"Every man therefore behaves after his own fashion":
American Manners and Modernity

I

For an analysis of American culture, the concept of manners may appear dated and useful at best for studies of colonial America and the early Republic. In contrast, the following essay is based on the assumption that the explanatory potential of the concept goes far beyond the early period. In effect, I want to claim that the concept must be considered a key concept for studying American cultural history. My purpose is not only to recover and revive a neglected term of cultural history, but also to extend its explanatory power to a more fundamental level, namely that of the theories of American culture on which interpretations of American cultural and literary history are inevitably based. No matter whether we intend to or not, and no matter whether we are even aware of the fact or not: whenever we interpret a particular phenomenon of American culture, we always already imply a view of American culture which we confirm, correct, or reject in the process of interpretation. The prospectus for the conference on manners for which this paper was originally written can serve as an illustration of this hermeneutic inevitability: the prospectus engages the concept of manners in a polemic against what it calls naïve nineteenth-century liberal ideas of society as mere artifice that threatens to suffocate the "natural" man. In trying to make its case for the need of a revival of the concept of manners, the prospectus challenges this view of American society and culture by criticizing the understanding of civilization which we encounter at the beginning of Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: "Huck does not need any civilizing – he is just fine as he is. – The view that America is 'nature's nation' and that Americans need only follow their natural instincts is a staple of the liberal tradition – a tradition which has dominated, in one form or another, general and academic thinking about the United States throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Schloss). I disagree with this characterization, because I think that the post-World-War-II liberal tradition which shaped the American Studies movement constituted itself exactly in the critique of such a naïve liberalism, but that is not the important point here. The important point is that in discussing concepts like manners or civilization, we already engage in more general claims about the nature of American society and culture. For the conference organizers, reviving the

concept of manners obviously held the promise of a critique of American individualism.

However, as the title of my essay suggests, I want to discuss the issue of manners in another context, that of modernity – a term whose usefulness for the analysis of American culture has been ignored and neglected in my opinion. The reason, I take it, is that the term modernity is usually conflated with the terms modernism and modernization. However, to equate the term modernity with modernism is to miss the many different ways in which American culture is shaped by modernity, while the term modernization, which had its moment in the Fifties and Sixties, has been thoroughly compromised since then, because its prediction of a slow but steady movement toward social progress, prosperity, and secularization has turned out to be far too schematic and "ideological" to be still acceptable. However, in contrast to the aesthetic category of modernism and the sociological concept of modernization, modernity is a philosophical concept that is based on a particular theory about the development of Western societies.

The foundational role of critical theories of modernity for the humanities in general and literary and cultural studies in particular has been forgotten in the last decades. Many scholars in current cultural and literary studies, and especially those cultural radicals which dominate American Studies at the present time, are inclined to dismiss the term modernity in almost knee-jerk fashion. They do not seem to realize to what extent their own professional existence and professional agenda are shaped by the very thing they dismiss. And yet, if it were not for a tradition of critical theories of modernity, literary and cultural studies as academic fields in the form that we know them today would not exist. This becomes more evident if we go back to Matthew Arnold for a moment, whose well-known definition of culture as the best that is thought and known in the world can be taken here as a short-hand formulation for the consensus that governed the formation and self-image of English Departments for a long time and then, because of its reputed elitism, became the main target for reformers and revisionists in the field.

Contrary to scholars who have criticized the elitism of Arnold's position, Arnold did not come up with his definition of culture because he was an undemocratic snob, but because he had a specific view of the development of modern societies. In the first chapter of *Culture and Anarchy,* entitled "Sweetness and Light," Arnold describes culture as an expansion of human powers and then goes on to explain why such an encouragement of self-development is badly needed at the present time:

> If culture, then, is a study of perfection, and of harmonious perfection [...] it is clear that culture, instead of being the frivolous and useless thing which Mr. Bright, and Mr. Frederic Harrison, and many other Liberals are apt to call it, has a very important function to fulfil for mankind. And this function is particularly important in our modern world, of which the whole civilisation is, to a much greater degree than the civilisation of Greece and Rome, mechanical and exter-

> nal, and tends constantly to become more so. But above all in our own country has culture a weighty part to perform, because here that mechanical character, which civilisation tends to take everywhere, is shown in the most eminent degree. Indeed nearly all the characters of perfection, as culture teaches us to fix them, meet in this country with some powerful tendency which thwarts them and sets them at defiance. The idea of perfection as an *inward* condition of the mind and spirit is at variance with the *mechanical* and material civilisation in esteem with us, and nowhere, as I have said, so much in esteem as with us. (Arnold, 1869, 48-49)

It is interesting to see how the term civilization takes on a meaning here that is quite different from the way it is used in *Huckleberry Finn.* In *Huck Finn,* civilization stands for "unnatural" social rules, whereas for Arnold the words mechanical and material have become key terms for describing civilization. For Arnold, the problem with civilization is not that it requires self-discipline and the acceptance of certain rules of behavior but that, increasingly, these rules are derived from the instrumental rationality of technological progress.[1] This argument can best be understood in the larger context of a particular tradition of critical theories of modernity: Throughout the nineteenth century, starting with German idealism, modernity, as an advanced, post-traditional and "disenchanted" stage of historical development, is seen not only as a realm of progress but also as a potential source of human self-alienation. Karl Marx and the Communist movement in Europe, as well as the transcendentalists in America, although radically different in many respects, nevertheless shared this philosophical premise and added new dimensions to a critical theory of modernity. At the turn of the century, Max Weber focused on such phenomena of modernity as bureaucratization and standardization and described the claims of rationality governing modernity as an "iron cage." Weber's thesis of a reduction of the enlightenment ideal of reason (*Vernunft*) to an instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), that is, to a means-ends rationality that threatens to control all aspects of life, including

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[1] This is confirmed by Arnold's comments in his *Civilization in the United States.* At first sight, these comments are a far cry from the condescending views of most English commentators on the U.S. In particular, Arnold praises the modernity of American society: "Perhaps it is not likely that any one will now remember what I said three years ago here about the success of the Americans in solving the political and social problem. I will sum it up in the briefest possible manner. I said that the United States had constituted themselves in a modern age; that their institutions complied well with the form and pressures of those circumstances and conditions which a modern age presents" (Arnold, 1888, 159). However, what is lacking in the United States is a form of civilization that goes beyond the political and the social and is defined by the criteria of distinction and beauty: "The human problem, then, is as yet solved in the United States most imperfectly; a great void exists in the civilization over there; a want of what is elevated and beautiful, of what is interesting" (181). Modern conditions in political and social life are not sufficient without "that real sense of elevation which human nature [...] instinctively craves" (183). Or, to put it differently: Modernity without "real civilization" remains empty.

its most private and intimate dimensions, was further radicalized by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which they argue that modernity has reached a stage in which instrumental rationality has also infiltrated psychic life and hence, subjectivity. Finally, as Axel Honneth has pointed out in a comparison between Adorno and Foucault, the latter's amazing influence in recent critical theory can be attributed to the fact that Foucault carries this analysis still one step further in arguing that the systemic power of modernity has pervaded not only the psyche but also the body, so that cultural "technologies" of the body can become the source of both subjectification and subjection (Honneth).

Without this context of critical theories of modernity, there would not be any literary, cultural, or American Studies. Approaches that describe modernity as mechanical and governed by instrumental rationality (instead of reason) set their hopes on culture as the realm of counter-values, as Matthew Arnold already did. In doing so, they paved the way for an institutionalization of academic disciplines in which these counter-values could be cultivated and studied. Contrary to its own self-image, the current cultural radicalism in the Humanities and in American Studies has not escaped this logic. What it has done differently is to look for counter-values in other cultural realms than the liberal tradition did. But no matter whether one focuses on American Renaissance writers who say "No! In Thunder," or the critical tradition of the 1930s, or on popular culture as a form and force of cultural de-hierarchization, or on ethnic writers on the margin or in the border lands who challenge and transform the center, the basic move always remains the same: the goal is to identify cultural material that promises to counter and resist the alienating forces of a modernity defined as mechanical and commercialized, as governed by instrumental rationality and the "cash nexus." In effect, the differences between the various theories of American culture that we currently have in American Studies can be traced back to different assumptions about how far the instrumental rationality of modernity has already advanced and, consequently, what type of cultural material might still offer any hope for resistance.

This brings us back to the concept of manners, because the concept can be linked to a key argument in critical theories of modernity. One of the main challenges for those theories lies in the vexed question of why people seem to act against their own interest by going along with a system in which instrumental rationality governs. In pre-modern times, such as the Middle Ages or during the reign of Absolutism, acceptance of the system was still secured by coercion. In modern times, however, the majority of people, at least in Western societies, seem to submit voluntarily to their own subjection. What is the explanation for the puzzling fact that people do not openly revolt against the conditions modernity has created? A major theoretical challenge thus lies in the puzzling phenomenon of consent. How is consent created and maintained? It is rewarding to go back to the concept of manners

in the context of this discussion – not, however, in order to find out how cultivated, socially-minded or individualistic Americans really are. Instead, the context of critical theories of modernity opens up another possible perspective, namely to look at manners as a cultural device for the creation of consent. More specifically, such a perspective suggests that we consider manners as manifestation of a cultural practice to which critical theories of modernity refer in order to explain consent, namely the ideal and practice of self-regulation.

II

Let us go back to American cultural history, then, and trace the changing functions of manners in order to find out what this development can tell us about historical changes in the creation of consent. Numerous authors have emphasized the crucial role manners played in colonial America for the new gentry class of planters and merchants, many of them parvenus, in establishing a claim to social authority in the colonies and securing social prestige in the political and cultural center of England. The fact that, at the same time, manners were also used to reinforce inequality, as Hemphill and others have pointed out, must be granted.[2] However, the claim that the social ideal of manners presented nothing but a shrewd strategy of social domination is refuted by the way in which gentry-members such as Thomas Jefferson or George Washington used manners as a regulative idea for the development of their own personality. However, the question remains to what extent this ideal of self-regulation was already internalized. To be sure, the goal was to turn the gentry-code of manners into an internal disposition, but often manners remained on the level of polite convention. The gentleman of the time is a man who has learned to govern himself, but in contrast to Franklin, for example, – who is not a gentleman and who bases his program for self-improvement not on manners but on the creation of a habit – self-regulation is not yet a daily routine in colonial gentry-culture. Manners provide an ideal of self-control and self-regulation in which standards are provided for emulation – with the implication, however, that these are not yet identical with the inner core of a human being. On the contrary, they are de-

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2 Cf. Hemphill: "Of course, as the holders of power, elite men had the most at stake; they had the most to lose if the relative equality of circumstance wrought by immigration and the fluidity of status that was growing with commerce permeated the larger institutions, the 'big rules,' governing society. So the ruling class tried to use the communicative function of social ritual by adhering to a code of behavior that set them off from the groups they wanted to control. They attempted to employ the social control function of ritual in trying to teach manners to the ruled – manners that would act, along with other institutions, to reinforce their revered but vulnerable inequality" (62).

signed to give this potentially unruly, impulsive inner core a "polite" and "polished" expression and form.

This is not to claim that manners were empty formalities. On the contrary, they were an important means of character formation. But although manners may have extended "deeply into the individual personality" (Kasson 7), they had not yet become "second nature." As Lockridge has pointed out in an extensive study of "colonial self-fashioning," there still was a gap between public image and private impulse that some found difficult to bridge. The construction, reconstruction and maintenance of a genteel identity was an unstable, vulnerable, and often dysfunctional process (Lockridge 276). This tension is reflected in the way in which the ideal of civility manifests itself culturally in the period. In critical theories of modernity, culture assumes the role of a counter-realm and, often, a last resort of resistance. This is not yet the case in the gentry-culture of the colonial period and the early Republic, however, where the function of culture still resembles the role culture plays in an aristocratic society where it represents and reinforces the authority of social norms. Typical cultural forms of the colonial gentry such as elegant houses, furniture, and interior decoration, portraits, dresses, polite conversation, and classical reading matter are to demonstrate publicly one's worth and respectability, and hence one's claim for social acceptance. The ideal is refinement by means of culture, not yet resistance.

There is an – understandable – tendency in the literature on American manners to oppose the claim "that manners have been in a state of decline for a very long time and are now worse than ever" (Kasson 3). However, a counter-claim only makes sense on the basis of a shift in the meaning of the word manners from a gentry-ideal of civility and refinement, expressed in gentlemanly and lady-like behavior, to a quasi ethnographical redefinition of *manners* as any code of social behavior which helps to regulate social life.[3] This "democratization" of the concept of manners already informs Tocqueville's reflections on American manners in his amazingly perceptive study *Democracy in America*, although at first sight, Tocqueville seems to provide yet another addition to the narrative of decline when he says: "In democratic countries, manners are generally devoid of dignity, because private life is there extremely petty in its character; and they are frequently low, because the mind has few opportunities of rising above the engrossing cares of domestic interests" (248).[4]

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[3] Cf. Neil Harris: "Like the word *culture, manners* possesses both a broad and a narrow meaning. On the one hand, manners can refer to forms representing courtesy and cultivation. On the other, they include ordinary usages, customs, and characteristic ways of doing things. American manners have been the concern of both the dancing master and the ethnographer" (Harris 148).

[4] The historical context for Tocqueville's observations is, of course, the Jacksonian Period, which Kasson characterizes as a confused state of American manners. What European observers found in their travels through America "was a culture of coarse fa-

The gain of democratic societies in comparison with aristocratic societies – the greater freedom of the individual to pursue his or her own interests independent of rank and station in life – is thus society's loss, because it creates an ever-widening distance to a common social ideal. As Tocqueville points out in a chapter entitled "Some Reflections on American Manners," increasing social and geographical mobility intensifies these centrifugal tendencies by undermining normativity and thus subverting the authority of manners in the sense of a genteel code of civility:

> The men who live in democracies are too fluctuating for a certain number of them ever to succeed in laying down a code of good breeding, and in forcing people to follow it. Every man therefore behaves after his own fashion, and there is always a certain incoherence in the manners of such times, because they are molded upon the feelings and notions of each individual, rather than upon an ideal model proposed for general imitation. (Tocqueville 249)

This does not result in radical individualization and social atomization, however. What Tocqueville registers perceptively are the effects of functional differentiation brought about by modernity, for, as he puts it, the members of a democratic society "will set up, close by the great political community, small private societies, united together by similitude of conditions, habits, and manners" (247). "In democracies," he continues, "where the members of community never differ much from each other, and naturally stand so near that they may all at any time be confounded in one general mass, numerous artificial and arbitrary distinctions spring up, by means of which every man hopes to keep himself aloof, lest he should be carried away against his will in the crowd" (247). Democratic societies, then, develop their own sets of manners but these manners have no longer any normative basis. They are conventions that have come into existence in often accidental fashion and codify arbitrary distinctions for their own sake.

For Tocqueville, there can be no doubt about what happens to the gentry ideal of manners in democratic societies: "The feelings, the passions, the virtues, and the vices of an aristocracy may sometimes reappear in a democracy, but not its manners, they are lost, and vanish forever, as soon as the democratic revolution is completed" (250). Surprisingly, however, the aristocrat Tocqueville appears to be less critical of this development than one might expect: "Too much importance should not be attached to this loss, but it may well be regretted" (251). It may be regretted, for although "the manners of aristocracy do not constitute virtue, they sometimes embellish virtue itself. [...] Those manners threw a pleasing illusory charm over human nature; and though the picture was often a false one, it could not be viewed

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miliarity, ludicrous pretension, and frequent rudeness [...]" (Kasson 58). "Most Americans, one etiquette adviser conceded in 1857, regard *Rudeness* and *Republicanism* as synonymous terms" (59).

without a noble satisfaction" (251). With these almost casual remarks, the governing premise of the gentry-code of civility, namely that manners express virtue and hence a certain type of "character," is dismissed as a pleasing illusion at best. Manners may provide welcome embellishments, but they are not a reliable manifestation of what human nature is really like. This raises the interesting question, however, how human nature may be represented in more truthful and honest fashion.

Tocqueville himself gives a hint when he says at another point of his chapter: "I cannot, however, admit that there is nothing commendable in the manners of a democratic people" (250). The reason he provides for this somewhat surprising claim reflects the displacement of Enlightenment ideals of gentility by Romantic ideas of individual self-realization; moreover, it already points in the direction of a modern ideal of self-regulation:

> In aristocracies the rules of propriety impose the same demeanor on every one; they make all the members of the same class appear alike, in spite of their private inclinations; they adorn and they conceal the natural man. Amongst a democratic people, manners are neither so tutored nor so uniform, but they are frequently more sincere. [...] The form and the substance of human actions, therefore often stand there in closer relation; and if the great picture of human life be less embellished, it is more true. (250)

Civility and refinement are replaced by new criteria which can be described, in following critics like Lionel Trilling and Charles Taylor, as sincerity and authenticity. To define the term authenticity, Taylor speaks of an

> individualized identity, one that is particular to me, and that I discover in myself. This notion arises along with an ideal, that of being true to myself and my own particular way of being. [...] To see what is new here, we have to see the analogy to earlier moral views, where being in touch with some source – for example, God, or the idea of the Good – was considered essential to full being. But now the source we have to connect with is deep within us. This fact is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture. (Taylor, 1994, 30)

Interestingly, Taylor attributes the emergence of what he calls, in another book, "the ethics of authenticity" to Herder:

> Herder put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human: each person has his or her own 'measure.' [...] There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's life. But this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for *me*. – This is the powerful moral ideal that has come down to us. It accords moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost, partly through the pressures toward outward conformity, but also because in taking an instrumental stance toward myself, I may have lost the capacity to listen to this inner voice. It greatly increases the impor-

tance of this self-contact by introducing the principle of originality: each of our voices has something unique to say. Not only should I not mold my life to the demands of external conformity; I can't even find the model by which to live outside myself. I can only find it within. (Taylor, 1991, 28-29)

Inevitably, an ethics of authenticity must arrive at the idea of originality as supreme value – and the idea of originality, in turn, stands at the opposite end of the concept of manners. We are here at the point where Huck's resistance to being civilized begins to make sense, albeit not as statement of a liberal ideology of individualism, but as expression of an ethics of authenticity for which, in Tocqueville's words, manners "conceal the natural man."

III

In the period in which Tocqueville made his observations on democracy in America, James Fenimore Cooper wrote historical novels which, at first sight, look like conservative attempts to reaffirm and restore the idea of manners. But, as Jürgen Peper has shown in an analysis of the neglected, but exemplary social satire *Home as Found*, Cooper is well aware of the fact that he is fighting a losing battle and that the "mannered" Effinghams of his novel are beginning to represent an increasingly marginalized social segment of American society (Peper 46-49). And yet, this is not the whole Cooper. In the different context of his Leatherstocking novels, he also presents a highly effective and influential Americanization of the concept of manners by creating the figure of Natty Bumppo and turning him, step by step, into the hero of his frontier novels. Natty gets his nickname Leatherstocking from his embarrassingly motley, formless and funny-looking leggings which are presented, when we first encounter the eccentric original in *The Pioneers*, as curious, if not hilarious illustration of what can happen to the genteel dress code on the frontier. Thus, at first sight, Natty appears to stand at the opposite end of the ideal of the gentleman. The fact that he does not move in genteel social circles but lives, for the most part, in a savage, uncivilized wilderness, seems to confirm the impression that he embodies democratic formlessness and illustrates the decline of genteel ideals of manners and refinement in the Jacksonian period.

However, at a closer look Natty turns out to be a gentleman in disguise who acts in decidedly principled fashion and strictly observes his own code of honor. He is "nature's nobleman" and stands for a democratization of the idea of the gentleman, a redefinition which meets the new criterion of authenticity, for as a *sonderling* who lives in the woods, Natty is a unique, highly original character indeed. Altogether, the figure of Leatherstocking illustrates an instructive re-conceptualization of the concept of manners. Contrary to the genteel code of the eighteenth century, Natty has hardly any social skills, behaves awkwardly in the presence of women, observes no

dress code, has no table manners and no learning whatsoever. His only remaining link to the figure of the gentleman lies in his admirable self-control which far exceeds that of any of the gentry-figures in the novels. With the figure of Leatherstocking, Cooper created a prototype of the modern action hero and put the idea of self-regulation on new grounds. The code of civility is transformed into a code of masculinity with its ideal of strict emotional self-control, for which the Indians, not the social ideal of the gentleman, now provide the main model. What remains, then, of the code of civility in its radically democratized form is the idea of self-regulation which derives its main inspiration, however, from completely "un-gentlemanly" and "uncivilized" sources and thus can be "savage" in its determination.

The observation that a democratization of the concept of manners leads to its transformation into the idea of self-regulation is confirmed by another major literary genre of the Jacksonian period, the domestic novel, in which the sentimental novel of seduction is transformed into a sentimental tale of domesticity. Again, as in the case of Cooper's Americanization of the historical novel, a democratization of the idea of gentility provides the point of departure. As Richard Bushman has argued convincingly, the sentimental fiction of the Jacksonian period focuses on the question of how a code of gentility can be adjusted to new and different living conditions:

> Sentimental fiction moved immediately to the center of the refining process. The stories engaged the central problem of the period: how to adapt genteel values to middle-class life. [...] Their efforts at adaptation can be summed up in the word 'domestication.' Authors of sentimental fiction made aristocratic gentility accessible by domesticating it. The stories transplanted refinement from balls and assemblies, the sites of brilliant entertainments, to homes. Refined lives were lived in parlors and sitting rooms [...], occupied by children and friends rather than by assemblages of brilliant women and notable men. (Bushman 281)

The home becomes the central locality for the demonstration of refinement: "The greater aim was to relocate the characteristic site of the refined life from the ballroom to the home." This domestication of gentility "had the effect of putting women at the center of genteel performances" (304). But, in the view of Bushman, it also created a problem:

> In taking up the task of teaching gentility, sentimental fiction inherited the problems that went with disseminating genteel culture in America. The difficulties arose because gentility was essentially aristocratic and America was not. Sentimental fiction carried a culture that was at heart aristocratic into a society that was striving to be republican. [...] Underlying much of the cultural work that sentimental fiction had to perform in the first half of the nineteenth century was the anomaly of aristocratic gentility exercising vast influence in a democratic, middle-class society. (289-290)

However, a closer look at typical domestic novels such as *The Wide, Wide World*, *The Lamplighter*, or *Fanny Hall* shows that the potential tension between aristocratic ideas of gentility and middle-class notions of domesticity did not really pose a problem for the genre. The domestic novel drew on cultural models of gentility only on the condition that these models were redefined and shorn off their aristocratic associations. As in the case of Cooper, what we get is a compromise form between gentry-values and their "democratic" transformation into a gender-specific code. In this compromise, gentility is redefined as respectability. The home becomes the main source of self-definition, but it does not have to exhibit an elegant style or to meet aesthetic criteria of beauty, nor do the bookshelves have to be filled with works by classical authors. Genteel characters do no longer have to be classically educated. Even poverty is acceptable and does not signify inferiority. However limited the financial resources may be, what counts is whether the interior of the home reveals an effort to use whatever meagre means there are to exercise self-control (e.g., by keeping things clean) and thereby to demonstrate a commitment to the ideal of self-regulation. Refinement is no longer demonstrated by tasteful, precious objects but by the care and attention the homemaker applies to a hundred details. The interior of the home reveals the character of the homemaker and becomes the basis for her claim to respectability. Wealth or fashion-consciousness are no longer signs of superiority in the world of the domestic novel, respectability is, and it has the added advantage that it confirms authenticity.

In his analysis of the role of gentility in the sentimental fiction of the Jacksonian period, Bushman stresses the idea of compromise: "But sentimental authors never totally repudiated aristocracy in the process of appropriating gentility; they aimed to purge the dross and adapt it to middle-class circumstances, not to abandon it altogether" (307). This is most obvious in the basic narrative pattern of the novel of domesticity. Its goal, in following the Cinderella-motif, is to gain recognition for a young woman whose worth has not yet been sufficiently acknowledged up to now: "The plots of these stories may be conceived as bringing this notable person out of obscurity, moving her along the axis from periphery to center" (309). By doing this, "the stories speak for a prevailing sense of undeserved neglect and wrongfully concealed virtue" (310). They "cry out that this woman deserves acknowledgment" (311). Such an acknowledgment can only be provided by a man of importance who realizes the true worth of the heroine. On what grounds, however, can the heroine win the heart and approbation of this "fine gentleman"? No longer by gentry-manners, but still by her "refinement," which gives her a moral claim on recognition at the highest level. As we have seen, however, refinement does no longer mean aristocratic splendor but is redefined through domesticity and the successful management of domestic pursuits. What distinguishes the heroine from others and justifies her quasi-magical ascent from neglect to recognition is thus, in the final

analysis, the ability for self-improvement she exhibits and, after a long-drawn process of apprenticeship, the strength and determination she shows in the exercise of self-control.[5]

IV

It has been acknowledged only recently to what extent the domestic novel is linked to the realistic "American school of fiction," which emerged after the Civil War and defined itself against the domestic romance. Many novels by William Dean Howells and Henry James continue to tell the story of a young woman's search for recognition and occasionally even draw on the narrative pattern of the Cinderella story for the purpose. At the beginning of *Washington Square*, for example, the heroine is an exemplary ugly duckling who gets no recognition, not even from her own father, the refined man of the world Dr. Sloper. Where the novel parts company with the Cinderella-story is at the end, when the "prince" turns out to be a fortune-hunter and there is no one else left to provide acknowledgment of the heroine's worth. At this point, recognition can only come from within herself. What Catherine Sloper has acquired through the painful experience of being rejected by both her father and her lover is not manners but an inner independence that provides her with a sense of self-worth. Similarly, James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is built around an opposition between Osmond's deceptive manners and Isabel's growing capacity for self-awareness and self-determination which she acquires as a result of her unhappy experiences with Osmond.

In James's fictional world (and even more so in Edith Wharton's), aristocratic manners have become the embodiment of insincerity and deception. And yet, James does not want to discard the concept and continues to write in the tradition of the novel of manners. The reason is that in contrast to romantic idealism, he conceptualizes the self as inherently social and therefore dependent on social forms. In this apparent contradiction – an inherently social self that strives for independence – American nineteenth-century realism carries the struggle between manners and individualization to a new level. On the one hand, there is a renewed interest in the concept of manners, albeit no longer as a genteel code of behavior. For James, the point of stressing the concept is to insist on the inevitability of social interaction and, hence, social experience. The self is always a social self. On the other hand, this fact empowers the individual, because her social experiences teach her a lesson on how to deal with the social realities of manipulation and decep-

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[5] As Richard Brodhead has shown in his essay "Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America" (a superb analysis of domestic fiction of the nineteenth century, which may very well be extended to other cultural forms of the time), culture can now propagate an ideal of self-regulation that is based on the management of the most intimate, most "authentic" and "sincere" emotions.

tion and how to develop a protection against them. Catherine Sloper's realization that both her lover and her father were trying to manipulate her, or Isabel Archer's sudden awareness that she has been duped by Osmond and Mme. Merle, liberate both heroines from their dependence on those authority figures, that is, from the world of the domestic novel. Their realization that they have been deceived is the first step toward self-consciousness and independence, while independence, in turn, means that the heroine no longer relies on recognition from the outside. The heroine of the domestic novel who exercises self-control for the purpose of being recognized by a "fine gentleman" is replaced by an inner-directed character who does not depend on others for her self-esteem. Nevertheless, it is only through social experience, not apart from it, that such an independence can be gained.

In the realist novel, "an individual becomes a 'character,' when he or she is able to establish self-control and inner strength by means of psychic and emotional self-regulation, that is, by the ability not only to assert herself against unreasonable claims of others but also to protect herself against her own wishes and desires" (Fluck, 1999, 87). In both novels, therefore, the supreme test of the heroine's independence is her decision to sacrifice her own happiness and to opt for a life of renunciation:

> For James (as for many of the women local colorists of the second half of the 19th century), renunciation creates freedom.[6] This aspect of James's realism poses the greatest problem for modern readers, because it can only be understood as a sacrifice of legitimate individual needs and desires. [...] However, such a view completely disregards the dimension of self-possession and self-empowerment which the individual can gain through psychic self-regulation. In the realistic novel and the cultural system of Victorianism, renunciation, as a supreme form of self-regulation, can become a source of 'strong' individuality, because it makes the heroine immune to the emotional manipulation by others. (87-88)[7]

The individual establishes a source of self-esteem that lies outside the manipulative grasp of "noble men" and "fine gentlemen": "Catherine who, for a long time, was acted upon, fortifies herself by erecting a wall around her inner self and by withdrawing into this inner fortress. It is the impenetrability of her inner life that puts her out of reach of the coercive skills and subtle impositions of others" (88).

An important element of Catherine's successful defense against being manipulated and victimized by others is her growing ability to suppress and

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[6] Gargano points out the obvious similarities between *Washington Square* and *The Portrait of a Lady*: "When she [Catherine] says goodbye to Townsend, she may seem to be entering a tomb but, in reality, she is 'free' in the same way that Isabel Archer is when she returns to the prospect of a long stretch of life with the sterile Osmond" (362).

[7] This, in fact, marks the difference to self-sacrifice. Renunciation is not self-sacrifice for others. It is, on the contrary, a retreat from social expectations and can therefore appear as "selfish," as is often the case, for example, in the stories by Mary Wilkins Freeman.

hide her inner feelings. Similarly, Isabel's last encounter with Casper Good-wood turns into a test of her self-control. In the tough guy-world of Heming-way, the hard-boiled school, and film noir, the ability to control and hide one's own emotions in order not to become vulnerable reaches new levels of intensity. However, the price for this form of self-control can be high: "To become a 'character' in the sense of a stable, inner-directed person can also mean to be a character in the grip of one's own self-imposed rules of self-control" (90). Eccentricities, neuroses and (secret) obsessions are there-fore often part of the inner-directed character. The independence and inner strength Catherine achieves "is won at the cost of yet another dependence, however, namely on those practices of self-discipline which provide the ba-sis for the individual's sense of self-possession. Control by others is replaced by the rule of those principles and habits which provide the self with a sense of mastery over her own life" (92). At the end of *Washington Square,* Cath-erine becomes such a person: "Catherine, however, became an admirable old maid. She formed habits, regulated her days upon a system of her own, in-terested herself in charitable institutions, asylums, hospitals, and aid socie-ties; and went generally, with an even and noiseless step, about the rigid business of her life" (James 203). Selfhood comes to depend on the continu-ous and regular confirmation of the self's ability for self-control.[8] Fittingly, James speaks of Catherine's existence after the painful separation from her father and her lover as "the rigid business of her life."

V

It was Freud who pointed out the potentially pathological dimension of such rigid forms of self-regulation.[9] For Freud, to obey the demands of the cul-tural super-ego leads to repression, for, "given the psyche's need for happi-ness and inclination toward aggression, the demands of the super-ego must be considered ultimately unreasonable" (Nicholson 8). In *Civilization and Its Discontents,* Freud spells out why it is wrong to give in to the demands of the super-ego:

> [T]he cultural super-ego [...] does not trouble itself enough about the facts of the mental constitution of human beings. It issues a command and does not ask wheth-er it is possible for people to obey it. On the contrary, it assumes that a man's ego is psychologically capable of anything that is required of it, that his ego has un-

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[8] Not being on time can thus already assume the dimension of a catastrophic collapse of self-control for the inner-directed character.

[9] A cartoon in an American newspaper captures his argument in a nutshell when a mother looks at her teenage child and says: "They grow up so quickly, but if I've done my job right he won't need me. He can feel guilty all on his own."

limited mastery over his id. This is a mistake; and even in what are known as nor-mal people the id cannot be controlled beyond certain limits. (Freud 108-109)

Complete mastery of the self, the ideal at the center of both the cult of mas-culinity and the cult of domesticity, is thus an unreasonable demand. The ego, which balances the conflicting demands of super-ego and id, is the more rational faculty, because it acknowledges the legitimacy of seemingly "irra-tional" dimensions of the self:

> Thus Freudian theory can be said to have strengthened the role of the emotions not because he, unlike the Victorians, merely admitted their existence or even their po-tential strength. It is rather that, for him, unlike for many in late nineteenth-cen-tury America, the demands they make must be taken as a given irrespective of what they do or do not make possible for proper human functioning or a well-run social order. While balance is crucial in both the Freudian and Victorian world-views, the endpoint of balance has shifted: from ends external to the self to the internal ordering of the self itself. (Nicholson 8)

Freud's argument can be seen as another stage in an ongoing process of the cultural democratization of manners by acknowledging the legitimacy of seemingly "uncivil" dimensions of the self and thereby undermining the distinction between the "mad" and the rest of us: "Whereas nineteenth-century psychiatry had functioned by excluding and isolating the so-called 'mad,' the forms of psychotherapy that emerged in the late nineteenth cen-tury stressed the universality of a 'subconscious' [...]" (Zaretsky; quoted in Nicholson 10). Therapeutic movements today "all assume that it is part of the human condition to possess emotional elements which have the power to disrupt our lives [...]" (Nicholson 10). Hence, "decisions about 'the right thing to do' have become viewed during the twentieth century as highly personal" (11). From this perspective, the important point about "bad man-ners" is no longer that they reveal a lack of civility and refinement (as they do in gentry-culture), nor that they indicate a failure of self-control which undermines the individual's claim for recognition and respect (as they do in nineteenth-century fiction). Rather, uncontrolled aggression or other viola-tions of a genteel code of manners should be seen as symptoms of deeper psychological problems; as such they should be openly acknowledged in therapeutical fashion and not suppressed.

The naturalist novel, which followed and radicalized realism, can in ef-fect be seen as dramatization of what happens when "the other side" of hu-man existence is ignored and suppressed. A particularly gripping example is provided by a novel like Frank Norris's *McTeague,* where the primitive, atavistic dimensions of the characters break through the thin veneer of so-cial habits called "civilization" and the inevitable result is a melodramatic narrative of self-destruction. But another naturalistic novel of the period around 1900 goes even further, in effect, even beyond Freud, although this

obviously happened without any intention and theoretical underpinning whatsoever. I am referring to Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* which violated contemporary moral standards by telling the story of a young woman's rise to fame and fortune despite the fact that she has had several illicit relationships with men. To be sure, naturalist characters like McTeague or Stephen Crane's Maggie, who come from, or end up in, the slum, are already as far removed from the world (and the novel) of manners as one may think possible. But at least they still struggle against their lack of self-control, albeit in a losing battle, because they realize that their weakness will lead to their downfall and eventual destruction.

Dreiser's Carrie Meeber, on the other hand, is not even aware of the fact that she has such a weakness. Manners and the question of self-control play no role in *Sister Carrie* whatsoever. Carrie achieves fame (and hence public recognition) as an actress, although she completely ignores public standards of morality and respectability. And yet, she is by no means "amoral." It is not that she rejects morality but that, because of her upbringing, she never internalized any moral norms and thus cannot be guided by them. Surprisingly, however, this absence of a moral conscience and of a moral compass is not seen as a loss but as a gain. In contrast to her second lover Hurstwood, who cannot give up certain notions of middle-class respectability and thus fails to adjust to the new conditions of life after the elopement into which he has lured her, Carrie herself has no such Victorian "hang-ups" and adapts to the new situation with ease. Because she has not internalized dominant standards of respectability, and thus has not made herself dependent on them, she has no difficulty in changing roles and identities according to new needs and new developments. While Hurstwood is trapped in an identity he has constructed in order to find recognition as a respectable member of the middle class, Carrie is free to take on new challenges and to refashion herself in ever new ways. This, in effect, is the secret of her success.

However, although such nineteenth-century staples as "character" or internalization are discarded in *Sister Carrie,* "refinement" is not. But it is now refinement of a completely different sort: Like no American novel before, *Sister Carrie* displays the attractions of the modern city, the new department stores, shopping windows, hotel lobbies, restaurants, and entertainment theaters. The refinement by which Carrie is attracted is the glamour and glitz of the new consumer culture that emerged around the turn of the century. In his influential essay "*Sister Carrie's* Popular Economy," Walter Benn Michaels has set this "economy of desire" in contrast to the "economy of scarcity" which still governs a realist novel like William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*:

> And, as we have seen, the self-sufficiency of a man alone is, for Howells, not only the guarantee of happiness, it is 'character' itself. The character of Carrie however, is defined very differently by Dreiser. The 'one stay of her nature,' he writes,

> was 'her craving for pleasure ... She would speak for that when silent on all else.' Where Howells identifies character with autonomy, Dreiser thus identifies it with desire, an involvement with the world so central to one's sense of self that the distinction between what one is and what one wants tends to disappear. (Michaels 381)

In the nineteenth-century novel, self-control is the precondition for building character and achieving self-determination, for Dreiser self-control is a barrier to the articulation of desire – which, for him, is the driving force of life. In this, Dreiser goes beyond Freud: Whereas for Freud, desire has to be disciplined by the ego and mediated with the super-ego in order not to be destructive, for Dreiser desire defines and drives the self. Or, in the words of Walter Benn Michaels: "What you are, is what you want, in other words, what you aren't" (Michaels 382).

VI

When Michaels made this point in 1980, he ran against the grain of critical voices for whom the emotional economy of the realist novel signaled repression and complicity with the system, whereas desire – still strongly celebrated in the first, May '68-inspired wave of French theory – was supposed to subvert the dominant social order. For Michaels, however, it was precisely the other way round: in its critique of the act of speculation and the attempt to "civilize" the businessman, realism still criticizes capitalism on the basis of norms such as reason and moral integrity, whereas, as Michaels argues in a critique of Leo Bersani's description of desire as fundamentally subversive, "the 'disruptive' element in desire that Bersani finds attractive is for Dreiser not subversive of the capitalist economy but constitutive of its power" (386). Modern capitalism needs exactly what Dreiser has described, namely the elimination of self-control, which must be seen as potential resistance to consumption, and instead, the constant refueling of a desire to refashion oneself, for only in this way can steady sales be guaranteed and high profits be maintained.

This type of argument, which turned the then prevalent critical orthodoxy on its head when it was first presented, has by now become almost the norm in critical theories of modernity. In advanced stages of modernity, the argument goes, consent is no longer created by manners or by an ideal of self-control, that is, by an internalization of norms, but by the much more effective way of stimulating desire. This method is much more effective, because, by stimulating, for example, sexuality, instead of repressing it, the system finally gains access to the most intimate dimensions of the self in order to shape them for its own systemic needs. Moreover, it thereby avoids that a

potentially rebellious and unruly part of the self is split off.[10] The power of the system can now penetrate all aspects of life, even the potentially oppositional. Moreover, this power effect has the added advantage that it remains largely invisible and unnoticed, because the effect is achieved in a paradoxical manner: While the individual experiences the expression of ever more personal aspects as liberating, this apparent liberation paves the way for discursively regulating even the most private and intimate dimensions. This may explain the – indeed – amazing fact of a growing individualization in modern societies that nevertheless does not provide any challenge to the political system. "Every man behaves after his own fashion," as Tocqueville had already claimed, but the result is not a subversion of the legitimacy of the system but, ironically enough, its confirmation. As Mark Poster puts it: "Critical theory faces the formidable task of unveiling structures of domination when no one is dominating, nothing is being dominated and no ground exists for a principle of liberation from domination" (Poster 6).

This – basically Foucauldian – argument must create a problem, however. As many critics have pointed out in the meantime, it leaves no prospect and no hope for resistance, not even for a critical awareness of what is going on. Moreover, it ties the establishment of modern forms of "micro-power" to exactly that process of individual liberation on which contemporary social movements base their political claims. In arguing, for example, that the private is the political, or that "the psyche is political" (Nicholson 15), the new social movements have used private and intimate matters for the authorization of political demands by foregrounding the psychic consequences of consent: "One of the ways in which the new left was different from the left of the 1930s was in its concern with issues of consciousness. It looked at oppression not only in economic and political terms but also in terms of how people felt about themselves" (Nicholson 18). The readiness to be radically "authentic" and to discard self-regulation in favour of self-expression thus became a motor of political change. From this point of view, individualization is a development that is politically desirable because it holds a strong democratizing potential. The "therapeutic turn" in modern Western cultures, the increasing shift of the sources of recognition from a generally accepted norm of civility and manners to the individual and what it feels, is seen as an important source of democratization. Consent represses and excludes, whereas the therapeutic turn, "because of its individualizing, or at least anti-communitarian tendencies, provided us with ways of moving beyond such a

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[10] Cf., for example, Judith Butler's characterization of the psyche as potentially subversive: "This viable and intelligible being, this subject, is always produced at a cost, and what remains unconscious is precisely that which resists that normative demand by which subjects are instituted. Indeed, the psyche, a notion which includes the unconscious, is very different from the subject: the psyche is precisely that which exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demand to inhabit a coherent identity, to become a coherent subject" (231).

politics. [...] In sum, one can say that 'the therapeutic turn' contributed towards making United States culture more democratic than it had previously been by extending the range of claims that could be made on the body politic" (Nicholson 20).

Which one of these two theories of modernity (and, by implication, of American culture) is right? Both positions would probably agree on the major stages in the cultural history of American manners as they have been outlined in this essay: first the dominance of a gentry code of manners, then its "democratization" and transformation into gender-specific codes defined by the ability for individual self-control, and finally another stage of "democratization" created by a shift from self-control to unhampered self-expression (or, as I have described it in another context, from economic individualism to expressive individualism; Fluck, 2002). On the other hand, the difference between the two positions lies in the question whether these stages can be described as truly a process of democratization or whether what looks like individual liberation masks only another and more effective systematic attempt to gain consent and maintain power. The answer to the question – to get back to the starting point of this essay – will determine on what theory of American culture our analysis of the history of American manners will be based. Clearly, to regard the gradual dissolution of the authority of manners as part of a process of "democratization" is to endorse a narrative of individualization and to identify American culture as a modern culture with special democratic potential that challenges us to revise critical theories of modernity. On the other hand, what looks like democratization and individual liberation to some, appears as discursive subjection to others, namely an expansion of the logic of instrumental rationality to even the most private and intimate dimensions of the individual. Seen from the perspective of these critical, increasingly radical theories of modernity, the concept of manners is hardly more than a historical episode, an early form in the cultural history of how to create consent (or, to use the Foucauldian terminology, in the cultural history of technologies of power), because modern forms do no longer work in the old-fashioned way of establishing social standards of emulation but by discursive regimes which have already done their work before the individual is even aware of it. American culture may be especially advanced in this respect, as Horkheimer and Adorno claimed, but, in principle, it holds no special distinction for such a theory of modernity.

However, the narrative of individualization might also be criticized from a third perspective. From this point of view, the concept of manners is important not so much as a social standard of behavior but as confirmation of the idea of the social self. The concept of manners may have undergone a loss of cultural authority in the sense of providing standards of social behavior, but the larger issue to which the concept draws attention, the question of how we theorize and deal with the social side of the individual, is still pertinent not only for understanding American culture, but also for theories

of modernity. In this sense, the concept of manners leads directly to a reconsideration of that which it intends to model and shape, the individual. The democratization-argument conceptualizes the individual from the perspective of an ethics of authenticity: To democratize manners even up to a point where they are considered mere hindrances of self-expression is to liberate an authentic core of the self. In contrast, critical theories of modernity have increasingly conceptualized the individual as discursive construct "subjectivized" by interpellation into a subject-position, so that manners have become obsolete for the modern state.

A third possibility in talking about the individual may be characterized as pragmatic: It regards the individual as neither capable of being identical with itself (and thus "authentic"), nor as mere effect of a discursive subject-position, but as a self, that is, as an inherently social being that cannot gain a sense of identity without a "Me" and cannot be a "Me" without the desire and constant challenge of an "I." From this perspective, manners, broadly understood, can be seen as indispensable social conventions that help to negotiate this conflict. In this view, American culture is neither simply "democratic" (in providing more and more possibilities for individual expression), nor "modern" (in the sense of critical theories of modernity); it is a culture whose modernity lies in the fact that the struggle between these two conflicting tendencies of modernity has been carried to extremes and has therefore become especially intense. In the final analysis, the "liberation" we encounter in American culture is that of both tendencies: like no other modern culture, it is shaped both by individualization and by the instrumental rationality of modernity. This is the challenge we have to face in analyzing it, and the concept of manners and its cultural history in the U.S. can help to sharpen our awareness of this challenge.

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