the most traditional, within the rational/traditional scheme, they also tended to ignore nation-state culture, looking instead at tribal enclaves within broader social groupings. Indeed, when they turned their attention to American culture, as in Lloyd Warner's Yankee City Series (1941–59), which focused on a specific city, they tended to look for community-like subgroupings within the nation. And it is here that they along with those adopting anthropological methods found heterogeneity, presumably stemming from the persistence of tradition. The origins of multiculturalism, as a metacultural element of culture, a way of talking about modern America, lay in part in this discovery of heterogeneity, which could be presumably attributed to the distorting influence of tradition and which would be washed out through assimilation. In this way culture, originally including aspects of both the collective brain and the tyranny of ancestors, came to be identified with alpha culture.

Lateral and Vertical Culture

The recent metacultural tendency to identify culture with alpha culture and hence with heterogeneity and diversity surfaces also in Habermas's own formulation of the system-world/life-world contrast.[4] Habermas takes the rational/traditional dichotomy inside the nation-state, viewing modern society as intrinsically heterogeneous, consisting of life-worlds held together by the impersonal forces of the system, which he identifies considerably with the marketplace and the rationality of monetary transactions. And, of course, for him this system-world has caused the steady deterioration of the rational public sphere as an integrative force in modern society. Although his distinction resonates with Weber's earlier contrast between economy and society, Habermas spells out more clearly the inability of the life-worlds, on their own, to provide a basis of articulation for society as a whole.

When looked at from the outside, life-worlds—background, taken-for-granted assumptions about the world—like cultures appear to be internally homogeneous. They are recognized as specific only when one is contrasted with another. The contrast appears, so to speak, externally. On the inside, where the assumption of homogeneity goes unchallenged, culture can be seen as uniformly shared and hence as transmitted across the generations in a block, such that you either have it or you do not have it. For many years, the model for this kind of all-or-nothing sharing was language, whose patterns one had assimilated or not, as the case may be. Without the linguistic patterns, the strings of sound were unintelligible gibberish; with them, they suddenly acquired meaning.

Social transmission across generations became associated with this kind of total sharing, with those inside the culture having something that others lacked.

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[4] Habermas's formulation is mapped out in his two-volume set, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987).

This kind of vertical culture, transmitted across the generations, is thus exclusionary. It defines an in-group and an out-group and emphasizes the boundary between them. Simultaneously, it levels the differences within the group, making culture appear to be homogeneously shared. But since one internally homogeneous culture is distinct from the next, this vertical aspect—culture as tradition, passed on across the generations—is simultaneously a source of heterogeneity externally, in Habermas's scheme requiring the operation of the system for its integration.

Anthropological methodology has tended to play up this vertical aspect of culture in which individuals became interchangeable. One could as well study it through this individual as that, since there was internal homogeneity. In the early part of this century, students of Native American social life, who were interested primarily in investigating cultures they regarded as nearly extinct and accessible in many instances only through memory, in fact studied cultures largely through single individuals. For this reason, a given culture could acquire an individual face—the Sun Chief for the Hopi (Talayesva and Simmons 1942) or Crashing Thunder for the Winnebago (Radin 1920, 1926). The commonality, the shared culture, could be identified with a single visage, with the arch of a nose, the height of a forehead, the shape of a mouth.

But culture as reflected in the life-world concept—that is, as unproblematically shared culture—is a specific refraction of the broader concept; it is alpha culture. At the same time, although it has not always been emphasized by anthropologists, there is another aspect of the culture concept, namely, that which is transmitted laterally, not across the generations but rather between people existing at one time and often between separate groups regarded as having distinct vertical cultures. Culture in this case is not an all-or-nothing proposition; rather, it is a matter of degree, an attractive force in which differences exist. Since culture tends to spread wherever possible, the conditions for that spread can be created by distinct cultures coming into contact. The lateral aspect cannot be given a personal face because it cannot be embodied in any one individual. This face of culture—the omega face—is nondescript, generic, identifiable only as human.

The modern market system is an example of something that is cultural in the broad sense even though it is seemingly capable of articulating differences. It depends on social learning and experience—knowledge of bookkeeping, credit, compound interest—as well as on practices too numerous to detail, but no two individuals need be exactly alike; on the contrary, it is important that they be different in at least some measure. No one could seriously imagine the market as acultural in this broad sense of culture. We cannot see it in anything other than fantasy as directly emerging from the interactions of untutored individuals trying to satisfy their individual needs. At the same time, because it involves the articulation of difference, it cannot be readily encompassed under the model of sharing and commonalty and internal homogeneity. Instead, this is a distinct kind of culture, one in which the articulation of difference is not only possible but actually essential.

This aspect of culture is profoundly impersonal, a feature that Durkheim, among others, clearly recognized. It is a relational, articulating force, one capable of fusing different individuals and distinct perspectives. Here we see the lateral aspect of social transmission, which results in the constant mixing and remixing of different traditions, each understood separately in terms of vertical transmission across generations.

It is not surprising that culture should have this lateral aspect, which indeed goes along with malleability. If the crucial characteristic of culture is its ability to be passed on socially, there are two principal routes. One route leads across generations, which allows culture a limitless horizon for transmission. Another route, however, is between individuals and groups who do not already share the same culture via historical transmission. This route also opens up new and seemingly endless horizons for transmission. Of course, if lateral transmission were to be completed on a global scale, the two aspects would become one. Precisely because of the malleability of culture, however, new elements are constantly created, starting new vertical trends that can become lateral trends as well, competing with other received wisdoms. Malleability coupled with lateral transmissibility, therefore, provides a constant source of articulation of difference. This is the impersonal, but also inclusionary, face of culture, which is for this reason a wellspring of articulated heterogeneity and diversity.

Universal and Local Culture

Whereas alpha culture can readily define itself in terms of group boundaries, and in this sense it is local, omega culture tends to defy localization. Metaphorically it is culture at the nation-state level, but it also represents the incorporative tendency of culture as opposed to its exclusionary tendency.

This contrast was present in the early formulations of culture as against biological determinism. Culture explained why people differed from one another—in their customs, beliefs, values—but it also explained how they could be similar. There was nothing in their genetic make-up that prevented them from sharing a single way of life. Indeed, Boas was at pains to emphasize this malleability of human beings: the differences were not fixed. Through education and learning, any individual could effectively assimilate into another culture. Correspondingly, precisely because culture is socially transmittable, it tends in fact to be transmitted wherever there is social interaction. This is the diffusing, expanding, incorporative aspect of social transmittability. Culture is learned, but it is only learned. Old learning can be undone by new learning. Maximally, this would require a generation; however, cultural transformation through relearning can take place, in some not inconsiderable measure, even during the lifetime of a single individual.

In its maximally diffusing and expansive tendency, culture is potentially universal. There is no contradiction between the notion of culture and that of universality. On the contrary, the possibility of global encompassment is implicit in the basic notion of culture, just as is the possibility of local difference. The claim to aculturalness is therefore a claim to alpha aculturalness, but not necessarily to omega aculturalness. To assert a universal is in many cases to assert omega cultural status.

The interaction of two forces, one toward lateral and one toward vertical transmission, results in the complex problematic of universalism and localism. On the one hand, there is the propensity for culture to be passed down vertically across the generations and despite lateral social interactions along which a different culture might also pass. This propensity causes resistance to assimilation to other cultural patterns on the part of the group's members. Hence, one face of culture looks out on a field of resistance, whereby the impulse to transmit across generations thwarts the impulse to transmit laterally within a generation across boundaries. This is the field of multiple cultures. On the other hand, there is the tendency for culture to diffuse laterally through social interactions, spreading from one individual or group to the next within a given generation. This is the diffusing, incorporative tendency, but it is a tendency that comes into conflict with the historical one that produces resistance. Hence, the other face of culture looks out on a field of conquest in which local resistances are overcome. This is the field of unitary culture.

The question of universality is, in this light, a question of lateral spread. A universal truth is one that actually succeeds in achieving universal lateral spread. It is, of course, one thing to achieve and another to claim, and we can imagine that certain aspects of culture may achieve universality—technological innovations, for example—without any corresponding claims. Alternatively, some claims to universality may be made without the corresponding achievement, such as claims about beliefs. The key point here, however, is that there is no contraction between the culture concept and claims to universality. A claim to universality may or may not be borne out: the cultural element in question may in the course of its lateral spread encounter other cultural elements that block it. But there is nothing inherently false about the claim, at least from the perspective of the general concept of culture. On the contrary, since one tendency is for culture to spread laterally, universal encompassment is a reasonable limiting point.

Culture with a Capital *C*

A crucial feature of the traditional concept of culture is that culture is learned; it is cultivation, and its acquisition takes time. Neither a biological given nor a simple reflex of the physical environment, culture depends on social interactions, and these unfold in time. For this reason, there is asymmetry in the idea of culture: some individuals have more of it than others. This is minimally the case in comparing children with adults, but distinctions are possible and, indeed, are made in many societies around the world among adults themselves. Some are more learned, more cultivated than others.

In the twentieth-century history of the culture concept, this asymmetrical, temporal aspect is downplayed in favor of the notion of culture as something that the members of a society share more or less equally—all God's children got culture. Whether or not it was E. B. Tylor who first used the term in its modern sense, it is apparent that the older usage had precisely the opposite sense. It referred to high culture, possessed by persons of great learning. Implicitly, great learning was confined to western societies, so that tribal peoples and the unschooled in the West lacked "culture" in this sense.

Turn-of-the-century anthropologists turned that meaning around, demonstrating that nonliterate societies had "culture" as well; it was merely a culture different from that of Western high culture. It involved learning, but the content of that learning was different. Westerners developed in this way a new-found respect for non-Western cultures, especially for so-called primitive peoples.

Of course, recognizing that other peoples had culture, in the sense of cultivation, did not mean that their culture was regarded as of equal value. Early theories were evolutionary, placing Western civilization at the peak or endpoint of a linear process, which provided the basis, for example, for the organization of displays in the British Museum, where one could see a linear sequence of weapons from primitive projectiles such as spears, through bows and arrows, through the crossbow, and so forth, up to the Gatling gun. While non-Western peoples may have had culture, they did not have Western culture.

If they had a lower form, however, it was significant that they had culture at all, since, prior to the twentieth century, this was largely denied to the lower classes within Western societies, where the term culture was reserved for high culture, or culture with a capital *C*. Comparisons through the first half of the twentieth century tended to be between Western and non-Western societies, assuming, implicitly perhaps, that Westerners had only one culture, which was differentially shared. Cultivated individuals simply possessed more of it than others.

When the culture concept began to be used in research on America, and especially in relation to ethnic and class groupings, the notion of local cultures within the nation-state developed. It is not that there had been no prior awareness of diversity but that the diversity gradually came to be understood in terms of culture in the twentieth century. Culture with a lowercase *c* came to replace culture with a capital *C*.

What is curious at this point in history is the seemingly complete reversal that has taken place in the metacultural arena. The notion of culture as high culture has largely disappeared, with the attendant leveling of differences from the point of view of value assessments. Each culture within multiculturalism is equally valid and valuable. This seems to have been a consequence of the working out of the "other-peoples-have-culture-too" notion. But it is now strikingly apparent within the new multicultural environment of contemporary public sphere debate that, for some individuals, high Western culture is not culture but rather something else, truth or rationality or universal worth. Whereas nineteenth-century Western metaculture opposed high culture to the lower class lack of culture, in the late twentieth century the multiple cultures of modern America stand opposed to the acultural level of the nation-state.

What else is high culture than culture? Here we return to the problematic of cultivation. There is nothing in the basic culture concept (that of social transmission) that necessitates a view of different alpha cultures as all equivalent in terms of value. This view derives from a working out of the notion that culture is *only* culture, that it is *only* social learning. But there is another view of that same insight, namely, that it *is* social learning. In this latter view, social learning by a group of individuals who have devoted their lives, perhaps over generations, to a given area of endeavor is not equivalent to the nonspecialized social mastery over that area, whether it be knowledge, practice, or artistic expression, that is also socially learned but outside the group (e.g., in another society).

An example of this is the community of physicists. In the broad sense of culture as social transmission, that community unquestionably has a culture: it would be impossible to imagine modern physics in the absence of social transmission of knowledge. At the same time, within the community, individuals devote their lives to modifying received wisdom by progressively more fine-grained investigation of the material world. Here the alignment with the malleable aspect of culture is apparent.

Culture as cultivation, after a certain level of social learning, depends on this kind of specialization because of the limits placed on the capacity of individuals to master all there is to be socially transmitted within a given area. The smaller the area of mastery, the greater the possibility of cultivation within it. This is true not only of areas of knowledge but also of those involving practical activity and performance. It is true, for example, in dance, where certain movements may be emphasized, as in ballet, with the result that greater specialization goes along with greater mastery. Years of practice may be needed just to put one in a position to replicate a given movement passed on by a virtuoso teacher. The same may be said of music and other artistic activities. Specialization and cultivation go hand in hand, and they result in the possibility of greater mastery over the area in question than in a generalizing culture.

Correspondingly, specialization and cultivation are allied (at least in the contemporary debate) with the impersonal, articulating, lateral aspect of culture, since the specializing subculture is dependent on other subcultures. In the personal aspect of culture—where every individual is endowed with culture, and, in this regard, is equivalent to every other individual—the lateral, binding aspect is less apparent. The whole of the culture is found in any one of its parts. But in the impersonal aspect, the culture as a whole is nonrecoverable from a given individual. Culture as cultivation, therefore, which seems at first unrelated to the impersonal, turns out on closer inspection to be correlated with it through the phenomenon of specialization. That correlation can at least be asserted in the course of contemporary debate.

Through specialization and the impersonal, it becomes possible to pass on more detailed learning in virtually every aspect of culture. Insofar as culture is understood as that which is socially transmitted, cultivation and specialization enhance culture. They open up greater room for its operation, permitting more fine-grained transmission. They are superchargers for the alpha version of culture, accelerating the latter's basic processes, making it a new, and, in some respects (or so the argument goes) better machine.

When we examine a given area of mastery, therefore, one cannot reasonably claim that an omega cultural element is superior to an alpha one in its basic task. An alpha cultural element, based on the personal, shared aspect of culture, cannot be said to be equivalent to its omega counterpart. The claims stemming from multiculturalism that they are equivalent are based on the idea that culture is only social learning. But from an "it-*is*-social-learning" point of view, we must recognize also the intrinsic asymmetry present in the culture concept, or so this line of argumentation goes. Some learning requires more cultivation. Insofar as any specific area of culture is concerned, therefore, omega culture may be superior to alpha culture, because it allows greater cultivation and greater mastery.

If a specializing omega culture proves its point-by-point superiority over a generalizing alpha culture—superiority in a specific area of knowledge or performance—only by an ungainly leap of faith, can we conclude that a specializing culture is, in some overall cosmic sense, better or truer than a generalizing one? The problem is analogous to that of complex and simple biological organisms—human beings versus, say, bacteria. The verdict is still out on which are, in the long run, more adaptive, even if evolution has proceeded in the direction of complexity.

Omega/Alpha Culture and Noumena

Characterized from the outside, alpha culture occupies no privileged position with respect to the noumenal world. It is only culture; it lays no claim to superiority vis-à-vis other cultures. It is one form of knowledge, one set of values, one way of doing things among many. This is the sense of culture that has come to us through contemporary anthropology and now cultural studies, and it is the sense used in the term multiculturalism, when looked at from the point of view of the modern American nation-state and its public sphere processes. This sense is present already in the extension of the term culture from Western high culture to Tylor's *Primitive Culture* ([1874] 1958) and through Boas's *Race, Language, and Culture* (1940). Still, there is arguably little in the way of a theoretical-philosophical foundation to justify the delinking of culture and the noumenal world that has taken place primarily since the 1960s.

The alpha cultural point of view, created by the European and American intelligentsia, is fueled in some measure by the linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure. In taking a relational, distributional approach to the linguistic sign and linguistic meaning, structuralism seemed to sever language and reality. This was implicit in Saussure's formulation of the "principle of arbitrariness," wherein sign and object are decoupled. The same underlying argument is reprised in the poststructural simulacrum, effectively denaturalized despite its appearance of authenticity. The supermarket apple, cultivated under highly controlled circumstances, dowsed with pesticides, and polished to a high gloss, appears more natural, more "applelike" than one from an untended orchard. Even appearance is taken in by the workings of alpha culture, understood as Saussurean.

The problem of noumena emerges also in the semiotic framework of C. S. Peirce, in which the "dynamoid object"—the object underlying the sign, and, hence, appearances—was also inaccessible. However, this did not mean for Peirce that all higher-level signs, through which noumena might be cognized, were equally valid or invalid representations of noumena. For him, the interpretations of the world through signs tended to confirm or disconfirm one another, and semiosis was an open-ended process in which a community of sign users coordinates the multiple signs and decides which are better and worse representations of the object, presumably in the same way it decides, for example, about the relative utility of metal as against stone for weapons and tools. This is the evolutionary model of culture as progressing or getting better, and it is the notion embedded in Western science. In the realm of technology, some innovations prove better than others, so that, in the archaeological record, new tools and implements arise and quickly spread while old ones die out. Similarly, in the realm of knowledge, some ideas develop that are found to be more satisfying than others, or at least this is the argument.

The evolutionary view of sign systems is in keeping with the other face of culture, omega culture. The spread of the idea, as encoded in discourse and as part of culture, has to do with the utility of the idea as discourse within a broader scheme. What is important is that there is nothing in the general notion of culture that leads us to categorically deny or affirm such a possibility. Omega culture is culture conceived as spreading laterally and, therefore, as potentially universal. For all we know, that universality may have to do with the superiority of the idea for the species as a whole, taken as a community of interpreters, in much the same way that, for example, fire proved its universal worth to humans.

There is a sense, not derivable from the broader notion of culture but arguable within the public realm, in which culture evolves adaptively like biological life, as hinted at in Geertz's (1973) image of culture as supplementing or superseding the genetic code. Reading the analogy backward, we could think of genes as sign vehicles that encode information about a noumenal world. The organisms they produce are derivative signs, like deductions from premises, which are tested against noumena. Better and worse representations of the noumenal world are possible, leading the organism and its associated representation in the form of genetic material to prosper or to die out. Of course, the organism may also construct its environment as part of its representation of noumena. The point here, however, is that the general culture concept, refracted as omega culture, is continuous with biological life, in which organisms can be seen as interpretations of noumena. Both contain an evaluative moment in which interpretations are judged better or worse. In this sense, any element of an alpha culture survives insofar as it represents a better fit, a better interpretation of the dynamoid object. This represents an evolutionary argument for the omega facet.

Why Metaculture?

One might ask why culture produces its own metaculture, and, in particular, why modern American culture produces this curious metacultural bifurcation of omega and alpha culture if culture, in its broadest sense, has to do merely with social transmission or circulation and encompasses both of these facets. The answer to the first, I suggest, has to do with the idea of transmission or circulation itself, whether vertical (across generations) or lateral (within a generation across boundaries). One might say that any aspect of culture is inert. It contains no force that would cause it to spread, to perpetuate itself, in the face of resistance in the form of alternatives. That force is lodged in metaculture, which in effect supplies a reason, a motivation, for the transmission. The interpretation of the element, where interpretation is regarded in its broadest possible terms, is the force that propels.

In the restricted context of public debates over multiculturalism, the concept of metaculture is too narrowly framed to encompass this broad type, although this narrow framing may be what is in fact so distinctive of the modern public sphere. Metaculture, understood more broadly, however, encompasses any evaluative response, such as aesthetic judgment. In this context, violence as a force is metacultural and, indeed, may be a fundamental manifestation of metaculture. Not all violence can be understood in this way, but certainly we can count among the manifestations of metaculture violence specifically directed at enforcing some aspect of culture and, hence, insuring its perpetuation in the face of change, or at forcing someone else to adopt some element of culture to which they do not already subscribe. State-sponsored violence in the form of wars of conquest is metacultural in this sense. So too is ethnic violence and other forms of resistance. Metacultural violence may and perhaps typically does result from collisions occurring along two different paths of cultural spread, where the elements in question are mutually exclusive.

If any kind of evaluative response to culture is metacultural, in the broad sense, the explicit referential discourse about multiculturalism characteristic of American society in the early 1990s is a special type. Here there is a clash between metadiscourses, which, because they are referential, maintain a peculiar detachment from the culture they interpret. One metadiscourse, that of omega culture, proclaims the culture it bolsters to be universal—not being content with implicit or de facto demonstrations of universality. Simultaneously and in seeming contradiction to this proclaimed universality, it portrays its culture as threatened by alpha cultures, that is, by local cultures that are displacing it. Paradoxically, if an element of omega culture could be so readily displaced by an element of alpha culture, it would not be an element of omega culture, at least not in the simple sense of one whose fit with respect to the noumenal world is obviously better than that of any alpha culture. Otherwise, why should the omega cultural element be displaced? Why does it need to be defended against what is regarded, after all, as only alpha culture, that is, as not universal, not rational, not quintessentially true?

But the corresponding argument applies to proponents of alpha multiculturalism. Their metacultural claim is (1) that the multiple subcultures are valid and worthy in their own right; hence, there is a reason to perpetuate them and to resist assimilation to the dominant omega culture; but also (2) that omega culture is really not universally valid at all but rather only a form of alpha culture. But if omega culture is really just alpha culture, that is, if it is only culture, then there is nothing to fear from it. It has no more intrinsic force than the alpha cultures in question. The metadiscourse of multiculturalism casts doubt on itself by undermining one of its own premises, namely, that omega culture is nothing but alpha culture. Why should it be concerned about the predatory character of omega culture if there is nothing intrinsically more forceful or powerful about it?

If both discourses are internally suspect, however, it is nevertheless possible to see the social purpose beneath the descriptive one in each case—and, indeed, to imagine that the tension between them is the driving force behind key public debates at this point in history. Each provides a rationale for transmitting the culture it champions. In the one case, truth must be protected against the encroachment of falseness; in the other, one tradition must be defended against another, no more valid tradition. Metaculture furnishes the motivation, the impulse for culture, even if that motive is cerebral rather than visceral, mental rather than physical. Metaculture, in its incarnation as referential discourse, may be more ethereal, more evanescent than its violent incarnation, but it is not therefore any less effective. Indeed, discursive metaculture may have the singular virtue that it is irresolvable; there is no definitive resolution to the problem of cultural flows. The two faces of culture are colloidally suspended, permitting the dominance of the omega elements without, simultaneously, eliminating the alpha elements.

Ideology and Power

If metaculture can be efficacious as a force impelling cultural elements to spread, what about institutions and power? After all, if an element of culture is not necessarily perpetuated just because of its intrinsic worth, that is, because of its fit with the noumenal world, but instead requires a metacultural interpretation to impel it, might perpetuation not also be a function of the value of an element with respect to other aspects of culture, especially those having to do with differential privilege—what is usually called the social, social structure, or political domination? The cultural element in question is regarded, in this sense, as having ideological value.

Indeed, from a strong version of the institution-and-power argument, all of culture is ideological, and an ideological cultural element that lacks intrinsic force can perpetuate itself only through institutions that are based on differential power. At the same time, however, it is apparent that power relations, because they are socially constructed and transmitted formations, are also part of culture in broad terms. To say that an element of culture is transmitted just because of institutions and power relations is to say that it is transmitted because of other elements of culture, which are tenaciously adapted and for which the element in question is significant enough to call them into play.

But there is a paradox here, for the original element itself must be adapted or represent a better fit vis-à-vis noumena; otherwise, why should it be of significance to the other elements to perpetuate it? How can we both assert that the element is intrinsically inert with respect to transmission and yet that it is simultaneously significant enough to other elements of culture that it must be perpetuated?

The paradox can be resolved, but only once again by splitting the culture concept in two, that is, making some elements that are transmitted a part of culture and other elements a part of something else, in this case, the social or institutional arenas—and this leads us back to the universalizing, communicative rational presuppositions of a social approach to the public sphere. This formulation adopts the view that culture is alpha culture and that there are some things that, while socially transmitted, are nevertheless not alpha culture. In particular, socially transmitted structures of domination are not alpha cultural. But if they are not, then what are they? The answer is that they are part of a realm in which differential fit with respect to noumena is accepted, that of omega culture. Arguments seeking to make a distinction between culture and the social are replicating a now-familiar opposition between alpha and omega culture. The former is just culture, whereas the latter is something else, something truly forceful or adapted or tenacious. Ironically, therefore, some social versions of the public sphere debate may implicitly actually be derivable from one side of the debate over culture.

While the argument starts from the premise that alpha cultural elements have no intrinsic connection to noumena, it ends up arguing that they do, but only when mediated by omega culture, here in the form of social structure. In some accounts, variability in the social even explains variability in the cultural, and, importantly, the social does have a linkage to the noumenal world—some social formations are more adaptive or enduring than others. Such accounts therefore end up arguing for omega culture. We can see why Habermas's social view of the public sphere, from this perspective, privileges universalizing rationality.

Even if a cultural element is accepted not for its intrinsic worth but because of the social apparatus that bolsters it, there must still be connection between the two. Why should individuals pass the element on? They must have some inkling of the connection, however intuitive, however subconscious it may be. Moreover, unless the connection is obvious or immediately inferable, it is at best tenuous and subject to failure, not to mention manipulation. Therefore some representation of the relationship is necessary, some metacultural formulation by means of which it is fixed. That metacultural formulation is also, of course, itself a part of the culture. Even under circumstances in which omega cultural elements are rendered explicable by reference to the social, we must invoke metaculture as the motive force behind the elements.

The Nation-State

What is the modern European/American nation-state as a cultural phenomenon, or, better yet, as a metacultural phenomenon? One answer is that it is a specific refraction of the two tendencies within culture, a specific admixture of alpha and omega culture. The contemporary public sphere can certainly be seen from that point of view. Since culture always involves at least these two tendencies, there is nothing distinctive in principle about this nation-state culture. What is distinctive, or so the preceding arguments suggest, is rather the interpretation of alpha and omega culture at the metacultural level. The argument is that Euro-American nation-state culture is defined by its metaculture, which makes room for both alpha and omega aspects and which therefore in effect permits internal diversity while simultaneously striving for stability in its dominant formations.

This can be seen in the explicitly dichotomous metacultural discourses discussed earlier, involving contrasts between rational and traditional, system-world and life-world, culture with a capital *C* and lowercase *c*, and so forth. These discourses maintain the asymmetry of the omega/alpha culture relationship, even while in some cases positing an evolutionary movement that might efface one of the poles altogether. Weber's rationalization process is a prime example, since the movement of history there is away from the traditional and toward the rational. In its refraction as modernization theory, all traditional (alpha) cultures eventually, in some hypothetical future, disappear. The trick, it would seem, is to appeal to the omega side while simultaneously making room for the alpha.

It is important also that the metaculture is referential discourse, that is, talk or writing about culture. It is not, for instance, violence, although the latter remains a possibility. The problem with solutions like violence is that they tend toward an extreme so that one of the two sides wins out definitively. In that case, the colloidal quality of the nation or public as an uneasy mixture of sameness and difference, of omega and alpha culture, is destroyed. Under a discursive metaculture, in contrast, it is difficult to imagine a final victory for one side or another, since counterarguments can always take shape, provided they are not forcibly suppressed.

This is not to say that everyone need share a single dichotomous discourse, the discourse of modernization, for example, for the nation-state to work. In the contemporary American situation, for example, the upholders of omega culture are opposed to the proponents of alpha culture, with neither side recognizing the dependence of each on the other, if the nation-state-type solution is to work. The polarization in this case, however, seems potentially benign since either position is internally inconsistent. It seems unlikely that one side will achieve a decisive victory over the other.

At the same time, the dichotomous discourses themselves are not always capable of maintaining the colloidal state, since a monolithic formation threatens to precipitate. This may have been the problem with modernization theory, which was an essentially assimilationist metadiscourse seeking to overcome the separatist discourse of earlier periods. Because the extreme of modernization theory—total assimilation—was too real and immediate a possibility, its efficacy as a colloidal metadiscourse was limited; multiculturalism can be seen in some sense as a reaction to that extreme.

The modern European and American nation-state and public sphere, based on a balance between omega and alpha metacultural descriptions, is one in which multiple alpha cultures can coexist under a dominant omega culture. This may be the general tendency of all nation-states; it may be implicit in the very conception of the nation-state, although the original idea on which the latter was based was the fusion of diverse peoples, of diverse cultures, into a single people and culture. But nation-states have taken very different orientations to internal alpha cultural diversity—hence, the differing fates of the public sphere. The violent suppression of diversity has been at least as common if not more so as its protection and nurturance, and the rhetoric of human rights has had more luck at protecting individuals than cultures. The recent resurgence of allegiance to the public sphere in the former Soviet Union, in parts of Eastern Europe, and in Latin America should not obscure that crucial fact.

But the global system of nation-states does tend to secure a place for metacultural discourses based on the admixture of omega and alpha aspects, because, where internal diversity is supported by a metaculture, it is reinforced by migration across boundaries from territories with a predatory state culture. Interestingly, while the latter may ground itself in a metaculture of omega superiority, in fact, against the backdrop of the broader global system, the homogenizing omega culture becomes an alpha culture and hence a source of diversity for other systems in which the metacultural idea of a mixture or balance prevails.

The Politics of Metaculture

How does the politics of metaculture during the Boasian period stack up against the politics of multiculturalism in the early 1990? The periods confront, in some sense, inverse problems. In the early part of this century, a key issue in the United States was immigration. The metacultural configuration tended toward racialism, with differences between populations being attributed to biology. Immigrant groups would never assimilate to the dominant culture. The key task of the Boasians was to resist this biologization of the metacultural configuration of alpha and omega culture by showing that race and culture were not inextricably linked and, in fact, immigrant populations could assimilate into and become indistinguishable from dominant populations. The task was to argue the omega cultural side from the possibility that alpha cultures—or, at any rate, the people subscribing to them—might change and assimilate into the dominant culture, a possibility that some purveyors of metaculture denied.

The solution acknowledged the dominant culture but recognized it as dominant for evolutionary *cultural* rather than biological reasons. The Boasians had to defeat the metacultural view that there were extracultural factors inhibiting the transformation of peoples who had immigrated. In this, they were arguing for what has been called here omega culture, that is, for the adaptive, changing side of culture. They argued, in other words, the opposite of the multicultural position.

Diffusion was much more important to them than was tradition. Whereas the concern among multiculturalists is resistance to the spread of a dominant culture and the preservation of local traditions and differences, the Boasians tried to show that cultures could change, that people could assimilate.

The omega cultural theme was played out especially in the concept of the culture area, where diffusion has resulted in the sharing of culture traits by peoples of diverse backgrounds and where the areal culture was adapted to the ecological conditions in which it occurred – better adapted, in fact, than other cultural formations that may have taken shape in that environment. It exhibited, or so its proponents argued, a positive fit with the noumenal world.

As a point of political reference, the culture concept has shifted polarities over the past century. Now that the possibility of assimilation has been established at the metacultural plane – and this possibility represents a hard-won victory over the forces of metacultural racialization – emphasis has been placed on the right of other cultures to be different and to maintain themselves in opposition to the forces of assimilation. This shift has moved the culture concept toward tradition and sharing. Simultaneously, the notion of better or worse fit with respect to noumena has been categorically denied. Different cultures are equivalent because no culture has a privileged link to reality.

Here we see at work not the politics of culture but rather the politics of metaculture. As long as the term culture, together with kindred terms, is employed by a small group of specialists with little or no political power, the chances that the concept may be distorted by desires from the realm of political advocacy are kept to a minimum. Under such ideal conditions, the concept can purport to describe culture while only minimally influencing it. But once it enters the arena of public debate – and it certainly did from the time of Boas, and arguably even from the time of Matthew Arnold and E. B. Tylor – its polarities are determined by its position as a point of political reference. Correspondingly, those polarities assume an appearance of unique reality.

Consequently, we are in the position now of having to deny major trends in the history of research on culture. We throw out systematically elaborated points of view, we shroud one of the once beautiful faces of culture in ignorance and darkness. At the same time, we are doing so under pressure from a formerly, perhaps too predatory omega metacultural discourse. But this is the price of an encounter between academic and public discourses, and it is also the fate of cultural concepts that become points of political reference.

The Truth of Metaculture

The reconstruction of one face of culture has been done here only incompletely, with some pieces still missing and the cement showing through the cracks. Nevertheless, the lineaments are recognizable. This is unmistakably a face of culture—the public face of culture—even if it is not culture in the narrower, marked sense. The latter is after all at least in part the work of a specific politicization, and it is at best, taken in isolation, only a partial truth. We are now in a position to put the two faces back together, to step back and behold the re-creation, and to ask ourselves what truth, if any, the totality expresses; for this metaculture is encoded in at least some explicitly referential discourses (e.g., those of Weber and Habermas), and, unlike nonreferential metaculture such as violence, the discourses can be evaluated with regard to truth, as well as with regard to their pragmatic efficacy as social order. Do they function only pragmatically with respect to the Euro-American nation-states of the twentieth century, furnishing a kind of ideological glue that holds these social entities together? Or do they also accurately describe the operation of culture in these historically specific cases? Or, again, does the omega/alpha contrast have some broader applicability with respect to culture more generally?

It is evident that, if anthropological descriptions are to be trusted, every culture thus far described shows both omega and alpha moments. We find everywhere that cultures adapt and change but that they also conserve and resist, albeit in different measures; they show shared, personal aspects and differentiated, impersonal aspects; they exhibit some degrees of cultivation; and they include social structural as well as expressive/ideological patterning. But it is one thing, with the analyst's metacultural lens trained on a culture—a lens not undistorted by modern public sphere debates—to reveal both aspects; another to compartmentalize or distinctly localize them. If the latter compartmentalization can be found at all, apart from its metacultural expression, it is found probably only in the Euro-American nation-state and its progeny, and even there it is differentially refracted.

In arguing that the distinction might be valid for the Euro-American cases, I have proposed the existence of describably distinct cultural levels: the level of the nation-state, on the one side, whose appeal is to omega culture—to rationality, universality, impersonality, and cultivation—and the level of the ethnic, racial, gender, or sexual preference group, on the other, whose appeal is to alpha culture—to tradition, local truths, personalism, and sharing. The distinction is made explicitly by some theorists, notably Weber and Habermas, but it is also implicit in the opposition between appeals to culture in the marked sense versus appeals to universal standards or culture in the unmarked sense. Tradition, relativity, and local knowledge may be fine for ethnic groups, gays, or blacks, but for the nation there must be universal standards, rational procedures, cultivated knowledge, and values, or so the argument goes.

A truism within anthropology is that schools are the workshops of culture, the institutional loci of social transmission. Insofar as these work as tools of the nation-state, they should contain within them the traces of omega culture, and they should be one of the loci of compartmentalization, another being the domestic group, the locus of alpha cultural socialization. But the problem with identifying schools as one extrametacultural locus of omega culture is that we cannot be sure, apart from metaculture, that something is universal-rational as opposed to local-traditional. We need the metacultural tag, which would seem to make the metacultural descriptions ideological.

But it is equally important that we cannot assert either that what is claimed to be universal-rational is really local-traditional or that it cannot be more truthful or better adapted than elements of alpha culture. The latter assertions depend on a strong ideological position—that there is only alpha culture. To believe that, one would have to ignore a great deal of the history of research on culture. So nation-state-regulated institutions, such as schools, may in fact be one locus, or so the argument would go, of omega culture. We cannot be sure of it either way.

It would make sense that, if these two aspects of culture can be found everywhere, some cultures would compartmentalize and distinctly localize them. The benefit of this has already been remarked: the preservation of alpha cultural diversity provides a check on the possibility that omega culture might really be just another alpha culture; it furnishes criticism of omega culture's claims to universality. Correspondingly, if omega culture really does strive for universal worth, then it should welcome such criticism; it should seek to foster the perpetuation of alpha culture, making use of it as an impetus to its own change, refinement, and betterment. At the same time, would-be challengers of omega culture should be prepared for its vigorous defense. Metacultural argumentation is, after all, an important gate-keeping mechanism. Otherwise, anything might pass itself off as omega cultural. This is the kind of debate we are in fact experiencing in the modern public sphere.

Janus-faced metacultural descriptions?—they are probably part of the ideological glue of the modern Euro-American nation-state, the tension between omega and alpha culture furnishing the dynamic force behind the contemporary public sphere debate. There are some respects, indeed, in which multiculturalist criticism presupposes a rational public that may listen to its criticisms, even as it argues against a universalizing rationality. The alpha presupposes and participates in the omega. And it is not too great a leap to imagine that the omega also presupposes and participates in the alpha. For if truths were self-evident, we would have no need to argue for and against them in the public arena; there would be no purpose in communicative rationality in the first place. This affirms the central organizing role of the alpha/omega dichotomy within the public sphere as a cultural phenomenon. At the same time, it is only recently that this explicit metacultural formulation—culture's two faces—has taken center stage in public debates, and surely this development signals a reconfiguration of our communicative processes.

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